

# Comparison of functionalist and conflict views on society



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The study of society has been approached by sociologists in many ways throughout history, this piece will look at the functionalist and conflict views on different aspects within society.

### Inequality

Sociologists have varied views on inequality as a whole in society.

Functionalists say that the binding agent of society is the shared values that create a social consensus, or, “ a general agreement by members of society concerning what is good and worthwhile” (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, 2000, p. 26). They believe that society can cope with a certain amount of inequality as long as it is based on the values within the consensus.

Functionalists argue having a meritocratic system in society where members are rewarded for their achievements is necessary for enabling social mobility and ensuring that role allocation within society is effective. According to Functionalists Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, having a meritocratic society enables role allocation as “ it ensured that the most talented individuals would fill the functionally most important positions” (Sadovnik, 2011, p. 5).

This overall consensus that the majority of all social institutions accept a meritocratic social system and that higher achievers receive better rewards; is much why functionalists believe inequality is a necessary and welcomed aspect of society.

Opposing the functionalist theory, conflict theorists place emphasis on the main reason inequality existing is because of the small number within the ruling group has the majority of power to set up society in a certain way that

is for their own benefit. They hold all control of production, distribution and exchange. They continually exploit the lower classes to further benefit themselves and create an ongoing class struggle with increasing inequality. From a Marxist theory perspective, “ one group gaining at the expense of the other, could not be resolved within the framework of a capitalist economy” (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, 2008, p. 10). The longer capitalism goes on, the more inequality continues to grow between classes. It can be seen to prevent social mobility and erase the ability for people to move into higher classes, as stated in an Oxfam media briefing “ If you are born poor in a very unequal society you are much more likely to end your life in poverty” (Oxfam, 2013).

### Gender / Family

A functionalist view on gender is based on what is known as traditional social norms that are first presented in the family. The ideal family being; a father, mother and children. The roles of the family in a functionalist society are that the father provides the main source of income and the mother provides a nurturing environment for her children. Functionalist Talcott Parsons saw the woman’s role in the family was to provide “ warmth, security and emotional support. This was essential for the effective socialization of the young” (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, 2008, p. 96). Within this environment, children experience their primary socialisation, where the pattern of adult relationships are normalised as heteronormative and model the social norms of masculine and feminine roles. This primary socialisation prepares them for social integration in which these gender-based roles and ideas are mirrored, men engage in labour-based work and women work in nurturing-based roles.

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Whereas conflict theorists suggest that modern family consensus can pass on poor traditional values such as patriarchy domination and exploitation. Women are seen to be providers of free labour for reproducing and raising future generations to enable an ongoing society. Marxist Feminist theorists “ have called for the restructuring of the family, the end of ‘ domestic slavery’ ” (Giddens, 2009, p. 617). The main focus Marxists Feminists have is that because children are absorbing these gender-biased social norms in their early family environment, it does not allow a foreseeable development in social attitudes to reduce inequality between men and women. This is in support of the argument Germaine Greer presented that “ family life continues to disadvantage and oppress women” (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, 2008, p. 468)

### Education

According to functionalists, the education system benefits society by reinforcing shared values and beliefs, creating a stronger consensus for future members of society. They argue that the education system is the crucial backbone for the continuation of a harmonious society. By reinforcing shared values, the education system enables the integration of diverse social groups. Functionalists suggest that education introduces the meritocracy system that is mirrored in society, that reward is earned through merit and the higher the merit, the higher the reward. Having a meritocratic system provides equality for all by rewarding individuals on their achievements, rather than their inherited social rankings. Functionalists Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore; believed that a meritocratic system was important because “

talent and hard work should determine the allocation of individuals positions". (Sadovnik, 2011, p. 5).

Conflict theorists instead argue that fundamental inequalities and contradictions are reproduced systematically through the education system. Conflict theorists don't see the meritocratic system as an equal playing field because of the inequality of educational resources between social classes. As stated in a news article " families typically from ethnic and poor areas are left with local schools that are increasingly inferior" (Freeman, 2014). This follows the arguments of conflict theorists that students from lower class families are subsequently disadvantaged and less likely to acquire merit, compared to their opposing peers from high-class backgrounds. Conflict theorist Pierre Bourdieu suggests that graduates from " an elite prep school has educational and social advantages over many public school graduates" because of " their school's reputations for educating members of the upper class" (Sadovnik, 2011, p. 8). It is these class-based advantages in the education system that conflict theorists suggest enables the ruling class to continue benefitting. The ruling class hold the power within society and an unjust meritocracy system allows them to withhold that power within their class.

## References

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