

# Structural Functional Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the following sociological theoretical approach, through exploration of:

1. Structural Functional Approach
2. Emile Durkheim

## 1. STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

The **structural functional theory** is a theoretical approach that views society as a complex and interconnected system whose individual parts work in concert to promote stability and harmony in the system as a whole.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Consider the metaphor of your body: each organ in your body has a function to promote the overall well-being of your health. You can't take away one organ and still expect to be healthy. Your heart needs to pump the blood, your brain needs to do the thinking, your liver and kidneys do the purifying, etc. If one of them ceases to function, your whole system fails.

This is the same way that structural-functionalists look at society. Each part of society has a function that contributes to the maintenance of society as a whole.

These 'parts' of society are called structures. Each structure has a function. A **social structure** is defined as any stable pattern of social behavior. Any routine, big or small, that represents a stable pattern of social behavior would be considered a structure.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Americans like to watch football on Sundays. Is this one of your routines? If so, this would be a stable pattern of social behavior, or structure. It's helpful to think of these structures as routines.

An act that contributes to the maintenance of a structure, such as system, institution, or society, is called a **social function**. These functions keep the structure going.



## THINK ABOUT IT

What acts might contribute to the maintenance of a marriage? These acts might include being nice to your partner, being faithful to them, etc. These are functions that keep the structure--marriage, in this case--going.

## IN CONTEXT

Society is one big web made up of individual structures that each have a function to keep the entire

system going. Picture society in the middle of the web. The web consists of many different interconnections, including the economy, marriage and family, religion, law, courts and punishment, the police, etc. It includes culture, education, politics and government. All of these structures work together to keep society going

Your education system socializes you and teaches you how to be a member of the society, to obey laws, to participate in society and politics, to get jobs and contribute to the economy. Some sociologists even believe that religion is essential for capitalism to function--that it helps develop the work habits and ethics that promote capitalism. In this manner, religion connects to the economy, to the family, and to culture.

Even things that you might consider 'bad', like deviant behavior and crime, contribute to the overall maintenance of the system.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Think about public displays of punishment. What is the purpose of making them public? It's a reminder to the rest of society that if you obey the rules, the system will keep functioning. If you don't, society will come apart.

For sociologists working within the structural functional perspective, the first task is to identify the various structures, and from there, begin to investigate each of their functions. This is a **macro-level** view of society. Structural functionalists work with a macro orientation; they don't work on a level of individual interactions. Instead, they work on the macro level of social structures. They examine how aggregated patterns of behavior combine to make social structures, which then perform functions for society.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Structural Functional Theory**

A theoretical approach that sees society as a complex and interconnected system whose individual parts work in concert to promote stability and harmony in the system as a whole.

##### **Social Structure**

A repeated and routine-like pattern of social interaction or social behavior.

##### **Social Function**

An act that contributes to the maintenance of a structure, such as system, institution, or society.

##### **Macro-level Orientation**

A zoomed out look at the social structures and institutions that shape society.

---

## 2. EMILE DURKHEIM

French sociologist **Emile Durkheim** was a prominent figure working within the structural functional approach. Durkheim lived from 1858 to 1917 and was hugely influential in sociology. He was regarded by many as one of the founding theorists of sociology. Durkheim gave us the idea of a **social fact**, which is defined as a phenomenon arising from a collective consensus--that is, our norms, our values, and our mores.

## IN CONTEXT

As a society, we collectively decide that we value people who are honest; we don't like thieves. Our laws reflect this consensus. Suppose you are poor and you need to feed your family. You go to the store and try to steal some bread. Now, perhaps that is morally permissible in your eyes, but the collective has decided that you can't do that and will push back on you. In this instance, a social fact has impacted your life when you tried to circumvent it.

Durkheim also wrote a book called *On Suicide*. In this book, Durkheim looked at suicide rates for countries in Europe and broke them down by sub-groups: the rate of suicide for men, and the rate of suicide for women. He further broke down the sub-groups by religion and marital status: the rate of suicide for Protestants versus Catholics, for the married versus the unmarried. He discovered that the more socially integrated you were--the stronger your societal ties, the more stability you had in your life--the less likely you were to commit suicide.

In this **suicide study**, Durkheim took the most ostensibly individual act - suicide - and gave it a social explanation. The root causes of suicide were linked to stability, social ties, strength, and harmony of the society. When those things were functioning, people weren't killing themselves, according to Durkheim.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Social Fact

A phenomenon arising from collective consensus - i.e. our norms and values - that transcend the individual and exercise constraint.

#### Suicide Study

A groundbreaking and fascinating study that linked suicide to social causes like the degree of social integration and the strength of social ties.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### Emile Durkheim

A pioneer of sociology famous for his studies of suicide and religion, and for the idea of "social facts."



### SUMMARY

Today you learned about the **structural functional theory**, through the exploration of social structures and social functions. You also learned about sociologist **Emile Durkheim** and his theories on suicide and social facts.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



### TERMS TO KNOW

**Macro-level Orientation**

A zoomed out look at the social structures and institutions that shape society.

**Social Fact**

A phenomenon arising from collective consensus - i.e. our norms and values - that transcend the individual and exercise constraint.

**Social Function**

An act that contributes to the maintenance of a structure, such as system, institution, or society.

**Social Structure**

A repeated and routine-like pattern of social interaction or social behavior.

**Structural-Functional Theory**

A theoretical approach that sees society as a complex and interconnected system whose individual parts work in concert to promote stability and harmony in the system as a whole.

**Suicide Study**

A groundbreaking and fascinating study that linked suicide to social causes like the degree of social integration and the strength of social ties.

**PEOPLE TO KNOW****Emile Durkheim**

A pioneer of sociology famous for his studies of suicide and religion, and for the idea of "social facts."