

## THEORIES OF INEQUALITY IN SOUTH PARK'S CHICKENPOX

Most introductory textbooks present *functionalist*, *conflict*, and *symbolic interaction* theory in the early chapters and continue to incorporate these theoretical paradigms into the coverage of different subjects throughout the text. While not every instructor focuses on theory in introductory or even social stratification courses, presenting theoretical explanations for inequality can enhance students' understanding of not just class, but other sociological topics, as stratification arises in tandem with other subjects (family, education, work, politics, etc.). Also, because the three theoretical paradigms closely align with the competing socio-political schemes many individual citizens (especially individuals who follow politics) use to explain class differences, students often confront their own perceptions about inequality when presented with this specific arena of sociological theory in any course that covers class and inequality.

The *functionalist* explanation of stratification as articulated by Davis and Moore (1945) closely aligns with American individualism by arguing inequality is necessary because differential rewards motivate the most talented and hardest working individuals to fill the most important and therefore most rewarding occupations. *Conflict theorists* (Tumin 1953) emphasize how the powerful use their resources to protect their wealth and privilege—even when their lack of individual abilities and efforts should result in downward mobility. *Symbolic Interactionists* stress how inequality is reinforced by perpetuating classist stereotypes, as the poor are constructed or *othered* as deserving of their disadvantage because of their intellectual and moral inferiority, regardless of how hard those in poverty work to overcome the barriers they face in achieving upward mobility (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

### Strategy Description and Procedure

After a brief lecture on the paradigms' explanations for inequality, I pass out the attached worksheet for an in-class assignment used during the viewing of the "[Chicken Pox](http://tinyurl.com/lhwzwe2)" episode (<http://tinyurl.com/lhwzwe2>) from the second season of South Park. For honors' sections of introductory sociology and upper-level inequality classes, I make an open-ended, short answer 'quiz,' asking students to describe, through examples from the show, how each of the three theoretical paradigms is reflected in the episode. For regular introductory classes, I developed a matching questionnaire in which students attribute the different quotes from the show to the corresponding theoretical paradigm.

By depicting how the characters confront the issues of class in their own lives, South Park presents all three paradigms' explanations for inequality while highlighting the disagreement between the theories. In this episode, *functionalism* is expressed when Kyle's father explains:

You see, Kyle, we humans work as a society, and in order for a society to thrive, we need gods, and clods ... I spent a lot of time going to law school, and I was able to go because I have a slightly higher intellect than others. But I still need people to pump my gas, and make my French fries, and fix my laundry machine when it breaks down ... and we're all a functioning part of America.

This father-son lecture captures the individualism central to *functionalism*, which claims that inequality results from the higher economic rewards given to those who work hard and undergo extensive training

like “law school.” However, in saying “I have a slightly higher intellect,” the show approaches the controversial, social Darwinist aspects of Davis and Moore (1945) who argue inequality motivates the most talented people for the most important and indispensable positions in society. The show also illustrates the drawn out logic of this strictly positivist perspective when Kyle elaborates on his father’s ideas in a school essay about how the unemployed are not useful to society and should be sent away to live in camps.

Throughout the episode the *symbolic interactionists’* explanation of inequality is presented as Kenny and his family are constructed and perceived as lesser people who are responsible for being poor. At the beginning of the show, the boys are reluctant to sleep over at Kenny’s house because of his family’s poverty, but eventually their parents force the children to attend. On the way to Kenny’s house, the children pass over railroad tracks to the poor side of town while Cartman sings Elvis Presley’s, “In the Ghetto.” Upon arrival at Kenny’s house, trash is scattered about the yard, and once inside the boys avoid rats and ask for Nintendo only to be told by Kenny’s father, Stuart, they only have an antiquated gaming system “plugged into the black and white [television].” While sharing a dinner of frozen waffles, Stuart reveals in high school he was the best friend of Kyle’s dad, Gerald, both of whom worked at a pizza parlor. He then explains how they lost touch when Kyle’s dad “got promoted and went off to community college and I didn’t. And you know why? ‘Cause your dad’s Jewish!” According to *symbolic interactionists*, this quote affirms the ethnic aspects to some classist stereotypes used to justify others’ wealth (or lack thereof in other cases). However, after saying this, Kenny’s mother corrects her husband by saying “that ain’t why, Stuart! It’s because you are an alcoholic retard nugget o’ deer turd, and he had dreams of not eating frozen waffles for dinner every night!” This quote reinforces the classist stereotype that Gerald and his family are poor because of a lack of intellect and motivation.

The characters in the show continuously admonish Kenny and his family for their poverty, often in ways that both ignore structural barriers to upward mobility and perpetuate stereotypes of the poor as responsible and even deserving of their plight. For example, Kenny’s mother later reinforces her opinions regarding her spouse claiming, “My husband is a washed-up hunk of shit,” a slang expression for irreversible failure. Later on a fishing trip, Kyle’s father tells Gerald, “You’re a bitter old drunk, just like your father,” implying the self-fulfilling prophecy in which people are assigned an identity that adheres to others’ prejudicial expectations. When students are urged to think critically about these quotes, they come to see the symbolic interactionist processes of *othering* (Schwalbe et al. 2000), or the social construction of the poor as supposedly responsible for their plight because they are supposedly a lesser and lacking people.

The episode also makes use of symbolic interactionist concepts of *status symbols*, or signs that communicate individual’s class stature. While on a fishing trip, Stuart offers Kyle’s father a beer and Gerald replies: “I brought my own microbrew sampler from Aspen; it has six different beers from local breweries.” These drinks highlight the status differences between the two men, as Stuart drinks cheap beer and scotch. Furthermore, the show illustrates a framing of status symbols that occur in the lower class construction of upper class others, such as when Kyle’s mother asks for teabags or coffee grounds for her hot water, Kenny’s mother replies “naw, we don’t go for that hoity-toity rich folk stuff.”

The episode highlights the uneven resource distribution central to *conflict theory* before the ‘Gods and Clods’ speech when Kyle asks, “How come Kenny’s family eats frozen waffles for dinner and has rats on the floor, and we have a big house and lots of food?” His father Gerald responds, “Well, because Kenny’s family doesn’t have as much money as we do.” To this Kyle then asks: “But why? If they’re hungry and poor, why don’t we just always give them half of our food?” Through their

interactions, the boys also reinforce the hostility directed at the lower class as Cartman explains to Kenny, "Dude, seriously, you'd better stop being so poor, or else I'm gonna start huckin' rocks at you."

Other exchanges of dialogue in this episode of South Park highlight how control of resources or lack thereof reinforces the class structure by stalling mobility. Driving to their fishing trip, Gerald asks, "Aren't weekends just the best?" To this Stuart replies, "When you're unemployed, weekends are meaningless." Later, Gerald comments, "Well I'm sure you'll find another job soon. Something will come along." Stuart then notes how it is "not that easy [to find a job]," adding support to conflict theorists' argument focusing on the structural barriers limiting individuals' ability to achieve upward mobility. Stuart's next statement to Gerald captures the essence of conflict theory; those status groups with resources 'conspire' to protect that power and status when he claims, "You had rich parents. You got to go to that expensive community college. I wanted to be somebody, too! I just wasn't born with a silver enema." This exchange not only illustrates how conflict theorists perceive class as being transmitted inter-generationally, but it also speaks to the specific critique Tumin (1953) levies at David and Moore (1945) arguing opportunity is not equally spread across all citizens. Stuart's comments infuriate Gerald, and he retaliates using the functionalist-like mindset of American individualism that reinforces an aura of superiority upper-class individuals often claim via their success by pointing out, "I worked my ass off to get to where I am today." The men end up brawling, but by the end of the episode Gerald concedes, "Stuart, I think I owe you an apology. I realize that I shouldn't be so cold towards people that are less fortunate than me." However, the most grotesque part of the show comes just prior to this exchange; thus instructors may want to consider stopping the video after Gerald reads his son's essay about sending the poor to concentration camps.

### **The After Discussion**

After having students submit their papers for grading, I go through each of the paradigms individually and ensure students know where each was reflected in the show, while also proposing questions that allow for a more thorough understanding of the paradigms. Students tell me where they witnessed the functionalist paradigm reflected, and I then ask the class: How important are lawyers? This is an effort to illustrate how the rewards attached to social positions are not always related to an occupation's functional necessity. During the discussion of symbolic interactionism, I focus on Stuart's character and often initiate a debate amongst students as to whether he is poor and unemployed because he is an alcoholic or whether he drinks to cope and compensate for being poor and unemployed. I close this debate by asking students, what would happen if someone like Stuart went on a job interview and the possible employer just assumed he was drunk and unreliable because he was poor? Because the presentation of conflict theory was entwined with the cost of attending college, many students are willing to offer their own difficulties in affording higher education either with or without parental help, and this can serve to highlight the main ideas of the paradigm about the perpetuation of inequality through control over resources.

Also, I point out how even though insightful, the show is part of institutionalized media that can perpetuate classist, racist, and gendered stereotypes. Stuart's anti-Semitic comment that Cartman readily agrees to is the easiest way to initiate the discussion about how the show can play a role in perpetuating stereotypes. I also highlight how one character in the show, Kenny's mother, speaks with a southern accent and how this could serve to perpetuate "white trash" stereotypes (Eastman and Schrock 2008). This discussion usually culminates with students coming to realize the show itself can serve to reinforce stratification by perpetuating prejudices about the poor. Because students usually ask

me which of the theories I think is the most accurate, I often wrap up the discussion by explaining how all three theories accurately characterize a portion of what is ultimately a very complex, multifaceted system in which inequality is produced and perpetuated.

### Works Cited

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

In this episode of South Park, identify instances where the show reflects each of the 3 sociological paradigms' explanations/characterizations of inequality.

1.) Functionalism (Inequality is necessary)

2.) Conflict theory (Inequality struggle over resources)

3.) Symbolic Interactionism (Poor stereotyped/criticized)

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Match the theoretical paradigm that is best reflected in the quote from this episode of South Park. Each alternative can be used more than once.

- A.) Functionalism (Inequality is necessary)
- B.) Conflict theory (Inequality struggle over resources)
- C.) Symbolic Interactionism (Poor stereotyped/criticized)

\_\_\_\_\_. "It's because you are an alcoholic retard nugget o' deer turd, and he had dreams of not eating frozen waffles for dinner every night!"

\_\_\_\_\_. "You see, Kyle, we humans work as a society, and in order for a society to thrive, we need gods, and clods ... I spent a lot of time going to law school, and I was able to go because I have a slightly higher intellect than others. But I still need people to pump my gas, and make my French fries, and fix my laundry machine when it breaks down ... and we're all a functioning part of America."

\_\_\_\_\_. "You had rich parents. You got to go to that expensive community college. I wanted to be somebody, too! I just wasn't born with a silver enema."

\_\_\_\_\_. "I worked my ass off to get to where I am today."