Who Sets the Pay?

Two perspectives on inequality at work

S.4.3 "Explore stratification from both functionalist and conflict perspectives."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the functionalist explanation of the surgeon's higher pay, and circle the conflict explanation of that same pay difference. Put a star beside the pay difference both perspectives explain.

An Overnight Shift at Harbor Hospital

1. At Harbor Hospital, a surgeon, a nurse, and a cleaner work through the same overnight emergency. The surgeon performs an operation, the nurse monitors the patient afterward, and the cleaner disinfects the room before the next patient arrives. Each job affects patient safety, yet the surgeon earns far more per hour than the cleaner. This pay gap is one example of social stratification, the uneven distribution of rewards and opportunities among social groups. The hospital also offers paid training to some employees, while others must pay for additional schooling on their own. These differences raise a question: who benefits from the way work is organized?

2. A functionalist might argue that the surgeon's higher pay helps the hospital attract people willing to complete many years of demanding training. In this view, rewards encourage qualified workers to fill positions that require rare skills and carry major responsibility. A functionalist could also say that training opportunities help workers develop skills the hospital needs. This does not mean that cleaning is unimportant: an unclean operating room can put patients at risk. Rather, the functionalist explanation focuses on how a system of unequal rewards might help the hospital staff difficult roles. It is an explanation of inequality, not proof that every pay difference is fair.

3. A conflict theorist would examine who has the power to set pay and control access to training. At Harbor, hospital leaders decide wages, while cleaners have no seat on the wage committee. Employees who can afford years of school are more likely to qualify for surgeon positions; workers who must earn wages immediately face a steeper path. From this view, the surgeon's higher pay may reflect bargaining power and unequal access to credentials, not just the hospital's need for skills. Conflict theorists would also ask why essential cleaning work receives lower pay when its workers have little influence over wage decisions.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does each perspective explain why the surgeon earns more than the cleaner?

2. How might each perspective interpret the fact that some employees receive paid training while others must pay for schooling?

3. The cleaner's work protects patients, but the cleaner earns less. How would each perspective interpret this difference?

4. Why would the wage committee matter more to a conflict theorist's explanation than to a functionalist's explanation?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Invent a workplace with two jobs that earn different pay. In 4 to 5 sentences, explain how a functionalist and a conflict theorist might each interpret the difference, including one detail about training and one about who sets wages.

Who Sets the Pay?

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the functionalist explanation of the surgeon's higher pay, and circle the conflict explanation of that same pay difference. Put a star beside the pay difference both perspectives explain. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does each perspective explain why the surgeon earns more than the cleaner?	**Functionalists focus on attracting workers to a role requiring lengthy training and rare skills. Conflict theorists focus on bargaining power and unequal access to credentials.**
2	How might each perspective interpret the fact that some employees receive paid training while others must pay for schooling?	**A functionalist might see paid training as a way to develop needed skills. A conflict theorist might ask who controls access to it and how the cost of schooling limits opportunities.**
3	The cleaner's work protects patients, but the cleaner earns less. How would each perspective interpret this difference?	**A functionalist might point to differences in training and the difficulty of filling each role without claiming cleaning is unimportant. A conflict theorist might point to cleaners' lack of influence over wages.**
4	Why would the wage committee matter more to a conflict theorist's explanation than to a functionalist's explanation?	**A conflict theorist would focus on leaders' power to set wages and cleaners' lack of a seat on the committee. A functionalist would focus more on how pay helps fill roles requiring particular skills.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

At a shipping warehouse, a logistics manager earns more than a package sorter. A functionalist might say the higher pay attracts people who can plan complex routes and manage large shipments. From a conflict perspective, managers may influence salary decisions while sorters have little say. Applicants who can afford specialized training may find it easier to become managers, which can preserve the gap. Both views explain the same difference, but one stresses staffing needs while the other stresses power and access.

Accept different wording that accurately contrasts staffing needs with power or unequal access. Students need not argue that either perspective justifies the pay gap.