

Structural Functionalism: Manifest and Latent Functions

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the structural functional approach to social theory, through definition and discussion of:

1. Structural Functionalism
2. Manifest and Latent Functions

1. STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

To review, the structural functional approach views society as a complex and interconnected system--a complex machine with interlocking parts that all work together to promote the functioning of the system as a whole, promoting stability and harmony.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Your body is one of these complex and interconnected systems, with all of its organs working together to produce stability and harmony in your body.

2. MANIFEST AND LATENT FUNCTIONS

Robert K. Merton (1910-2003), is an American sociologist who founded the sub-discipline in sociology called 'the sociology of science', in which sociologists focus on the scientific process itself. For this, Merton was awarded a National Medal of Science, the first sociologist to receive this prestigious honor.

Merton contributed to the structural-functional approach by giving us the concepts of manifest and latent function. These are both a type of **social function**, which is the consequence of any pattern of social action or interaction for society as a whole.

There are two kinds of social functions: a manifest function and a latent function.

1. A **manifest function** is an intended consequence of any social structure or pattern. The key point is that it is intended--you want it to happen.

2. A **latent function**, on the other hand, is unintended, an unrecognized or unforeseen consequence. Latent

functions tend to lurk--you don't know they're there until they become known or even become a problem, which is known as a social dysfunction. A **social dysfunction** is a consequence that's harmful for society.

IN CONTEXT

Robert Merton founded the sociology of science, which focuses on the scientific process and is ultimately about generating knowledge. Around 1900, scholars were measuring the cranial size of people of different races, because they theorized that people of different races had a different biology, which therefore explained racial differences.

Their research represented the manifest function of producing scientific knowledge. Later on, however, this research was used as a way to subjugate people, known as 'scientific racism'. The original scientists didn't realize that their work would have this unintended consequence--scientific racism--which was a latent function of their process of science and discovery.

This latent function of scientific racism could also be classified as social dysfunction, as certain people don't live rich and flourishing lives because they are subjugated and therefore aren't contributing to the economy, which is harmful to society as a whole.



THINK ABOUT IT

You're on your way to a focus group that you set up with six people. You don't realize, however, that President Obama is in town at a fundraising dinner, so you get stuck in traffic for two hours due to all the street closures in the area surrounding the president's event. As a result, the focus group doesn't happen. What are the manifest and latent functions of the political dinner?

The manifest function of the political dinner--of the political process, really--is to raise money to keep the election process on track and get Obama elected. The latent function is all of the traffic congestion and how it affects everybody who's stuck in that traffic. Who knows what other plans people had that didn't materialize because they were stuck in traffic? These are all latent functions.



TERMS TO KNOW

Social Functions

The actions that contribute to the maintenance of a system, institution, or society.

Manifest Functions

The known and intended consequences of a system, institution, or society.

Latent Functions

The unintended and often unforeseen consequences of a system, institution, or society.

Social Dysfunction

Factors that lead to the breakdown of a system, institution, or society.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Robert K. Merton

American sociologist who won the National Medal of Science and contributed the idea of manifest and latent

functions.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **structural functionalism**, with a specific focus on sociologist Robert Merton's work on **manifest** and **latent social functions**.

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



TERMS TO KNOW

Latent Functions

The unintended and often unforeseen consequences of a system, institution, or society.

Manifest Functions

The known and intended consequences of a system, institution, or society.

Social Dysfunction

Factors that lead to the breakdown of a system, institution, or society.

Social Function

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



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Robert K. Merton

American sociologist who won the National Medal of Science and contributed the idea of manifest and latent functions.