One Rule, Three Lenses

Compare how sociological theories interpret a school policy.

SS24.S.3 "Compare and contrast the three major sociological theories: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction.* 3a Apply the major sociological theories to a situation and evaluate the differences in interpretations."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline what each theory says about the phone rule, then circle one limit of each interpretation. Use your marks to compare what the theories explain.

Phones Away at Lunch

1. At Westview High, students must place their phones in numbered pouches during lunch. The principal says the rule will help students talk face to face, but some students say lunch is their only chance to contact family. Functionalism asks how a practice helps a school operate and meet shared needs. A functionalist might expect phone-free tables to strengthen friendships and reduce arguments fueled by online posts. Yet the same rule could disrupt an important function of lunch for students who coordinate rides or check on relatives. This view weighs the school's social benefits against those costs.

2. Conflict theory begins with a different question: Who has the power to make the lunch rule, and who bears its costs? Administrators choose the policy, while students have little say in it. Students whose families rely on quick messages may pay a higher price than those who do not. A conflict theorist would ask whose needs counted when the rule was made and whether some students can get exceptions more easily than others. This approach highlights unequal influence, but a focus on power alone may miss friendships that grow when people put their phones away.

3. Symbolic interactionism looks closely at the meanings people create in everyday encounters. At Westview, a student who puts a phone in its pouch might signal respect to a friend, while another might feel that the same act signals distrust from adults. During lunch, classmates may treat eye contact as an invitation to talk or as unwanted attention. These meanings can change as students interact. Unlike functionalism's focus on how the rule affects school life or conflict theory's focus on power, this approach explains why the same rule feels different to different people. It may overlook who controls the policy.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How would functionalism and conflict theory each interpret the rule's effect on students who need to message family?

2. How would functionalism and symbolic interactionism explain conversations at phone-free tables differently?

3. A student feels that using a pouch signals distrust from adults. What would symbolic interactionism focus on, and what different question would conflict theory ask?

4. Which theory best examines the concern that some students might get exceptions more easily than others? Name one detail another theory would add.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A town library begins requiring visitors to reserve a study seat online. In 4 to 6 sentences, explain how each theory would interpret this policy, then judge which theory best reveals a possible problem and why.

ANSWER KEY

One Rule, Three Lenses

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline what each theory says about the phone rule, then circle one limit of each interpretation. Use your marks to compare what the theories explain. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How would functionalism and conflict theory each interpret the rule's effect on students who need to message family?	**Functionalism would consider how lost family contact disrupts a useful part of lunch. Conflict theory would ask why students who rely on messages bear a greater cost under a rule they had little power to make.**
2	How would functionalism and symbolic interactionism explain conversations at phone-free tables differently?	**Functionalism would examine whether conversations strengthen friendships across the school. Symbolic interactionism would examine how students interpret actions such as eye contact during those conversations.**
3	A student feels that using a pouch signals distrust from adults. What would symbolic interactionism focus on, and what different question would conflict theory ask?	**Symbolic interactionism would focus on the student's meaning for the act. Conflict theory would ask who has the power to require it and whether students had a say.**
4	Which theory best examines the concern that some students might get exceptions more easily than others? Name one detail another theory would add.	**Conflict theory best examines unequal access to exceptions. Functionalism could add whether the rule strengthens friendships, or symbolic interactionism could add how students interpret putting phones away.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A functionalist might say reservations help the library manage limited seats so visitors can plan their study time. A conflict theorist would ask whether people without reliable internet are shut out and who decided to require online booking. A symbolic interactionist might study whether a confirmation makes visitors feel welcome while a denied request makes them feel excluded. Conflict theory best reveals a possible problem because online booking could give people with internet access an unfair advantage. Functionalism explains the practical goal, but it may not fully expose that unequal access.

Accept other interpretations grounded in each theory's focus: shared functions, power and unequal costs, or meanings formed through interaction. The Part 3 judgment may favor any theory if the student identifies a plausible problem and explains the choice.