

Structural functionalist



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A society is a complex unit, made up of interrelated parts. All these parts form the structure of the society and each sub unit has to perform its given task. Social structures are stressed and placed at the center of analysis and social functions are deduced from these structures. This perspective looks at how the various parts of the society come together and perform their individual tasks interdependently and interrelated to promote social stability and order and in turn the smooth functioning of the society.

Structural functionalism is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation, which is a broad focus on the social structures that shape society as a whole, and believes that society has evolved like organisms. This approach looks at both social structure and social functions. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements; namely norms, customs, traditions, and institutions.

As a structural theory, Functionalism sees social structure or the organisation of society as more important than individual. Functionalism is a top down theory. Individuals are born into society and become products of all the social influences around them as they are socialised by various institutions such as the family, education, media and religion. Functionalism sees society as a system; a set of interconnected parts which together form a whole. There is a relationship between all these parts and agents of socialisation and together they all contribute to the maintenance of society as a whole.

Structural functionalism concentrates on the positive and negative functions of social structures. Societal functionalism is a particular type of structural functionalism that aims to explain the role of social structures and institutions in society, the relationship between these structures, and the manner in which these structures constrain the actions of individuals. According to structural functionalists, individuals have little to no control over the ways in which particular structures operate. Indeed, structural functionalists understand individuals in terms of social positions.

It is not individuals who are ranked, but positions that are ranked according to the degree to which they contribute to the survival of society. High-ranking positions offer high rewards that make them worth an individual's time and effort to occupy. The structural functionalist perspective also takes into account the concept of value consensus. Functionalists believe that society is held together by this consensus, or cohesion, in which members of the society agree upon, and work together to achieve, what is best for society as a whole.

They share the same ideas, beliefs and morals which bind them together. Functionalists believe that without such collective shared values and beliefs, achieving social order is impossible and social order is crucial for the well-being of society. They believe that value consensus forms the basic integrating principle in society. And if members of society have shared values they therefore also have similar identities, this helps cooperation and avoids conflict. Value consensus also ensures that people have shared: - Goals, Roles and Norms.

Any social system has four basic functional prerequisites: * adaptation * goal attainment * integration and * Pattern maintenance. The function of any part of the social system is understood as its contribution to meeting the functional prerequisites. Adaptation refers to the relationship between the system and its environment. In order to survive, social systems must have some degree of control over their environment. Food and shelter must be provided to meet the physical needs of members. The economy is the institution primarily concerned with this function.

Goal attainment refers to the need for all societies to set goals towards which social activity is directed. Procedures for establishing goals and deciding on priorities between goals are institutionalized in the form of political systems. Governments not only set goals but also allocate resources to achieve them. Even in a so-called free enterprise system, the economy is regulated and directed by laws passed by governments. Integration refers primarily to the 'adjustment of conflict'. It is concerned with the coordination and mutual adjustment of the parts of the social system. Legal norms define and standardize relations between individuals and between institutions, and so reduce the potential for conflict. When conflict does arise, it is settled by the judicial system and does not therefore lead to the disintegration of the social system. Pattern maintenance refers to the 'maintenance of the basic pattern of values, institutionalized in the society'. Institutions that perform this function include the family, the educational system and religion. No theory has been there without any criticism.

The structural functionalist perspective also has been criticized on the grounds that it neglects the negative functions of an event such as divorce.

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The perspective justifies the status quo and complacency on the part of society's members. Functionalism does not encourage people to take an active role in changing their social environment, even when such change may benefit them. Functionalism sees active social change as undesirable because the various parts of society will compensate naturally for any problems that may arise.