

Sociology as one of  
the founding fathers  
of



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Sociology is part of a relatively new science, social science. Sociology has several different perspectives which all try to explain society and its superstructure. For this essay the focus will be two structural theories, Functionalism, a consensus theory, and Marxism, a conflict theory. By using these two theories it will allow similarities and differences to be compared in relation to social stratification, family and education. Functionalism is both a macro and structural consensus theory, as it looks at how society is maintained and reproduced.

This theory was first developed by Emile Durkheim (1898), known as one of the founding fathers of sociology and a key theorist. (Haralambos, 2000) Durkheim focused on stability and social order, what he coined as Social Solidarity. Durkheim believed a core set of shared norms and values, which is also known as value consensus, kept society running smoothly. Durkheim argued that if society was not regulated, people would satisfy their own needs and wants with no regard for others. Society needed constraint and regulation, based on these shared values. This meant that if it was necessary for society to work, people would have to accept the common values.

Durkheim called this a collective conscience. (Marsh, 1996) Functionalist theorists believe all parts of society are interrelated, such as schools and family, work together to maintain the equilibrium of society, albeit with functional prerequisites for society and anomie, born from Durkheim's belief of a normless state in society. (Browne, 2006) Marxism is both a macro and structural theory, looking at the whole of society. This theory was first developed by Karl Marx (1848), a key theorist who believed in communism.

Marxism is believed to be the theory and practice of self - emancipation of the working class. This is radically different to how it is perceived and described by critics and adherents, who identify Marxism with repressive state capitalist regimes such as China, North Korea or Venezuela.

(Haralambos, 2000) Similarities between these structural theories are from the outside, and have no associations with ideas from within them.

Both theories are known as macro as they look at society as a whole. Both theories use analogies to describe and explain societal structure.

Functionalists use the human body as an analogy. Stating the heart, lungs and brain work together to help the human body to survive just as family, education and law work together to help society to survive. Marxism uses the building analogy to show the economy is the base of all functions of society and how the superstructure develops from these economic foundations.

Durkheim was French, and Marx was German, this meant their theories related to mainly Europe. Both theories often contradict each other.

(Moore, 2009) A key concept of functionalism is Durkheim's belief of a collective conscience, shared norms and values within society. Functionalists believe this comes from socialisation within family and education, learning society's expectations from these social interactions. On the other hand, Marxism believes there is a of the proletariat.

While the proletariat wants higher wages and fair working hours.

Functionalists believe society is a consensus with social order, while Marxists believe society is always in conflict. (Browne, 2006) Functionalism can be compared through The Theory of Equilibrium Parsons (1966) and Marxism

Theory of Dialectical Materialism Dietzgen (1887). When there is a dynamic working balance among interdependent parts, it is said to be social equilibrium. Each sub-system will adjust to any changes and will keep on doing so until equilibrium is retained.

This process will only be achieved if the change is slow. If change is rapid the whole social system is thrown into chaos unless a new equilibrium can be reached. (Haralambos, 2000) Dialectical materialism is a contradiction of the social equilibrium theory. It states the economic base and conflict is at the centre of all change in society. Dietzgen believed the economy influenced change on all other institutions and this change is the result of conflict arising from events, movements and ideas (Haralambos, 2000) The concept of social equilibrium is how society works together as a whole to maintain balance as change happens, and dialectical materialism challenges this by stating conflict and the economy cause the social change.

Functionalists believe social change is evolutionary, slow and gradual. It naturally occurs in a peaceful way by consensus. While Marxism believes social change is revolutionary. Changes happen by conflict and are explained by dialectical materialism, change in the economic base inflicts social change.

(Webb, 2008) Functionalism and Marxism have very different views on social stratification. For functionalists, the division of social class is a necessity. This keeps everyone in society motivated to improve their lives through social mobility and the rewards and sanctions theory.

This allows a balance by labelling people to allow different social roles for everyone. (Webb, 2008) Marxists view social stratification as another way for the ruling class to keep their power and influence. This is done by labelling people as working class. The bourgeoisie produced a false class consciousness within the proletariat. (Browne, 2006) Marxists see social stratification as the base of conflict within society.

The conflict is due to the precariat's need for higher wages and the wealthy elite's need for exploitation to create higher profits. (Savage, 2015) To see if Functionalism and Marxism is as prevalent in the twenty - first century as in the nineteenth century the BBC, British Broadcasting Corporation, ran a survey, The Great British Class Survey (2011). This quantitative survey was cross referenced with The UK Census 2011 and had approximately 160, 000 responses. Due to data not being representative to the whole of society and mainly middle to high management and university students within the BBC heartland participating, a smaller nationally representative survey of 1, 026 participants was also carried out on behalf of the BBC. A further fifty qualitative interviews were conducted and aimed at those who did not take part in GBCS. This information has shown a clear wealthy elite who want profits and a precariat who are constantly being exploited with zero-hour contracts and low wages. (Savage, 2015) For Marxists this shows the conflict theory is still applicable in today's society in the UK.

On the other hand, functionalists or The New Right will argue that the state has enabled this culture of welfare dependency by providing generous welfare benefits, a move away from laissez - faire policies of the past. Charles Murray (1984) argued these benefits rewarded irresponsible and

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antisocial behaviour. He believed fathers would see the state take care of their families allowing them to abandon any familial responsibility. (Webb, 2008) These views assume that everyone benefits from all social policies.

Functionalists believe there is a “ March of progress” and social policy makes life better for everyone, whereas Marxists argue that cutting welfare benefits is reversing any progress made by creating more poverty within the poorer members of society. Feminists argue that social policy often benefits men and not women. (Webb, 2008) Functionalists see the family as essential to social order.

Parsons (1951) believed the nuclear family, a mother, father and biological or adopted children, met the needs of society for a geographically mobile workforce. Parsons (1951) also believed the family performed two “ irreducible functions”. These functions were primary socialisation of children and stabilisation of adult personalities. (Webb, 2008) Murdock (1949) on the other hand believed the nuclear family existed in every society and performed four important functions. Murdock (1949) believed procreation occurred within a nuclear family setting.

Murdock (1949) viewed sex as an emotional bond between husband and wife, encouraging monogamy as this contributed to stability and social order by setting moral values for sexual behaviour. Culture, values and norms were taught to children within the family setting according to Murdock (1949), this he believed was educational and beneficial to society. Family values were instilled into children by seeing the expressive, caring and nurturing role of the mother and the instrumental roles of the father by

providing economic support for the family. (Moore, 2008) Marxists argue these views are outdated and downplay the conflicts within the family unit. Marx (1848) believed the family only existed within the bourgeoisie. The proletariat are not a family unit in the same sense, they are a unit to provide the next generation of workers becoming "instruments of labour" Marx (1848) Bilton (1987) believed the family encouraged and produced hierarchical and inegalitarian relationships.

The family was a safety valve calming down the frustrations of working and daily life. Marxists are not against the nuclear family, they just view the function of the family differently, they view the function of the family as another way the proletariat are exploited. (Marsh, 1996) Functionalists and more recently The New Right believe a nuclear family is needed as John Major, Prime Minister, (1993) implemented government policy, which ran for many years, to return to traditional values. Marxists argued these policies created more conflict and hardship for lower income and unemployed families. While the functionalist view of the family does not consider any hardships or abuse, it is still promoted as the best foundation for a stable society. Functionalists believe marriage breakdown and the rise of single parent families is responsible for the majority of society's delinquencies.

The functionalist view has not considered economic inequality due to the expectation of women to work within the home rearing children, believing instead that all families are financially secure. Gittins (1985) argued the "ideal" family is used to disguise the real economic base of exploitation. (Marsh, 1996) Sheeran (1993) argues Marxist and radical feminist both believe the family is an ideological construct, which is repressive and

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perpetuates capitalism, and women are forced into taking responsibility for the children by the “agent” of the state, the patriarchal family. (Marsh, 1996) Whilst Durkheim believed primary socialisation provided by the family as important he also believed secondary socialisation provided by schools for education important too. Durkheim believed secondary socialisation was needed to reinforce the value consensus, values and norms, taught by families. Durkheim believed for a child to be a productive member of society they needed to feel part of society, schools did this and created social solidarity, a commitment to something much larger than themselves, a commitment to a community. (Haralambos, 2000) Durkheim argued that the family provided kinship, the peer group was based on personal choice, but society was neither of these principles, that children would have to learn to cooperate with those who are neither friends or kin.

School provides an environment for these skills to be learned, albeit through a hidden curriculum. Durkheim believed that when a child learned to respect school rules the child learned to respect rules in general, that the child was learning self - constraint and self - control. (Haralambos, 2000) Hargreaves (1982) argues that contemporary schools spend too much time focusing on the individual needs and not enough on the duties and responsibilities to the school. Hargreaves (1982) believes schools fail working class children by not providing them with dignity to prevent rebellious behaviour if failing exams. He says, “ To acquire dignity a person must achieve a sense of competence, of making a contribution to, and of being valued by, the group to which he or she belongs.” Hargreaves (1982) believes the curriculum should allow students to study some subjects which interest them, or they have a talent



for, this will help them develop self-worth. To study some form of community studies or projects will help develop their sense of belonging to a wider community, along with studying some form of team sport to develop loyalty towards the school.

(Haralambos, 2000)Parsons (1961) on the other hand, believed schools act as a bridge between family and society, preparing the child for life as an adult. While in the family setting the child has an ascribed status, school gives the child access to a meritocracy, allowing the child social mobility to achieved status in adulthood. Marxists would argue the education system passes on the values of the minority, the ruling class rather than society in general. (Haralambos, 2000)Althusser (1971) believed the education system is only there to reproduce a workforce for the capitalist society with the necessary skills. Althusser (1971) argued education continues the ruling class ideology and socialises children to accept the dominant ideology, also known as a false consciousness. Althusser (1971) states this is done by taking people from different social classes and educate them accordingly.

(Browne, 2006)Bowles and Gintis argued the point further, by stating the hidden curriculum corresponded to many features within the workplace, for example, conforming to society's rules and laws by adhering to school rules. Punishments for rule breaking is detention and exclusion, in society breaking laws results in arrest and possible court action resulting in possible detention within the Prison system. A second example is punctuality, the student is taught to be on time as the time belongs to the school and in society punctuality at work as the employer pays for time worked, therefore time belongs to the employer. (Browne, 2006)Functionalists would argue that

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Bowles and Gintis have ignored the functions of the curriculum, that subjects within the humanities produce critical thinkers, this is the opposite of how Marxists see the education system, believing Marxists see the education system as exploitive to the lower classes. (Marsh, 1996) Both functionalists and Marxists see schools legitimizing social inequality, functionalists see this as students achieving qualifications within a meritocracy.

Marxists see this by way of ruling class ideology. Functionalists and Marxists both see education as an institution that serves the need of capitalism.

Functionalists see this as the best qualified students rising to the top and being rewarded with the best jobs. Marxists argue students are educated and trained for the manual and lower managerial positions, that privately educated students have access to the network connections to work in the highest paid jobs within society, the principle of " who you know and not what you know." (Marsh, 1996) It would seem on the surface that there is an inherent fairness within modern society, everyone is treated equally, but, in reality, this is not what it seems. The life chances each person has is determined by his or her social class at birth, ascribed status, their gender, sometimes ethnicity and state of health. (The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018) conduct many research projects on poverty in the UK, much of this research is ongoing and is used to try to create change.

Chapman (2008) and Reay (2007) would argue that social class is still the major determinant of life chances in the UK and is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The Great British Class Survey (Savage, 2015) also agrees with that argument. (Browne, 2009)