

# Social inequality

[Economics](#), [Tax](#)



Social Inequality Unit 03 What are functionalist theories of inequality?

Learning targets: - Functionalists have a consensus view of society. They believe that people in society work together for the common good of all, this is known as the organic analogy. - All societies are unequal. Inequality of whole groups in the social structure is known as stratification. -

Functionalists believe stratification is good for society. - Functionalists say that the best people get the best jobs because they are more talented and work harder. Poor people are poor because they do not work hard enough for the best positions. Key questions (AO1) What is the functionalist view of society? (AO1) What causes inequality according to functionalists? (AO2)

What are the strengths of the functionalist view? (AO2) What are the weaknesses of the functionalist view of inequality? Summary of Key Points

What is the functionalist view of society? Many early writers and philosophers viewed society as being like an animal or human body. They shared the view that all the separate parts of the body worked together to create something whole. They claimed that everybody works together for the common good of us all, as do body parts for the organism. This shared view is known as consensus theory because it is based on social agreement.

Durkheim argued strongly for the organic analogy because he said we share values and norms. He said that different people in different jobs equate in social terms to the differing organisms of the body. Society itself is more than the sum of the people who go to make up that society. The supporting evidence is that things which happen to society will affect you regardless of your actions or opinions (e. g. war). Society lives on when individuals within it die. Durkheim's ideas became the basis of functionalism. Functionalists say

that society is based on shared norms and values. They say that the job of the sociologist is to look at how parts of society work together for the good of the whole society. Social cohesion (sticking together like glue) is maintained through shared rituals and activities, for example state events such as Coronations and funerals, shared consciousness such as reading the same newspapers and watching the same TV programmes and major events such as sporting occasions which make people feel united with each other. How do functionalists explain inequality? The term social inequality describes a condition in which members of a society have different amounts of wealth, prestige, or power. Some degree of social inequality is found in every society. When a system of social inequality is based on a hierarchy of groups, sociologists refer to it as stratification: a structured ranking of entire groups of people that perpetuates unequal economic rewards and power in a society. Ascribed status is a social position assigned to a person without regard for that person's characteristics, for example, being a Queen is an ascribed status, as is being a female. By contrast, achieved status is a social position attained by a person largely through his or her own effort. This can be positive or negative so a person can be an ex-prisoner or a judge. These are achieved statuses. Functionalists claim that inequality and stratification is functional for society and a source of social order. Davis and Moore proposed this theory in 1945. It was heavily criticised, particularly in the 1970s for being an extremely conservative theory by Tumin, who remains their foremost critic. For Davis and Moore Stratification is a system of status positions and jobs. The key point of the theory is that Stratification is universal and necessary. This is argued because all society is stratified. They

argue that society is therefore a functional necessity. The theory focuses on the following: - How do people get to their proper positions? - How do we motivate people to fill these positions? - Once in position, how do you get people to do what is required? Davis and Moore went on to claim that society needs to fill the most important and difficult jobs with the most talented and hardworking people. If people were all paid the same regardless of their work, they would take the easiest jobs and do as little training as possible. There would be no incentive to work hard and do difficult educational courses. Society ensures that the most pay and the best working conditions go to those who are prepared to put the time and effort into working hard for them. The high rewards act as motivation for the years of work and preparation required for the difficult and responsible careers that some people choose. There have been many critics of the viewpoint, for example Kendall et al. point out that the functionalist approach generally ignores questions of structural inequality because it does not consider the social factors such as racial discrimination, lack of job opportunities, and the inadequate funding of many schools that may contribute to the persistence of inequality in society. Nevertheless, this theoretical perspective is very powerful. It emphasises the view that the jobs of power and importance are given to those with the most talent. It is clear that this type of theory is very attractive to those who have positions of power and wealth in society. It suggests those who are poor and powerless lack effort, talent and determination. How has functionalism influenced politics? Many belief systems suggest that poor people brought their difficult situations upon themselves. This type of theory has a long history in Britain, for example the

famous philosopher Herbert Spencer argued that poverty was good for society as it encouraged people to work in order to avoid being poor. He said that the poor themselves deserved to suffer poverty because of their lack of morality. Those living on benefits today are often seen as being lazy, and the term 'dole scrounger' was frequently employed by the press to describe people dependent on benefits in the 1970s and 1980s. Even today, young single mothers are often demonised as becoming pregnant to gain housing, despite there being very little research evidence to support this claim. This type of popular thinking resulted in the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, and led to the subsequent dominance of the thinkers of the New Right. The political and philosophical perspective known as the New Right is associated with the politicians Margaret Thatcher in the UK, and Ronald Reagan in the USA. The principles of the New Right are based on the theoretical viewpoints that are very close to functionalism. The New Right believe that inequality is inevitable in society. They go further and argue that we should have economic freedom. We should buy and sell as we wish - this is known as market liberalism. It assumes that all people are customers who are rational and make good choices. As a result, there is a philosophy of 'choice' so that parents are encouraged to choose schools for their children or hospitals if they become ill. The subtext is that people also 'choose' to be poor. In Britain, the New Right became associated with underclass theory, which is supported by writers such as Charles Murray and David Saunders. These writers both claim that in the UK, benefit systems mean that people make a rational choice to stay poor, because it is easier to stay at home on the dole than go to work. They claim that some people go on to develop a

culture that is state dependent, against traditional values, criminal, irresponsible and destructive. They suggest that people are often lazy and selfish so they must be encouraged to work by making welfare payments low enough to make life uncomfortable. People who live in areas where few people have work will develop a culture that encourages laziness. People get used to relying on others if life is made easy for them and all their self will and self-reliance is lost. They must be encouraged to take control of their own lives and by punitive methods such as having their benefits cut, if necessary. Criticisms include the way that it ignores the way that some people have more access to wealth, status and power than others, so effectively it ignores social structure. It does not take inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity, age and ability into account. There are dual standards, rich people are expected to be rewarded for their work by the incentive of high pay, but poor people should be expected to work to avoid poverty.

Businesses should have the freedom to sell what they like, but families should follow strict rules of behaviour. It ignores bad behaviour among the rich, poor people are controlled, but not the wealthy. In addition, it makes odd assumptions about people, for instance, that they are naturally selfish, and that they do things for rational rather than cultural reasons. From a sociological point of view one of the most damning criticisms is that there is very little research evidence to back up what is claimed by the New Right.

What is trickle-down theory? Trickle-down theory is sometimes used in an insulting way to describe a theory that has been popular among politicians of the New Right and who have functionalist views of society. The basic belief is that by cutting taxes to the rich and to businesses, then the whole

population will benefit as the rich people spend their money and boost the economy. This type of thinking formed the basis of economic policy in the USA under President Reagan and in the UK under Margaret Thatcher. There is support for this kind of thinking in the writing of the influential economist, Keynes who said that tax cuts for the rich promote investment. There are still regular and frequent calls by political parties to cut taxes in order that people can spend more of their money. The most recent and widely reported call for tax cuts came from David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party in May 2008. In the 1980s, taxes were cut in Britain in a way that benefitted the rich in the hopes that it would boost the economy. Many taxes were abolished, such as capital gains tax which applies only to the wealthier people in society. At the same time, some taxes that affected everyone and possibly the poor more than others increased. In 1981, Value Added Tax (VAT) rose from 8% to 15% to pay for the tax cuts to the rich. In 1991 it was raised again to 17.5% by the Conservative government of John Major government to pay for cuts in the poll tax. In practical terms, the very rich are often low tax payers in view of what they earn. The TUC suggests that tax avoidance by the super-rich costs the British taxpayer £13bn a year. They point out that this is enough money to increase old-age pensions by 20 per cent. Tax planning loopholes mean that the super-rich put money into the names of their families or live abroad for large portions of the year to avoid tax. The government has policies which support the super-rich so capital gains tax at is set at 18% when the top rate of income tax is 40%. There is still debate as to the effectiveness of the tax cuts in supporting the economy. It is certain that the rate of inequality in British society has been

growing so that a reduction in the growth of inequality is now seen as a government achievement! Trickle down theories are not supported by economic evidence but still hold considerable influence over public policy making. What is the Functionalist Perspective on class? Functionalists have a positive view about inequality, since it is seen to motivate the less well off to aspire to the income and status enjoyed by the rich and wealthy. Therefore, they applaud the existence of the class structure seeing it as promoting effort, motivation and success. Functionalists believe strongly in the existence of a meritocracy whereby there is equality of opportunity enabling the talented to rise up from any social class to occupy society's most important and demanding roles. Functionalists believe it is appropriate and right to highly reward those in the higher social classes since they believe they are there through merit. Rewarding those at the top only serves to motivate those at the bottom more, they argue. Inequality is therefore beneficial to society and the existence of a class structure becomes functional in providing that inequality. Functionalists like the competitive values that the class structure provides and genuinely believe society is open to social mobility thereby allowing the most talented to rise to the top of society. A fluid and flexible class structure rewards individual achievement by granting the 'glittering prize' of income and status to those who work hard. Despite class inequalities of the class structure a meritocracy offers the opportunity for anyone to get to the top. The ideas of functionalism are probably best expressed through the culture of the USA where the 'American Dream' is the widespread goal of almost every citizen. The argument that those at the bottom are held back by structural constraints such as poor



housing, poor education and general poverty is dismissed by functionalists with the argument that they are simply not trying hard enough. The view that the lower classes are held back by their cultural values of laziness and fecklessness, rather than genuine structural disadvantages, is a functionalist theme adopted subsequently by the New Right. For example, the work of US New Right theorist Charles Murray portrays those at the bottom of society, whom he refers to as an underclass, as outside the cultural values of the rest of society. He sees them embracing an alternative subculture of deviant values centred around being workshy, living off welfare and having fatalistic attitudes, for example, taking life as it comes. Whilst influential, Murray's work has come in for sustained criticism for its refusal to recognise the significance of structural factors and his dogmatic obsession of scapegoating lone mother families for society's problems. In Britain, Murray's New Right contemporary, Peter Saunders shares a similar contemptuous view of those at the bottom of the class structure. However, adopting a view similar to postmodernism he sees society as divided less along lines of class and more in terms of consumption. He calls this consumption cleavage. He argues a process of 'social re-stratification' has taken place, dividing those seeking to satisfy their consumption needs through private ownership of cars, housing, private education and health care, in contrast to those reliant upon social housing, public transport, state education and health care. Saunders argues that divisions of consumption and lifestyle cut across 'old' class lines, with consumption now influencing and shaping identity and social attitudes to a far greater extent. However, Rosemary Crompton criticizes Saunders for claiming class is dead on the one hand; yet continuing to point to

occupational class as a powerful influence on income, consumption and political attitudes on the other. What should you have in your folder of notes on this topic? (AO1) Key concepts Define the key concepts and ideas. Consensus Demonised Hierarchy Market liberalism New Right Organic analogy Prestige State dependent Status Stratification Trickle-down theory Underclass Underclass theory Value added tax Independent study Compulsory - Make separate revision cards for each of the researchers and theories mentioned in these notes - Create a list of the strengths of functionalism, using textbooks and the Internet to help. - Create a list of weaknesses and criticisms of functionalist views of inequality using textbooks and the Internet to help Extension work - Create revision cards for the new language that you are learning. - Create a revision PPT of the politics and philosophy of the New Right and of the Conservative government 1979 – 97. Use Wikipedia and other internet sites to help. Useful websites and sources of information (AO1): You should use the website of the NGfL Cymru and look at the ebook to develop your notes <http://www.ngfl-cymru.org.uk/sociology-as-ebook-a2> Wikipedia is helpful on functionalism as a perspective [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural\\_functionalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural_functionalism) Download notes from Oldham Sixth Form College on functionalism and try the quizzes to test understanding [http://sixthsense.osfc.ac.uk/sociology/as\\_sociology/functionality.asp](http://sixthsense.osfc.ac.uk/sociology/as_sociology/functionality.asp) There is an American university text that criticises functionalism and offers simple explanations of the main theorists [http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072817186/student\\_view0/chapter7/chapter\\_summary.html](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072817186/student_view0/chapter7/chapter_summary.html) This forum debate considers the issues. You may wish to contribute or to <https://assignbuster.com/social-inequality-2/>

compose an answer of your own <http://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20071111091140AAZFpm3> Here's a model essay – not perfect by any means, but a good starting point <http://www.jakeg.co.uk/essays/underclass.htm> A relevant news story from the BBC [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/2220748.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2220748.stm) And another article about NEETS (Not in Employment, Education or Training) who are rapidly becoming the new underclass <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article438356.ece> Answer these questions in your notes

1. Do all people in a society share norms and values?
2. According to functionalists, do we have free will?
3. How do functionalists account for those who reject society such as terrorists?
4. Do people in society really share values, morals and norms?
5. Do the best people in society always get the best jobs?
6. Are those people with the best jobs the most important people in society?
7. Does everyone in society share norms and values?
8. Are the highest paid people the most useful to society?
9. Summarise the principles of the New Right
10. Explain trickle-down theory.
11. Should taxes be cut?
12. Why are functionalists positive about the class structure?
13. What is the functionalist explanation for those found at the bottom of society?
14. In what ways are the ideas of Murray similar to functionalism?
15. What is consumption cleavage?
16. Why does Saunders argue a process of 'social restratification' has taken place?

Outline and evaluate functionalist explanations of social inequality. Essay Plan Explain theory, concepts, issues or key debates. Say what you mean by key terms. Indicate probable conclusion

Strength 1 of theory explained  
Strength 2 of theory explained  
Strength 3 of theory explained  
However  
Weakness 1 of theory explained  
Weakness 2 of theory explained  
Weakness 3 of theory

explained Wrap the essay into a final conclusion related to the command that was given Research Methods As an A level Sociologist, you have been asked to research whether young single mothers become pregnant in order to avoid work and gain benefits. Suggest a simple research design and justify your choices. Explain the difficulties that you might experience in carrying out your design and suggest how you would avoid them The design The justification The problems Operationalise key terms Select the method Ethical considerations Sample population and procedure Pilot study Process of research Analysis of results