

The usefulness of structural theories and social action

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Structural theories see human behaviour as constrained, and even determined by the social organism of society for example, the social structure that is made up of interrelated institutions such as families, schools, religion, the economy, political system, etc. These theories see society that already exists and when we die society continues on regardless. We cannot see or touch society but we feel its influence on a daily basis because it shapes what we think, feel and do. Structural theories, therefore, argue that we are pushed into courses of action by social structures over which we normally have little or no control.

In this sense, then, these theories suggest that people are the product or puppets of society. Functionalism is a structural theory because it sees society as a social system made up of interrelated and independent institutions such as education, work, religion, law and the family, etc. Functionalists believe that society can best be compared to a living organ, in which institutions and people all have a function to play with society. For example, the function of the family is to socialise children. The main function of these institutions is to maintain social equilibrium or order.

However, functionalisms have been criticized for overemphasising consensus in society. They tend to focus on the functions or benefits of social institutions and consequently neglect the dysfunctions or harm that institutions can cause for individuals. For example, the family is always seen as a harmonious institution by functionalists and social problems such as domestic violence are not acknowledged. Whereas Marxists do acknowledge these kinds of things as Marxism is a conflict theory. Marxists believe that every single society always have examples of conflict.

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For example, in the family, normally husband and wife for example could argue about household expenditure. In education, there could be a debate on whether a parent should send their child to a state or private school. In religion, the debate and arguments on whether to be catholic or protestant therefore from this Marxists are showing that we do not have 100% consensus in society, like functionalists say. Dahrendof (1959) says that Marxism is out dated. He says that Marxism as a theory can't explain conflict today, because in society there is too much conflict.

He explained that social classes are not polarised because working-class people have become richer. In society today it is the managers that control the workforce and make decisions etc, not the people that own it. The people that own it just sit back and take the profit. Likewise to functionalism, new right is also a consensus theory that wants to keep the status quo. New Right perspectives believe that traditional roles within society have been undermined by the permissive values of the 1960s and 1970s. However, this is the opposite of radical feminists want as they want change to happen now and happen quickly.

New rights argue that the nuclear family is the bedrock of society, like functionalism does, and that the welfare state creates a dependency culture. Social action theories however take a micro approach to explaining and understanding society. Social action theories look at meanings, interactions etc. It stresses the ability of individuals to exert control over their own actions. The individual is not seen as a passive recipient of society's

directions but as an active creator of social behaviour. In this sense, society does not have an independent existence or objective reality.