

Strengths and weaknesses of the functionalist view on society essay sample

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Functionalism is a consensus perspective, whereby society is based on shared values and norms into which members are socialised. For functionalists, society is seen as a system of social institutions such as the economy, religion and the family all of which perform socialisation functions. A strength of the functionalist theory is that it a macro level structural theory which uses an organic analogy- using the body as a way to describe the different parts within society. Parsons identifies three similarities; System, System Needs and Functions. The System being organisms such as the human body, and society which fit together in fixed ways. For example in the body, organ cells, in society the parts are institutions and individual roles. The system needs meaning just as organisms have needs such as nutrition; society has needs which need to be met in order to survive, and lastly, functions. Functions involve the contribution something makes to meet the systems needs; so as the circulatory system of the body carries nutrients and oxygen to the tissues, the economy helps maintain the social system by meeting the needs for food and shelter.

An example using this analogy would be the brain would be the politics and the family the heart. This analysis clearly looks at the whole of society; all while making it easier to understand sociologically and visually shows how all the different functions of society link and work together. However, the fact that it is a macro level theory can also be interpreted as a disadvantage. It does not look at individuals or small groups within society and therefore may miss differing factors which contribute to the workings of society. Marxists will also criticize the functionalist approach by saying rather than society

being a harmonious whole, it is infected based on exploitation and divided into classes with unequal power.

Being a consensus theory, functionalism sees society as based on a basic consensus among its members about values, goals and rules; in other words a shared culture. This shared culture provides a framework allowing individuals to cooperate by doing things such as defining their goals they should pursue and laying down rules about how they should behave. One functionalist, Parsons, calls this agreement value consensus- the glue that holds society together. Value consensus makes social order possible, with Parsons identifying that the system has two mechanisms for ensuring individuals conform to the shared norms, thus meeting the system's needs; Socialisation and Social control. The system can assure its needs are met by teaching individuals to want to do what is required of them, with positive sanctions rewarding conformity and negative ones punishing defiance.

As individuals are integrated, the behaviour of each person will be quite predictable and stable, allowing cooperation. However this view can be seen as a weakness, as it is somewhat 'naïve' to assume that there is consensus; it is unlikely within society we all essentially believe in and work for the same thing. From an action perspective, Wrong criticizes the idea of a value consensus as he criticizes the functionalists over socialized, deterministic view of the individual. Wrong says that individuals have no free will or choice; they are mere puppets whose strings are pulled by society. Due to this, the functionalists' approach somewhat contradicts itself as functionalism

sees humans as being shaped by society, but their approach actually takes the opposite view.

Parsons model of the social system is like that of a building block. At the bottom is individual actions- each action we performed is governed by specific norms or values, which come in 'clusters' called status roles; known as institutions. For example the family is an institution made up of mother, father and child. Institutions are then grouped into sub systems- such as shops, farms, factories, which all form part of the economy, whose function is to meet society's material needs. Within society, Parsons identifies four basic needs which are met by a separate sub system. It is sometimes referred to as the AGIL scheme. These four needs are: adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency. The social system meets its members' material needs, goals are set and resources are allocated to achieve them; this function is performed by the political sub system, through institutions such as parliament. Different parts of the system need to be integrated together in order to pursue shared goals and the latency refers to processes that maintain society over time.

The functionalist theory identifies two types of society- traditional and modern. Parsons says each type has its own typical pattern of norms (called pattern variables A and B) Within each type, there are variables which fit together. Within traditional society, an individual's status is ascribed at birth, and they are expected to put the kinships group before their own. Opposite to this, in modern society, individuals are expected to pursue their own individual interests, achieving their status through their efforts in educations,

attained through deferred gratification. However, it could be said the idea of modern society is a weakness of the functionalist approach. Although structural differentiation occurs, meaning institutions have developed, each meeting different needs, there is less strong of a collective conscience, and rapid social change means old norms may be undermined, which could lead to anomie.

It was Durkheim who was concerned with the rapid social change which was occurring. Durkheim saw the transition to modern industrial society as a concern. Society had changed from a simple social structure to one of a complex, specialised division of labour. Referring to the functionalist approach, this social change is seen as a weakness as Durkheim's view of traditional society was that it was based on 'mechanical solidarity' based on little division of labour. A strong collective conscience bound them tightly together, however in modern society the division of labour promotes differences between groups and weakens social solidarity. It brings greater freedom for the individual- but this must be regulated in order to prevent the destroying of social bonds.

Functionalism believes that sociology is a science; a society made up of 'social facts' that can be studied scientifically to discover laws of cause and effect. Functionalist theories believe that society is a fairly cut predictable structure with which scientific knowledge of how society functions can be gained. This knowledge can then be used to achieve progress to a better society. This is a modernist theory. This approach is argued to be a weakness, as a logical criticism would be that functionalism is unscientific.

For most, a theory is only scientific if in principle it is falsifiable by testing, however for functionalists this is not the case. For example, they see deviance as both dysfunctional and functional- and if deviance is both, then the theory cannot be disproved and is unscientific. However strength of Functionalism is that it asserts that there are purposes for social conditions or facts. For example, under a functionalist point of view the newspaper deliverer and the sewer worker all contribute to the function of the entire unit- the social structure would not function properly without these. One of the weaknesses of this perspective, however, is that some could arguably assert that poverty serves a function in such a society. You can make this argument, but as Durkheim saw "function", he was much more optimistic and may have argued that poverty was more a product of "anomie" than actually serving a function.

Within the functionalist approach to society, one criticism comes from within the approach, from Merton. Parsons assumes that everything in society is functionally indispensable in its existing form with all parts of society tightly integrated into a unity, which each part being functional for the rest. Parsons also assumes that everything in society performs a positive function for society as a whole, and change in one part will have a 'knock on' effect on all other parts. However, Merton argues that within society there is the possibility of 'functional alternatives' and also the idea of universal functionalism is more of assumptions, as some things may be functional for some groups and dysfunctional for others. The idea of dysfunction introduces a neglected note into functionalism, suggesting that there may be a conflict of interest. This is further identified a weakness by the conflict perspective.

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Conflict theories such as Marxists argue functionalism is a 'conservative ideology' which focuses on harmony and stability rather than focusing on conflict and change. They argue its assumptions of 'universal functionalism' and 'indispensability' help justify existing social order as inevitable and desirable. This approach legitimates position of powerful groups who have most to lose from fundamental changes in society.