Conflict theory is used in the social sciences to study the power dynamics among members of competing groups. A conflict perspective assumes that there is an unequal distribution of power within a society. Conflict theorists also assume that because of inequality, conflict arises between groups. Groups with more power have control over resources, including necessities such as food and clothing; they also occupy prestigious positions within society, such as political and economic offices. More powerful groups control what becomes defined as deviant behavior and societal norms, including laws, business practices, and cultural and social norms. Any behavior that does not fulfill the social expectations of the powerful is then punished, exploited, and/or stigmatized. Conflict theory is used by scholars in the social sciences to study inequality, with areas of interest including race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality.

Powerful groups seek to maintain their positions of power by developing ways to keep those with less power from gaining control over valuable resources. They do this through many processes, such as developing laws and policies that promote their preferred lifestyles and ways of doing business and developing ways of writing and speaking that justify their elevated positions within society. For people in positions of power to justify unequal power distributions within society, they must develop social and cultural definitions of deviant groups. The powerful are able to place a negative label on all people they consider to be deviant. Historical examples of this include the label of mental illness given to outspoken or rebellious women, the stigma of alcohol and drug abuser given to people with tattoos, and the idea that the homeless population is lazy and immoral. Rather than seeing these people as a product of a complex set of social circumstances, many of which are beyond the individual's control, those in powerful positions instead consign populations that do not practice their own preferred lifestyles to deviant groups.

The powerful are able to name and define deviant groups because they have the resources and the rhetoric to do so. Deviant groups, then, serve as a way for the powerful to legitimately maintain control over less powerful groups. Conflict theorists focus on the ways in which these less powerful populations are more likely to be considered deviant and experience exploitation and discrimination by those in positions of power. There are many deviant groups, but the social sciences study four main populations that suffer negative labels within society: (1) women; (2) racial and ethnic minorities; (3) the poor; and (4) the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. From systematic economic and political processes to everyday cultural norms, members of these populations suffer. Conflict theory provides a helpful theoretical framework for researchers and activists who try to explain why certain populations fare worse than others and to develop ways to help underprivileged groups. Conflict theory has the potential to highlight inequality within society, power differentials, the experiences of group membership into normal or deviant groups, and the exploitation and discrimination that occurs due to membership in a deviant group.

Theoretical Contributors

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Two theorists have made large contributions to conflict theory: Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Max Weber (1864–1920). Marx's theoretical contributions form the foundation of the conflict perspective. He explains the struggle between competing groups as a class struggle. With the breakdown of feudalism and the emergence of capitalism, society was divided into the owners of the means of production, called the bourgeoisie or capitalists, and those who work for the capitalists, called the proletariat or the working class. He describes the relationship between the capitalists and the working class as one of constant struggle. Thus, alongside the progress made during the Industrial Revolution, the class structure divides into two major sects, those who own businesses and resources and those who rely on the owners for their livelihood.

Marx predicts that the working class will become further removed from the means of production, meaning their work will become more unsatisfactory in their everyday lives. For example, instead of having a backyard garden, members of the working class consume products and depend on the owners of the means of production for food, clothing, and other necessities. The owners of the means of production are then placed in a position of power over the working class and find ways to exploit it, resulting in capital gain for the owners. He also predicts that the workers will eventually refuse to be exploited and will attempt to overthrow the capitalists. Marx, however, explains the difficulties of the workers achieving what he describes as class consciousness, or the awareness of members of the working class to form solidarity, because members of the working class are also in competition for what little resources the capitalists give them, such as food, shelter, and low-paying jobs. He predicts that the working class will eventually rebel and overthrow the owners of the means of production when they achieve class consciousness. However, as some would argue, the rebellion has not occurred in the way Marx predicted, because he did not include factors other than class in his discussion of conflict.

Despite Marx's focus on class, however, theorists have expanded the conflict perspective to study other types of competing groups. For example, Weber takes Marx's ideas about class conflict and expands them to include social factors other than economic class, such as race and ethnicity, gender, and religion. He also considers the fact that membership in multiple competing groups can complicate people's decision making and ability to rebel against their life circumstances. For example, being a white woman provides certain advantages owing to race yet certain disadvantages owing to gender. By examining multiple group memberships, conflict theory is able to approach more complex situations that are more representative of human life. Weber argues that membership in one group may outweigh disadvantages experienced by membership in another group, leading to a conflict of interest and a decision to not rebel against certain injustices. Thus, conflict theory has grown to understand overlapping memberships in competing groups.

**Race/Ethnicity**

Conflict theory is used to study racial inequality. Conflict theorists understand the exploitation of African American slaves and Native Americans in the United States by those of European ancestry as a result of powerful Europeans, who benefited from trade and technology at a faster rate than Africans and Native Americans, having the power to manipulate and control non-Europeans. Slave owners found ways to justify slavery by claiming that Africans were savage and less than human. As the practice of slavery began to be challenged in the United States, whites began to find ways to continue to exploit and keep nonwhites in less powerful occupations. For example, whites used the rhetoric of science to describe those of African descent as genetically and phenotypically similar to apes, of limited intelligence, and unable to control their impulses. Today, even as social change has occurred and the
Civil Rights Act has been passed, competing groups continue to be divided by race due to continued white privilege and discrimination against minorities.

Conflict theorists argue that whites, as a group with considerable power, have found ways to justify systematic racial discrimination by developing linguistic strategies of blaming the victim, in this case racial minorities, for the problems they experience, despite the fact that historically, whites in America have exploited racial minorities and kept them from attaining higher positions within society. An example of blaming the victim includes the ideology of rugged individualism to celebrate whites' hard work and the rewards they deserve. Many whites insist that anyone can attain a higher status if he or she works hard enough, implying that minorities lack the motivation to be successful. As a group with more power, whites continue to dominate the world economy, media, and mainstream culture.

In the study of deviance, researchers have focused on the ways in which deviant behavior is more heavily punished for racial and ethnic minorities than for whites. For example, white-collar crime is typically committed by whites who occupy prestigious jobs in business, corporations, and the government. However, a crime committed by a white business executive is less likely to result in more jail time than a robbery committed by member of a racial or ethnic minority. Another example would include the use of crack cocaine by minority populations and the use of powder cocaine by white populations. Although both are essentially the same drug, those who use crack are more likely to be more heavily punished in the courts. Conflict theorists would argue that laws benefit whites more so than minorities, giving whites more leeway when they commit deviant behavior. They focus on the ways in which the media portray the minority criminal or drug abuser as a thug or gangster rather than as someone trying to make ends meet under conditions of systematic exploitation and discrimination versus the white-collar criminal as an unfortunate victim of complex business processes who was temporarily swayed to the dark side. Racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to advance in their careers and in educational attainment due to increased punishments for deviant behavior, even though white-collar crime hurts society as a whole much more than does petty theft. The conflict perspective argues that because whites are in positions of power, they have found ways to escape harsher punishment than racial and ethnic minorities.

**Gender**

A conflict perspective is also useful for studying gender inequality. Feminist theory is often considered a branch of conflict theory, mainly because feminists generally see men and women as members of competing groups. Men have historically dominated women in all aspects of life. Men are on average larger and physically stronger than women and have often used their strength to keep women in inferior positions within society by labeling them as weak. Women have also historically been unable to vote in political elections, own land, or occupy prestigious positions within society, as for instance in religion and politics. Women have also been sexually exploited and treated as property to be owned by men. On average, they continue to make less money than men, even when controlling for variables such as occupation and amount of education.

Conflict theorists consider women's empowerment movements to have control over their reproductive practices and achieve career goals similar to those of men as a result of conflict experienced according to gender. However, many women refuse to rebel against gender inequality owing to the cultural expectations men have placed on them to be good wives and mothers. They are expected to be emotional caretakers of their families, clean house and raise children, and be
subservient to others in general more so than men. Although men continue to occupy the most prestigious occupations, as women gain more access to education and successful careers, men as a group will be less able to have full control and power over society’s resources.

In the study of deviance, conflict theorists study the ways in which women have been systematically excluded from top positions within business and government. Examples include the fact that a woman has never been a U.S. president, even though women make up about 50% of the population. Women are pressured to be submissive to their husbands and downplay their careers because of their roles as mothers and wives. Because of these societal and cultural pressures, women are less likely to be financially independent, have a high-profile and rewarding career, and have control over big family decisions, such as purchasing homes and cars. Women also continue to be harshly judged on their outward appearance. They are more likely to feel pressured to fulfill societal expectations of women as sexual objects of beauty and desire. They are also more likely to have eating disorders, negative self-perceptions, and higher rates of anxiety and depression than men. Conflict theorists would argue that this is because they are, as a group, less powerful than men.

Class
Similar to Marx’s description of the conflict between the owners of the means of production and the working class, sociologists continue to study class conflict. Those who own businesses and capital are more likely to run for political office, develop laws and policies that negatively affect the working and lower classes, and gain access to more capital. For example, in the U.S. society, the distribution of wealth is continuing to become more disproportionate, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Current research has shown how people are becoming more likely to marry someone whose educational attainment is similar to their own; those with college educations are less likely to marry someone with only a high school diploma and vice versa. This means that college-educated couples will continue to make more money than couples with high school educations, creating a larger class divide. The majority of the economy’s income and wealth is being controlled by fewer and fewer people, thus increasing the distance between the upper and lower classes. Those in control are finding more ways to exploit the working and lower classes’ labor, while at the same time making those classes more dependent on the successful running of the current businesses and government practices. Similarly, the larger economic outlook in America predicts that manufacturing jobs that are typically filled by lower- and working-class people continue to decrease in number. Consequently, more service-based jobs, which have been historically underpaid compared with working-class jobs that provide a decent living to families, are increasing in the United States, giving those with a high school education or less little occupational incentive or opportunity for promotion. For the upper classes, this means they are able to exploit the lower classes even more.

In the study of deviance, some researchers have used Karl Marx’s work to explain class differences and predict class trends for the future. Conflict theorists look at the ways in which capitalists find ways to maximize their own profits while at the same time finding ways to exploit cheap labor, regardless of the social consequences. Even though jobs are less able to sustain families, members of the upper class continue to defend their success as a result of hard work and determination, claiming that the lower classes are less motivated, lazy, and welfare abusers. However, members of the working and lower classes often continue to work the same number of hours, try to find multiple jobs to make ends
meets, and are less likely to receive protection and benefits from their employers.

**Sexuality**
Research has also focused on the ways in which members of the LGBT community have suffered because of their deviant status within society—from systematic discrimination, such as being denied jobs based on their sexual orientation, to everyday cultural norms, such as the common saying “that’s gay” to refer to social phenomena as weak, stupid, or inferior. Members of the LGBT community have also been systematically denied rights that benefit heterosexual couples. Gays and lesbians are denied rights that married heterosexual couples enjoy, such as home ownership benefits, spousal insurance coverage, visitation rights at hospitals, and the ability to hold hands in public without scorn or disapproving looks. Conflict theorists would argue that heterosexuals hold more powerful positions within society and therefore look down on the LGBT community, creating laws that benefit the preferred heterosexual lifestyles of the powerful. The current debate about gay marriage is a reflection of the conflict experienced between competing groups. Hate crimes committed against members of the LGBT community are also evidence of the power heterosexuals have to inflict harm and even kill people they consider to be deviant.

**Conclusion**
Although space permits coverage of only a limited number of topics of interest to conflict theory, it is clear how this theory can be applied to many sets of competing groups, such as religious groups, athletic teams, and academic groups. The key point of conflict theory is that competing groups with unequal power differentials experience conflict. The powerful benefit from their positions and find ways to keep and increase their positions. The weak attempt to find ways to gain power and control, even though their goals are much harder to achieve because of exploitation, discrimination, and the deviant labels placed on them. Also, we can see how multiple group memberships can create more complex situations for individuals (i.e., being a poor black woman, an upper-class Hispanic man, or a working-class white man), preventing them from rebelling against the powerful in some instances.

Conflict theory allows researchers to study a wide range of social phenomena, the concepts of power and inequality, and the ways in which deviance is defined and treated in society. It provides a foundation to study systematic discrimination and exploitation of weak groups, as well as the ways in which people interact and treat each other on a daily basis based on group membership. Conflict theory can also be used to attempt to level power differentials, as well as promote social equality and a better life for underprivileged groups.

*See also*: Discrimination; Punishment and Rule Enforcement; Racism; Sex Discrimination; White-Collar Crime

**Further Readings**


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