

# Sociology, germov and smith



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

**Introduction**

We often think of theory as somehow divorced from reality, but we actually make use of theories every day of our lives' (Germov 2009, p. 25).

In this assignment I will examine two theoretical perspectives. I will then discuss their similarities and differences in their approach to studying health and illness. I then aim to discover which perspective has greater contemporary relevance in today's society.

The two theoretical perspectives I have chosen to investigate are structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism. I chose these two perspectives as I am interested in finding more information about them both, I would like to discover more information about how they relate to health and what perspective is has more relevance today.

According to Germov (2009, pp. 26) ' A theory is an explanation of how things work and why things happen'. They allow us to make sense of our world by showing us how certain facts are connected to one another to show us the answers to the ' how' and ' why' questions of life (Germov 2009, p. 26).

Germov (2009, pp. 26) states:

A theory attempts to simplify reality and generalise its common and related features relevant to the topic at hand. The sheer variety of social life and the diversity of human behaviour mean that there is no single sociological ' theory of everything'.

Many social theories have been developed over the years. There are seven main theoretical perspectives including structural functionalism, Marxism, Weberianism, symbolic interaction, feminism, contemporary modernism and post-structure/postmodernism (Germov 2009, p. 27). However I have chosen to only investigate two of these theories, functionalism and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalism is the oldest and dominant theoretical perspective in sociology (McClelland, 2000). The key theorists for this perspective are Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton (Germov 2009, p. 27).

Emile Durkheim is considered to be the father of sociology. He is credited with making sociology a science, and having made it part of the French academic curriculum as “ Science Sociale”. Emile Durkheim gave many lectures, and published an impressive number of sociological studies during his lifetime. His lectures and studies were on subjects such as religion, suicide, and all aspects of society (emile-durkheim. com 2002).

This perspective is built upon twin emphases: application of the scientific method to the objective social world and use of an analogy between the individual organism and society (McClelland, 2000). It studies the way social structures function to maintain stability and social order (Germov 2009, p. 27).

### **Summary**

Structural-functionalism is a consensus theory, meaning that it sees society as built upon order, interrelation, and balance among parts as a means of maintaining the smooth functioning of the whole. Structural-Functionalism

views shared standards and values as the basis of society, focuses on social order based on unspoken agreements between groups, and views social change as occurring in a slow and orderly fashion (Unc. edu 2004).

Functionalists accept that change is sometimes necessary to correct social dysfunctions, but that it must occur slowly so that people and institutions can adapt without confusion (Unc. edu 2004).

Structural Functionalism has made a number of main assumptions which focus on several levels of analysis society, community, individual and social unit. The assumptions include that societies and social units such as families and organisations are held together by orderliness and cooperation, societies work best when they function smoothly as an organism and that the system may be static or involved in an ordered process of change. Another assumption made by structural functionalism is that the nature of one part of the system has an impact on the form that the other parts can take. Also those external environments adapt to each other and more (Unc. edu 2004).

Functionalism focuses on the MACRO level, meaning it looks at large-scale social institutions like “ society” compared to looking at international networks such as the government. Structural functionalism pays little attention to individual agency and personality development.

The functionalist analysis of health care has been mainly influenced by Talcott Parsons. He viewed the health of individuals as a necessary condition of a stable and ordered society. He conceived illness as a form of deviance meaning he viewed it as stopping people from carrying out various social roles which were essential to the functioning in society (Germov 2009, p.

30). In other words, when you are sick you are not being a productive member of society.

The general idea is that the individual who has fallen ill is not only physically sick, but now adheres to the social role of being sick. The pathway to health was achieved through the sick role. 'Being Sick' is not just a 'state of fact' or 'condition', it contains customary rights and obligations based on the social norms that surround it. The theory outlined two rights of a sick person, the sick person is exempt from normal social roles and the sick person is not responsible for their condition. The obligations are that the sick person should try to get well and that the sick person should seek technically competent help and cooperate with the medical professional (Millon, Blaney & Davis 1999, p. 446). An example of this is that students often have to supply a medical certificate to support their case for not performing their students' roles of not turning up to class or submitting work on time.

Symbolic interactionism is one of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology. This perspective has a long intellectual history, beginning with the German sociologist and economist, Max Weber and the American philosopher, George H. Mead, both of whom emphasised the subjective meaning of human behaviour, the social process, and pragmatism (McClelland 2000).

According to Smith (2001):

Max Weber was born in 1864 and looked at sociology in terms of it being an extensive science of social action and in the beginning he would only focus on specific social contexts. Somewhat in contrast to this belief, he later

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believed that one of the most distinguishing characteristics of a society is their change or shift in motivation that is caused by structural or historical forces.

Symbolic interactionists focus on agency and how people construct, give meaning and interpret their behaviour through interaction with others (Germov 2009, p. 33). The main assumption is that humans create reality through their actions and the meanings they give to them. ' Therefore, society is the cumulative effect of human action, interaction, and interpretation, and these are more significant than social structures, hence the focus of the perspective' (Germov 2009, p. 33).

For interactionists, humans are pragmatic actors who continually must adjust their behaviour to the actions of other individuals. We can adjust to these actions only because we are able to interpret them.

Germov (2009, p. 33) states:

Symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical bridge between sociology and psychology by concentrating on a small-scale interaction and how this impacts on individuals' identity or image of themselves.

An example of the quote above is when someone is to receive a compliment regularly such as you are attractive and intelligent the reaction can impact on what you believe and how you behave.

In contrast to functionalism which focuses on the MACRO level, symbolic interactionism focuses on the MICRO theories meaning it looks more on

individuals and their everyday interactions with others and small-scale social groups and organisations (Unc. edu 2004).

Symbolic interactionism emphasises that health and illness are social constructions that vary over time and change between cultures. Meaning that what is considered an illness is socially defined and passes through a social lens that reflects the culture, politics, and morality of a particular society and a certain point in time (Germov 2009, p. 33). Therefore an illness in one culture may be considered a wellness in another culture. Also now in the 21st century a plump woman would be considered healthy where as a thin woman would most likely be seen as unhealthy (Anderson & Taylor, p. 540).

Both functionalism and symbolic interactionism are sociological theories. There are a wide variety of sociological theories which can be grouped together according to various criteria. One of the most important of these is the distinction between structural or macro perspectives and social action or micro perspectives. These perspectives are different as they approach the analysis of society in different measures. Functionalism is an example of a macro perspective because it analyses the way society as a whole fits together whereas symbolic interactionism is a micro perspective as it stresses the meaningfulness of human behaviour and denies that it is primarily determined by the structure of society (Langhoff 2002).

I believe that the perspective with the most contemporary relevance is structural functionalism. Parson's views are correct in saying that the health of individuals is a necessary condition of a stable and ordered society. The '

sick role' ask people to supply evidence when not being able to perform their normal social role. This has contemporary relevance as for example, in today's society if people are unable to work they are to supply a doctor's certificate to prove they were deemed unfit to work and contribute to society. This is because as according to Parsons, illness disrupts the normal functioning of society; therefore it is important that the sick are encouraged to seek expert help so that they can return to performing their social role (Germov 2009, p. 30).

### **Conclusion**

Furthermore, functionalism has contemporary relevance because of the rights and obligations stated before are true when discussing society today. If people are sick they are exempt from normal social roles and they are usually not responsible for their condition. The obligations are also true as when sick, it is looked upon that if the sick person is unable to perform their social role they should try to get well and that the sick person should seek expert help and cooperate with the medical professional.

After investigating the theories of functionalism and symbolic interactionism it is clear that functionalism has more contemporary relevance in society today. However over time social theories change as society itself changes and new knowledge, ideas and capabilities emerge (Germov 2009, p. 39). Bessant's and Watts' 1999 study (cited in Germov 2009, p. 38) state that sociologists 'constantly "hover" between and in and out of different traditions', and specific social theories are not 'as neat or coherence' as grouping them into theoretical perspectives implies. This meaning that sociologists tend to include a range of perspectives into a specific theory.



This essay has focused on sex and gender and the nature vs. nurture concept and in doing so as assessed Freud's notion of 'anatomy is destiny'. After gaining an understanding of the concepts associated with the nature vs. nurture concept it can be suggested through research that there is no evidence to prove that one concept is of greater significance to the development of a child. In saying this it can be concluded that Freud's notion of 'anatomy is destiny' is still relevant today in society, however is not the underlying factor that contributes to the development of a child. It can now be suggested that although the nature theory is always going to contribute to the development of a child, more research is suggesting and offering evidence to believe that the nurture theory contributes significantly to the development of a child.