

## SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THEORIES INTERPRETED IN THE CONTEXT OF PREADOLESCENTS' WELL-BEING

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to use a number of sociological perspectives and theories in order to examine how they can be interpreted in the context of childhood/preadolescence and adolescence. Given that sociology is the science that studies society as a whole but also in its components, the chosen sociological theories can be interpreted and adapted to the age segment we are concerned with, namely children/preadolescents and adolescents. Thus, the flexibility of sociological perspectives and theories is observed in terms of the fact that they can be used as a theoretical framework to guide the researcher in the undertaken approach.*

**Keywords:** *structural-functionalist theory; systemic theory; interactionist-symbolic theory; theory of social comparison; theory of labeling.*

### Introduction

Sociological perspectives and theories play an important role in understanding the influences that shape the behavior of children and adolescents in today's society. Among the positive perspectives, we distinguish the one regarding the development of the preadolescents and that admits that all the preadolescents have strengths and the potential to develop in positive ways when these strengths they have will meet the resources to ensure their healthy development. Such an approach focuses on potential and not on possible incapacities. Examining the positive characteristics and resources that individuals possess seems to be of particular relevance, according to certain research directions. The first research direction derives from the development system theory and focuses on the positive development of the young people. The second one is closely related to the positive psychology and the studies on the values and virtues, especially hope and optimism. A third direction arises from career counseling and is known as life design (Sgaramella *et al.*, 2015).

If we analyze the theories regarding the human development, we notice that each of these theories deals with the subject of development from a relatively different perspective. However, taken together, they provide the necessary context to emphasize how individual experiences and behavior change over time. Therefore, together with the sociological perspectives, the theories also play an important role (the terms "perspectives" and "theories" may be interchangeable in some researches but the present paper separates

the two terms) in that it offers a framework of general principles which can be used to guide the research and to explain the results (Berger, 2003).

Given these aspects, in the following pages, we will render and analyze the way in which a number of sociological theories relate to the well-being of the preadolescents, emphasizing, in particular, the optics regarding the family and the education (these being two of the main factors that influence social and emotional welfare of the preadolescents).

## 1. The structural-functionalist theory

We have chosen to include in this list of sociological theories relevant to the researched subject, the structural-functionalist theory because it is concerned, among the many social fields of interest, with the issues of education (school) and of family, two key elements in the life of the preadolescents. We note that, in terms of structural-functionalist theory, it had many important representatives, including Émile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer and Talcott Parsons.

In Smith's view, the functionalism represents the latest and the most influential theoretical school that stands out as to the fact that it depicts a deep conviction regarding the desirability of a single theory of change. Thus, Smith argues, as the approach of functionalists has expanded and developed, it has revealed with increasing clarity its real intention: to provide a unified theory of change and order, which will encompass in a single framework the varied and changing structures of history (Smith, 2010).

In a nutshell, Thompson (2016) provides an overview of functionalist thinking: according to him, functionalists appreciate that a successful society has a stable social structure, in which different institutions perform distinct functions that contribute to maintaining the whole, in the same way in that the various organs of the body perform various functions to keep a human being healthy (here, Thompson refers to the organic analogy of Talcott Parsons). At the same time – continues Thompson – for functionalists, a successful/healthy society is one in which social life is organized so that the family socializes children and meets emotional needs, the school teaches notions that provide more extensive life skills, and the work place is the space in which individuals are called to contribute to the development of the economy.

An analysis of the nature of emotions from a functionalist perspective argues that, for functionalists, the distinction between emotion and emotion regulation occurs because the manifestation of an emotion creates the framework for new exchanges between the environment and the person. Such exchanges often require changes in the manifestation of the initial emotion. The consequences of the initial emotion can be social (unwanted and intense reactions caused by a child's anger), physical (when a child's anger results in a toy breaking) and psychosomatic (when anger results in increased blood pressure) (Campos *et al.*, 1994).

According to a research concerned with the way in which education contributes to students' social affiliation, the results it obtained support to some extent the hypotheses based on the structural-functionalist theory according to which education contributes to the student's sense of belonging. It is also worth noting that the results did not support, for example, the thesis of individualization according to which education would weaken the student's sense of belonging. Therefore, the study estimates, the structural-functionalist theory is a useful tool to explain the effect of education on belonging. The results also imply that, by increasing the educational level of the students and, especially, of the academic achievements, the belonging of the student to the society is accentuated. According to the structural-functionalist theory, the educational effect occurs because the acceleration of the student's sense of belonging is favorable to societal functioning. Therefore, it is necessary to optimize education to make it effective in improving students' level of education and academic performance as a way to stimulate the functioning of society (Cheung *et al.*, 2017).

## **2. The systemic theory**

The second sociological theory we have chosen to refer to is the systemic theory. Like the other theories, the systemic theory is also concerned with various aspects of the social life. Among these, we will present the main ideas regarding two of the factors that influence the social and emotional well-being of the preadolescents: the family system and the educational system. We mention that Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Kenneth Boulding and Anatol Rapoport had multiple contributions to the development of systemic theories.

When we refer to the family, the theory of family systems concerns the individual in relation with the family and the interaction that takes place between him and the family. The family is seen as the first context in which the traits of the individual character are developed and the patterns of his behavior are learned. The systemic theory of the family pays particular attention to both the problematic behavior of one person and the behavior of other people within the family or another primary group and the connection that is established between them. Unlike the theories that study the individual behavior and focus on what happens inside the individual as a primary point of reference, the systemic family theory links a person's problematic behavior to the behavior of the other family members. Thus, interactions between family members are considered essential for understanding the behavior and emotions of individuals (Johnson & Ray, 2016).

Referring to the "didactic/pedagogical triangle", a recent research was interested in analyzing the interactions between the three subsystems that make up the whole educational system: student, teacher, knowledge. Thus, the student is a dynamic subsystem, a carrier of intellectual energy that will bring the intellectual progress of society in the future; the teacher is constituted in the subsystem that carries out the transfer of knowledge to the student. He is,

at the same time, *a whole* and *a part* and therefore his role in the “pedagogical triangle” is very important for the student and society. Knowledge includes the state of society in which the student is shaped by the sources of formal, non-formal, informal education (Nicolescu & Petrescu, 2017).

In theory, these aspects are true, but from a practical point of view, the present educational system is becoming more problematic and needs a radical change, according to a researcher who referred to the differences between the agrarian society (in which the main means of transportation was the horse, the family was an extended one, the work was carried out within the family, and the school consisted of a single room in which all the students learned), the industrial society (in which people start to use the train, the predominant family is the nuclear one, the bureaucracy is making its way and education is provided in schools organized according to the current system) and the information society (the most commonly used means of transportation are the personal car and the plane, the number of single-parent families is increasing, the work is carried out in a team, and the education – regarding this, the author is trying to prove that a systemic change in the education of the today children and adolescents is needed). In Reigeluth's opinion, the current system maintains divergent relationships between teachers and the administrative body, between teachers and students and often including between teachers and parents. According to him, in the information age in which we live, students are not prepared to take part in the democratic society to which they belong, the school staff located in the lower levels in the hierarchy must submit to those from the upper levels, the study subjects are highly compartmentalized, and students are required to become passive members of their school community. These characteristics are counterproductive and harmful to citizens and to the society, which is why a systemic change is, according to the study, imperative in the contemporary era (Reigeluth, 1994).

### 3. The interactionist-symbolic theory

Despite the fact that interactionist-symbolic theory does not explicitly refer to children and adolescents, we have considered it appropriate to add it, however, to the list of sociological theories relevant to our subject, because the promoters of this theory are interested, first and foremost, in the social interactions between individuals (from here we deduce that children/preadolescents and adolescents are also targeted) and in the importance of symbol-bearing social relations, for the social and emotional well-being. Important figures who contributed to the theorization of symbolic interactionism include George Herbert Mead, William Isaac Thomas and Charles Horton Cooley.

One of the most constant statements of interactionism is that forms of social life exist as a continuous activity only among people (Maines, 2017).

Denzin (2004) argues that the term *symbolic* in the expression *symbolic interaction* refers to the linguistic foundations that underlie human group life,

while the word *interaction* refers to the fact that people do not act on each other, but interact with each other.

The “symbolic interaction” focuses on the connection between symbols (shared meanings) and interactions (actions and verbal/nonverbal communication). It is concerned with understanding how people, together, create symbolic worlds and the way in which these worlds shape human behavior. In conceptualizing families as social groups in which self and identity interact, researchers interested in the subject of the family from an interactionist-symbolic perspective ask questions such as: *What is the process by which family members come to share – more or less – meanings about the world (thereby understanding a symbolic reality, a common set of goals, values, beliefs and norms)? or what are the roles/expectations of society regarding husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters?* and, especially from a symbolic interactionist point of view, *how are these roles constructed, learned, and ultimately applied?* (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Plummer (2000) considers that symbolic interactionism is a pragmatic approach to the scientific study of the life of human groups and human behavior. Its empirical world is the natural world of such a group life and conduct. Symbolic interactionism, Plummer continues, places its problems in this natural world, conducts its studies in it, and deduces its interpretations from such naturalistic research. Therefore, its methodological position is that of direct examination of the empirical world. It also reminds many theorists of the last century of the continuing need to return to the investigation and exploration of everyday life found in empirical social worlds, strongly confirming its main subject: intersubjective, symbolic and human.

Symbols are needed to connect people and ideas yet from childhood and adolescence. Symbolic interaction describes the fact that as we acquire symbols, we have the power to interact with others using those symbols. In reality, we collect symbols as a result of symbolic interaction with other people. Therefore, symbols allow us to communicate intentionally. Symbols also allow us to express and understand each other's thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Therefore, the essence of a society consists in the interaction and communication of individuals through symbols, the society continuing to exist through symbolic interactions (Redmond, 2015).

#### **4. The theory of social comparison**

According to its name, the theory of social comparison (initiated and promoted mainly by Leon Festinger) has at its core the human need to compare. Since this need is universal and occurs at all ages, including in childhood and adolescence, we reproduce below the main principles of this theory, seen in terms of the influence they can have on adolescents.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines the theory of social comparison as the evaluation of one's own abilities and attitudes in relation to

those of others in a process that plays a significant role for self-image and subjective well-being.

According to the study of Morrison and his collaborators, social comparison strongly predicts self-assessment of body image and investment in self-image among adolescent boys and girls (Morrison *et al.*, 2004).

In a similar direction went another research, the results of which suggest that the media has an impact on body image disorder, both by processing body images (direct impact) and by encouraging teenage girls to support the idea that an ideal body it is the thin one, and by inoculating the feeling that what they see represents realistic ideals (indirect impact). Thus, people seen on TV define how their own bodies should look, and these perfect images are realistic goals to achieve. Compared to what they see in the media, they feel that they do not rise to the standard before their eyes. The more they compare, the thinner they strive to be. They dislike their own bodies and adopt unhealthy behaviors (Botta, 1999).

Moreover, the conclusions of Fardouly and her colleagues on the impact of Facebook on the body image and mood of young women in terms of social comparison, indicate that the use of the social network Facebook can cause women to be in a worse mood. At the same time, spending time on Facebook has led, in the case of women who tend to make comparisons on appearance, to a greater desire to change aspects related to the physical appearance (Fardouly *et al.*, 2015).

Social comparison may also have less expected effects than those mentioned above. A research conducted by a group of Canadian professors supports the uniqueness of the approach, postulating that this is the only research that considers deception as a result of social comparison processes. As the professors used the theory of social comparison as a theoretical background, they concluded that when consumers are faced with information that involves social comparison that might threaten their own identity, the same consumers will use deception as a tool to protect themselves from this threat. At the same time, researchers show that the particularities of the comparison context are crucial in defining the level of self-threat and the desire to lie. It is also shown that during threatening social comparisons, the information can threaten different aspects of the self. Equally, it has been found that the desire to protect the public self (the impressions conveyed to others) and the private self (the sense of self-worth) is the main responsible for making consumers involved in this study tend to lie. This research, the authors argue, reveals that the basic reason why the participants in the study show a tendency to lie when exposed to less pleasant/favorable social comparison information is to protect themselves from the possible threat to the public and private self (Argo *et al.*, 2006).

## 5. The theory of labeling

Of the sociological theories listed throughout this subchapter, the theory of labeling is probably the one that most clearly addresses the target group of this paper. In the following lines we will observe the main features of this theory and the possible effects of labeling on the individual.

The theory of labeling began to crystallize in the early years of the twentieth century, becoming known in the 1960s and experiencing its peak in the 1970s. Later, however, its presence began to gradually fade (Plummer, 2011). Among those whose contribution influenced the development of the theory we mention Erving Goffman, Howard Becker and Frank Tannenbaum.

According to the theory of labeling, people come to identify and behave in ways that actually mirror the labels assigned by others. This theory is most often associated with the sociology of crime, because labeling someone as a deviant can lead to problematic and undesirable behavior of the person being labeled. The given example says that when someone is perceived as a criminal, other individuals will tend to treat the person negatively, which will provoke a proportionate reaction from the labeled individual (Crossman, 2020).

According to Bernburg (2019), research aimed at addressing labeling often fail to study intermediate processes. Labeling theory holds that specific processes such as changes in self-concept, social exclusion, and involvement in deviant groups mediate the effect of labeling on deviant behavior. The author goes on to say that the fact that labeling triggers such processes is a distinct contribution of labeling theory and therefore intermediate processes need to be examined. An example is provided: incarceration can undermine social ties and life chances, as individuals are unable to participate in social activities and work to achieve specific goals during incarceration. Moreover, by the fact that the person in question is in the company of criminals, he or she can create connections with other deviants. Such processes, Bernburg concludes, can generate or favor the production of a crime, but are not operated directly by the intermediate (criminogenic) processes presented by the theory of labeling.

Ribelin (2019) states that no one is immune to the influence of labels. The theory of labeling indicates that our identity and behavior are determined or influenced by the terms we or others use to describe ourselves. The inclination to “stick” labels stems, in large part, from the need to feel safe and to control the environment around us. If we label a person as “toxic”, we will try to position ourselves away from him or her; if we label a situation as “unpleasant”, we will do everything we can to avoid it.

A research on the effects of formal and informal labeling on juvenile delinquency has shown that the most significant effect on subsequent delinquency has been caused by formal labeling. The study also found that formal etiquette outweighed parental assessments, school stigma, and young people's perceptions of caring for them. Although no significant link was found between parental assessments and subsequent delinquency, the authors

nevertheless recommend that parental assessments should not be overlooked in the future (Kavish *et al.*, 2016).

In his paper, Bernburg (2019) adds that research on labeling often fail to assess informal labeling, nor the processes of stigma. But the processes of informal labeling and stigma include the core of labeling theory, he believes. Formal labeling is considered to influence subsequent deviance in large part because it leads to informal labeling and stigmatization. However, the role of informal labeling and stigmatization cannot be demonstrated without measuring these concepts, concludes Bernburg.

It can be considered that the issue of stigma is closely related to that of labeling. Stigmatization as a result of a received psychiatric label, manifested by treating adolescents with emotional and behavioral difficulties in a different way, was the object of study of Moses' (2010) research. Thus, it was examined the perceptions of adolescents regarding the different attitude manifested towards them (due to the mental health problems they faced) by family members, colleagues/friends and school staff were examined. The results suggested that efforts to combat the stigmatization of young people with mental health disorders should focus on family, colleagues/friends and school staff so that they avoid making unfavorable assumptions and discriminating against young people with emotional and behavioral difficulties (46% of these young people described experiencing stigma initiated by family members in the form of mistrust, gossip, pity and avoidance; 62% felt stigmatization from colleagues/friends, which often led to loss of friendship and rejection. Finally, 35% of them mentioned the stigma of teachers and school staff, who expressed fear of them and underestimated their abilities).

To conclude, we would like to say that, given that sociology is the science that studies society as a whole but also in its components, the chosen sociological theories can be interpreted and adapted to the age segment we were concerned with, namely children/preadolescents and adolescents. Thus, the flexibility of sociological perspectives and theories is observed in terms of the fact that they can be used as a theoretical framework to guide the researcher in the undertaken approach.

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