

# Theorizing Social Protection: a Synthesis of Institutional, Interactionist and Holistic Perspectives

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## Սոցիալական պաշտպանության լուսաբանումը սոցիոլոգիական տեսությունների միջոցով

Աղաջանյան Մարտին Ա.

ասպիրանտ, Բաղադրագրությունների ամբիոն, Միջազգային հարաբերությունների ֆակուլտետ, Երևանի պետական համալսարան (Երևան, ՀՀ)

**Ամփոփագիր.** Սոցիալական պաշտպանությունը՝ որպես 20-րդ դարում ներդրված հայեցակարգ, ավելի քան արդիական է այսօր, քանզի բազմաթիվ պետություններ բախվում են սոցիալ-տնտեսական սրացող մարտահրավերների, ինչպիսիք են աղքատությունը, գործազրկությունը, եկամուտների անհավասարությունը, բնակչության ծերացումը և այլն: Հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է սոցիալական պաշտպանությունը երկու հիմնական սոցիոլոգիական տեսությունների՝ ինստիտուցիոնալիզմի և ինտերակտիվիզմի պրիզմայով, որոնք առաջարկում են համապարփակ շրջանակ (երկխոսք մոտեցում), թե ինչպես պետք է վերլուծվեն սոցիալական պաշտպանության համակարգերը: Ինստիտուցիոնալ տեսությունները պատկերացում են տալիս հասարակության ձևավորման գործում ինստիտուտների դերի և ուժի դինամիկայի մասին, մինչդեռ ինտերակտիվիստական տեսությունները շեշտում են այն իմաստներն ու փորձառությունները, որոնք մարդիկ կապում են սոցիալական պաշտպանության հետ: Փորձելով խորացնել սոցիալական պաշտպանության հայեցակարգի վերլուծությունը, հեղինակը քննարկում է մակրո և միկրո հարացույցների համապատասխանությունը, ինչպիսիք են ֆունկցիոնալիզմը, կոնֆլիկտների տեսությունը, քննադատական տեսությունները, խորհրդանշական ինտերակտիվիզմը և կոնստրուկտիվիզմը: Բացի այդ, քննարկվում է լրացուցիչ հարացույց՝ ի դեմս հոլիստիկ մոտեցման: Այս ինտեգրված մոտեցումը նպատակ ունի բարելավել սոցիալական պաշտպանության հայեցակարգի վերլուծությունը՝ հաշվի առնելով ինչպես կառուցվածքային, այնպես էլ անհատական տիրույթները: Ուսումնասիրությունը ծառայում է հետագա հետազոտությունների համար որպես հիմնարար ուղեցույց սոցիալական պաշտպանության զարգացող ոլորտում:

**Հանգուցաբառեր և բառակապակցություններ՝** Սոցիալական պաշտպանություն, ինստիտուցիոնալ և ինտերակտիվիստական տեսություններ, ամբողջական (հոլիստիկ) մոտեցում, կոնստրուկտիվիզմ, ֆունկցիոնալիզմ, սիմվոլիկ ինտերակտիվիզմ, կոնֆլիկտների տեսություն, քննադատական տեսություն

## Теоретизация социальной защиты: синтез институциональных, интеракционистских и целостных точек зрения

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**Аннотация.** Социальная защита, концепция, введенная в 20 веке, более чем актуальна в наши дни, поскольку многие страны сталкиваются с возрастающими социально-экономическими проблемами, такими как бедность, безработица, неравенство доходов, старение населения и т. д. В статье социальная защита рассматривается через призму двух ключевых социологических теорий: институциональной и интеракционистской, предлагающих комплексную структуру (двухкогортный подход) того, как следует анализировать системы социальной защиты. Институциональные теории дают представление о роли институтов и динамике власти в формировании общества, в то время как интеракционистские теории подчеркивают значения и опыт, которые люди придают социальной защите. В попытке углубить анализ концепции социальной защиты автор обсуждает релевантность макро- и микропарадигм, таких как функционализм, теория конфликта, критические теории, символический интеракционизм и конструктивизм. Кроме того, под видом целостного (холистического) подхода была представлена дополнительная парадигма. Эта интегрированная перспектива направлена на повышение эффективности анализа концепции социальной защиты путем рассмотрения как структурных, так и

индивидуальных измерений. Исследование служит основополагающим руководством для дальнейших исследований в развивающейся области социальной защиты.

**Ключевые слова и словосочетания:** Социальная защита, институциональные и интеракционистские теории, целостный (холистический) подход, конструктивизм, функционализм, символический интеракционизм, теория конфликта, критическая теория

### Introduction

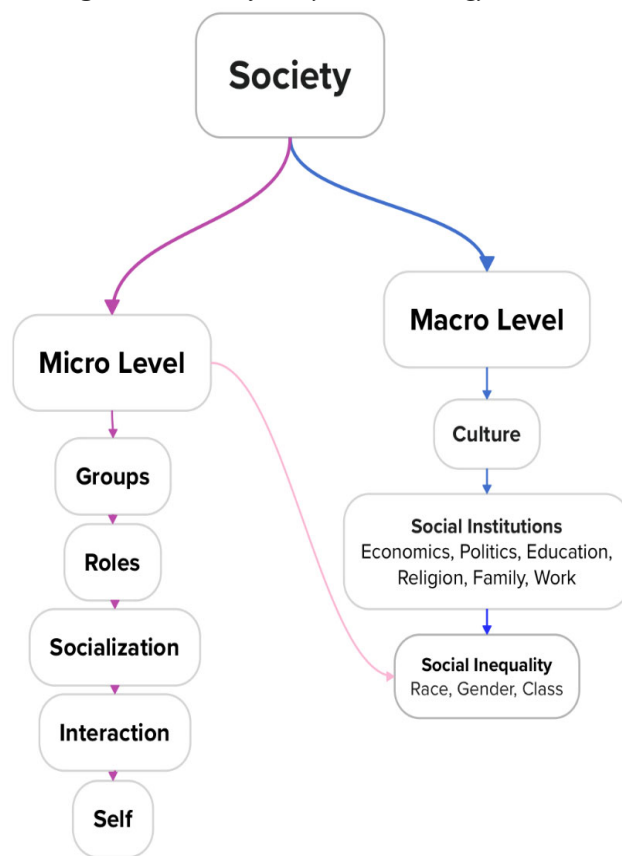
Theoretical frameworks are a vital foundation and tool for comprehending diverse concepts and phenomena since they facilitate philosophical, epistemological<sup>1</sup>, methodological, and analytical insights into research topics and enable reflecting on and presenting a clear overview of the subject matter [8, pp. 12-26]. The paper aims to contribute to the existing theoretical knowledge by presenting and categorizing different social and philosophical theoretical frameworks in order to generate a research loupe which will help comprehend the multifaceted and extensive context of social protection.

### Two-Cohort Approach

Given the varying practices and experiences that modern nations have developed in response to their unique social challenges, as well as the multidisciplinary nature of social protection studies, encompassing fields such as economics or sociology, it is reasonable to conclude that a multitude of approaches exist in elucidating the concept of social protection. Before delving into the main discussion of the two-cohorts model, it is also important to reflect on what social protection entails. As a concept, mainly introduced in the 20th century, i.e. not very long ago, the concept of social protection provides social and economic stability as well as social cohesion by addressing the needs of the vulnerable. Accordingly, the concept addresses both major and minor actors within systems such as political and economic structures, as well as individuals in need [9, pp. 515-519]. Hence, to analyze the concept of social protection at the macro and micro levels, respectively, two different perspectives are considered: **institutional theories (macro level)** and **interactionist theories (micro level)**. This dualism of structural and individual domains is what enables us to identify the functionality and purpose of social protection systems. While Structural or Institutional Theories focus on the importance of large-scale social structures, institutions, and power dynamics and provide insights into how social protection systems are shaped by economic, political, and social institutions; Agency or Interactionist Theories

highlight the personal experiences, interactions, and meanings that individuals and groups attach to social protection [13, pp. 1-7]. The comprehensive analysis of sociological macro and micro levels is illustrated in Figure 1. Inspired by Jennifer Puentes and Michaela Willi Hooper's representation,<sup>2</sup> the figure delineates the key characteristics of each level that collectively constitute society. This perspective facilitates the analysis of social protection on distinct tiers or the examination of individual components in isolation.

**Figure 1.** Levels of analysis in sociology



Below is the table where the two major cohorts of theories are represented for further analysis and conceptualisation (see Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> Epistemology encompasses all areas related to knowledge or cognition: psychology, sociology, logic, history, physiology, pathology, axiology, metaphysics, and more. When defined narrowly, epistemology examines the origins, cognitive values, principles, and boundaries of knowledge [16, pp. 3-4].

<sup>2</sup> Inspired by the figure of Jennifer Puentes and Michaela Willi Hooper [12].

**TABLE 1: TWO-COHORT APPROACH IN ANALYSING SOCIAL PROTECTION**

MAIN THEORETICAL COHORTS	
1. Institutional Theories (Macro Level)	2. Interactionist Theories (Micro Level)
<p>Taking into account that social protection addresses various aspects of socio-economic life, such as poverty, unemployment, and other challenges, first, it is essential to establish how societies address these issues. One perspective to explore the functioning of social protection is to understand the essence of social institutions and how they operate primarily. Hence, it is more advantageous to first try to define what institutions are and how understanding their functions can aid in grasping social protection. As stated by R. Scott, institutions are composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that provide stability and meaning to social life [17, pp. 427-442]. Overall, institutions are a complex set of social norms, beliefs, values, and role relationships. In this context, institutional theories help explain how the adoption of organizational structures such as cultural norms and practices [7, pp. 1327-1330] or governance structures explain social protection systems in different contexts.</p>	<p>Interactionist theories underscore the significance of meanings and interpretations that individuals assign to various phenomena, thereby offering a subjective perspective on their experiences and perceptions [10, pp. 18-28]. As cited in McPhail, Blumer mentions that “Individuals are active agents who construct their social world through everyday interactions” [15, pp. 401-423]. Interactionist theories study the roles of individuals, focusing on how people assert their needs and rights within various social systems. Based on the premise that individuals are active agents, various social scientists reproach these theories as agency theories. Interactions create a foundation which gives people a “behavioral referent” [18, p. 469]. These behavioral referents in turn aid in exploring the motivations and meanings of future interactions [18, p. 470]. Overall, Interactionist theories provide a framework to contemplate what the concept of social protection should encompass and which attributes it should additionally include.</p>

**MAIN PARADIGMS**

Macroparadigms	Relevance	Microparadigms	Relevance
<b>Functionalism</b>	In the scope of social science, functionalism views society as a complex system with parts that work together to promote solidarity and stability [19, pp. 1-27]. It stresses the importance of social institutions and most importantly, their functions in maintaining social order. The rationale why we have categorized it as a component of a larger institutional framework is that, as already stated, functionalism primarily focuses on the functions of the institutes rather than on the entirety of the institutional system itself. Each institution serves a specific function that contributes to the overall functioning and equilibrium of society. Functionalism focuses on how social structures meet the needs of society and how they	<b>Symbolic Interactionism</b>	Symbolic interactionism examines the recurrent interactions among individuals in society. It uses a "bottom-up" approach in contrast to macro-level theories like structural functionalism [4, pp. 1-17]. The theory primarily emphasizes the significance of language and symbols in interpersonal communication [2, pp. 1-3] and is based on the following hypotheses: human beings attach to objects and phenomena meanings; these meanings derive from social interactions; and meanings are adapted through an interpretive process [2, p. 2]. The insights provided in the scope of symbolic interactionism are significant in the way they interpret individual and group perceptions and interactions. Integrating these analyses into the social

contribute to social cohesion. As cited in Turner and Maryanski, one of the prominent sociologists, Robert Nisbet found that "functionalism is, without any doubt, the single most significant body of theory in the social sciences in the present [i.e., 20th] century." [19, pp. 1-27]

Based on the common reasoning and the provided information, we can infer that the role or function of social protection, in the framework of functionalism, is the maintenance of social order and stability by fulfilling necessary societal functions. This framework also helps verify how social protection systems contribute to societal cohesion and address the needs of different social groups.

**Conflict Theory**

Crozier in "A Theory of Conflict" writes that the conflict theory stipulates that social structures and institutions reflect the interests and power of groups dominant in the society which evidently leads to resources and authority conflicts. This theory emphasizes that societal change results from the struggle between competing interests [6, pp. 369-370].

Conflict Theory is relevant to social protection since it unfolds how existing power dynamics and inequalities occur in social protection policies. This process is ultimately insightful in terms of the socio-political context of social protection. As previously stated, social protection is intended to alleviate poverty and other societal challenges; it is therefore examined through various interdisciplinary lenses. For instance, poverty, described as a 'wicked social

protection discourse may prove advantageous since the experiences and perceptions of the people are crucial in the formula for comprehending the overarching concept of social protection.

**Constructivism**

As outlined by Andre Kukla in his work titled "Social Constructivism and the Philosophy of Science", constructivism is about reflecting on and then constructing the world properties and scientific facts through social processes and interactions rather than discovering them [14, pp. 1-18]. In other words, scientists create "facts" through their activities and interactions. In fact, "...theoretical entities and processes are constituted or constructed by scientists *post hoc*..." [14, pp. 3-5]. Consequently, researchers are merely observers and post-factum constructors of reality. Applying constructivist principles to social protection fosters deeper understanding of the complex social dynamics and more effective, inclusive, and adaptable social protection policies.

problem” by Thomas Corbett [5, pp. 3-8], is frequently not merely an economic issue but also a political one, as it undermines social cohesion and creates tensions between the affluent and those in poverty. It is commonly included in the programs of political parties, which transforms the economic aspect of poverty and extends it to politics [1, pp. 75-80].

**Critical Theory**

The critical theory can be more accurately characterized by Alan How’s “Critical Theory” where the author defines it as a philosophical approach [11, p. 3]. According to the author’s stance, this paradigm tackles a critical viewpoint towards oppressive and disparity-generating power structures and ideologies. According to the author, the final state of a “harmonious” society can occur when individuals are emancipated from constraints imposed by dominant societal forces [11, p. 6].

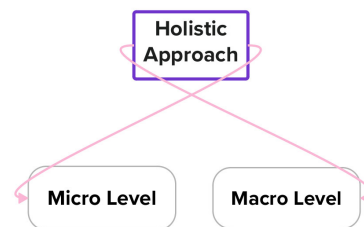
By challenging or reinforcing existing power structures and inequalities, the conflict theory provides a theoretical foundation on how to better social protection systems [21, pp. 213-237]. When the root causes of social inequities are identified and addressed, it leads to more equitable and just social protection systems. Thus, by employing this approach, the researcher can deliver a robust analysis concerning not only the immediate support and its implications within the context of social protection but also regarding long-term societal transformations.

**Holistic Approach**

On top of the aforementioned two-cohort theoretical flows approach, there is also another, more integrated approach to achieve a thorough comprehension of social protection. Insights from both institutional and interactionist theories can be merged into one more holistic approach that could consider both macro-level structures and micro-level experiences. The holistic approach interconnects philosophical and design frameworks [10, pp. 18-28].

Murray Bookchin in “The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy” debates that the concept of social ecology is wired by the holistic interdependence of social and natural relationships within communities [3, p. 22]. In terms of social protection policies, the holistic analysis of the interconnectedness of various social factors such as health, education, employment, and environmental sustainability provides quite a significant picture of society. Addressing these factors in isolation would not be as effective as considering their interdependencies and how they collectively contribute to understanding society. An illustration of this is the UNICEF framework, where the authors, for example, incorporate different concepts such as universal coverage, national systems and leadership, as well as inclusivity in reaching social protection [20, p. 4].

**Figure 2.** Visual interpretation of integrated/holistic approach (author’s own illustration)



**Conclusion**

In conclusion, analyzing social protection through macro-level institutional theories and micro-level interactionist theories provides a thorough perspective on its complex character. Institutional theories elucidate the design and operation of social safety programs by examining social institutions and power dynamics, thereby contributing to societal stability. On the other hand, interactionist theories emphasize how people's subjective experiences and interactions with others shape their engagement with complex systems, underscoring the significance of individual meanings and actions. The combination of these two complimentary constructs adds value to the understanding of social protection, with the consequence that policymakers and theories consider an explanation for social problems that addresses both structural and individual dimensions.

Furthermore, the comprehensive approach, which integrates perspectives from both institutional and interactionist frameworks, enhances the analysis by acknowledging the interrelation of social forces. This method emphasizes the necessity of analyzing social protection in conjunction with wider sociological, economic, and environmental factors. Such a perspective encourages the development of inclusive and adaptable social protection policies that address the needs of diverse groups while promoting social cohesion and stability. Ultimately, combining these theoretical frameworks offers a robust foundation for comprehending and enhancing social protection systems in an ever-evolving global context. The two-cohort approach promulgated in this paper serves as a foundational construct for researchers to further advance the study of social protection systems and address both structural and individual dimensions to enhance the effectiveness and equity of these systems.

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