Sociologists regard culture as a central ingredient in human behaviour. However, depending upon their particular theoretical perspective, different sociologists see culture through different lenses.

- Recall the different theoretical perspectives:
  - Functionalist
  - Conflict
  - Symbolic Interactionist
  - Post-modern
Culture: The Functionalist Perspective

Recall that the functionalist perspective is based upon the assumption that society is a stable, orderly system with interrelated parts that serve specific functions.

- Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski suggests that culture helps people meet their needs:
  - Biological needs (eg. food, procreation)
  - Instrumental needs (eg. law, education)
  - Integrative needs (eg. religion, art)
Culture: The Functionalist Perspective

According to functionalist theorists, societies where people share a common language and core values are more likely to have consensus and harmony.

All societies, however, have dysfunctions:
- Inequalities among class, racial and gender lines contribute to problems.
- Also, multiple subcultures can lead to lack of consensus about core values.

How are these problems resolved?
- Resolution of problems comes with education about the value of cultural diversity (schools and families are charged with this responsibility).
What is a strength of the functionalist perspective?

- It focuses on the needs of society and the fact that stability is essential for a society’s continued success.

What are some weaknesses of the functionalist perspective?

- It overemphasizes harmony and cooperation.
- It does not acknowledge all the societal factors that contribute to conflict and strife.
Culture: The Conflict Perspective

Recall that the **conflict perspective** is based upon the assumption that social life is a continuous struggle in which members of powerful groups seek to control scarce resources.

- Conflict theorists suggest that values and norms help create and sustain the privileged position of the powerful.
According to Karl Marx, ideas are *cultural creations*. It is therefore possible society’s leaders to use ideology – that is, a system of ideas that guides the way people think and act – to maintain their positions of dominance in a society.
Culture: The Conflict Perspective

According to Marx, people are not aware that they are being dominated because they have false consciousness, meaning that people hold beliefs that they think promote their best interest when in fact they are damaging to their best interests.

- For example, when hate groups “blame” certain people for a society’s problems, they shift attention away from persons in position of political and economic power.

- Extremist groups may perpetuate the very “problem” they think exists, and may maintain status quo by protecting people who are responsible for making important decisions.
Culture: The Conflict Perspective

What is a strength of the conflict perspective?

- It stresses how cultural values and norms may perpetuate social inequalities

What are some weaknesses of the conflict perspective?

- It focuses on societal discord and the divisiveness of culture
Culture: The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

- Recall that the Symbolic Interactionist perspective is engaged in micro-level analysis, and examines society as the sum of all people’s interactions.
  - People create, maintain and modify culture as they go about their day-to-day activities.

- According to Symbolic Interactionists, our culture’s values and norms do not automatically determine our behaviour.
  - Rather, we re-interpret these values and norms with each situation we come across. In other words, our values and norms are dynamic; that is, we are constantly changing them.
Culture: The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

- Georg Simmel suggested that eventually culture takes on a life of its own – and begins to control us instead.

  - For example, people initially created money as a means of exchange. It is a social construct that was designed to facilitate economies.

  Now, however, money has taken on a new meaning: it has become an end in itself (i.e. material wealth), rather than a means to an end (i.e. facilitating the exchange of goods and services).

  - Not only goods and services, but even people have a relative “worth” applied to them:
    - Bill Gates – $50 billion
    - Oprah Winfrey - $2.5 billion
Culture: The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

- Symbolic Interactionists examine how people maintain and change culture through interaction with others.

- As a result, Symbolic Interactionism does not provide an outline to analyze how we shape culture and how it in turn shapes us. It fails to take into account the larger, macro-level social structures (e.g., social class) that are considered in the Functionalist and Conflict perspectives.