

Structural Functionalism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will be introduced to one of the three main theoretical approaches in sociology: structural functionalism, an approach that sees society as a structure built of interrelated parts. You will also be introduced to the prominent critiques of this approach. Finally, you will explore the relationship between structural functionalism and the relationship building skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism, also just called functionalism, is a theoretical approach that sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society.

Functionalism grew out of the writings of English philosopher and biologist Hebert Spencer (1820–1903), who saw similarities between society and the human body. He argued that just as the various organs of the body work together to keep the body functioning, the various parts of society work together to keep society functioning. The parts of society that Spencer referred to were the **social institutions**, or patterns of beliefs and behaviors focused on meeting social needs, such as government, education, family, healthcare, religion, and the economy.

Émile Durkheim, another early sociologist, applied Spencer's theory to explain how societies change and survive over time. Durkheim believed that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability, and that society is held together by shared values, languages, and symbols. Durkheim believed that individuals may make up society, but in order to study society, sociologists have to look beyond individuals to social facts. **Social facts** are the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life. Each of these social facts serves one or more functions within a society.

➞ **EXAMPLE** One function of a society's laws may be to protect society from violence, while another is to punish criminal behavior, while another is to preserve public safety.

IN CONTEXT

Émile Durkheim was interested in studying the social factors that affect the prevalence of suicide in different communities. He studied social ties within a group, which he called social solidarity, and

hypothesized that differences in suicide rates might be explained by religion-based differences in social solidarity.

Durkheim gathered a large amount of data about Europeans who had ended their lives, and he did indeed find differences based on religion. Protestants were more likely to commit suicide than Catholics in Durkheim's society, and Orthodox Jews were the least likely to do so.

The determining factor, according to Durkheim, was the degree to which religious membership regimented the roles and relationships in a person's day to day life. He theorized that the more regimented religious control was, the stronger the social ties would be in that community. The greater the social solidarity the less likely you are to suffer from the isolation and misery that can characterize people who die of suicide. His work on this topic demonstrates the utility of theory for sociological research.



THINK ABOUT IT

Durkheim's explanation for different rates of suicide in different religious communities is only one possible explanation. Why else might people of different religions be more or less affected by suicide? Another noted functionalist, Robert Merton (1910–2003), pointed out that social processes often have many functions. **Manifest functions** are the consequences of a social process that are sought or anticipated, while **latent functions** are the unsought consequences of a social process.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A manifest function of college education includes gaining knowledge, preparing for a career, and finding a good job that utilizes that education. Latent functions of your college years include meeting new people, participating in extracurricular activities, or even finding a spouse or partner. Another latent function of education is creating a hierarchy of employment based on the level of education attained.

Latent functions can be beneficial, neutral, or harmful. Social processes that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society are called dysfunctions. In education, examples of dysfunction include getting bad grades, truancy, dropping out, not graduating, and not finding suitable employment.



BIG IDEA

Structural functionalism's big idea is that all parts of society are serving some kind of useful purpose or function.



TERMS TO KNOW

Structural Functionalism

A theoretical approach that sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society.

Social Institutions

According to Hebert Spencer, the patterns of beliefs and behaviors focused on meeting social needs, such as government, education, family, healthcare, religion, and the economy.

Social Facts

According to Émile Durkheim, the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life.

Manifest Functions

According to Robert Merton, the consequences of a social process that are sought or anticipated.

Latent Functions

The unsought consequences of a social process.

2. Criticism

One criticism of functionalism is that it can't adequately account for social change. The nature of sociology is the nature of life—we learn from past experience and build on that as we evolve and grow. Social change, then is inevitable, but if all parts of society have their function then where does change come from?

Also problematic is the somewhat circular nature of this theory; repetitive behavior patterns are assumed to have a function, yet we profess to know that they have a function only because they are repeated. Furthermore, dysfunctions may continue, even though they don't serve a function, which seemingly contradicts the basic premise of the theory.

Many sociologists now believe that functionalism is no longer useful as a macro-level theory, but that it does serve a useful purpose in some mid-level analyses.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the big idea of **structural functionalism** is that all parts of society are serving some kind of useful purpose or function. You also saw that a **critique** of this paradigm is that it doesn't provide an explanation for social change. Finally, you discovered how understanding structural functionalism strengthens your relationship building skill.

Best of luck in your learning!

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