

# Functionalism: sociology

[Sociology](#)



Functionalism is one of the oldest sociological theories. It looks at society on a macro level as a complex system whose parts work together to perform “order, stability and productivity” (Crossman Ashley). It is also called structural functionalism as it looks at social structure and social functions and how they work in society. These structures, such as the government and family are known as institutions. Each institution is dependent on one another and work in ways that benefit society.

For example, the government provides education for children of a family. In return, the family pays taxes on which the government depends, to keep working. The family depends on the school which helps children to learn and grow. In return, the children will raise and support their own families. When one part of the system does not function properly, all the other parts are affected. Change occurs only if the structures are able to adapt and maintain balance in the society.

One of the weaknesses of the functionalism theory is that since it is macro-scale, it can forget to include small groups such as tribes and gypsies. By looking at society as a whole, sociologists do not recognize these small groups. Therefore, they may lack important information about how society functions and how small groups live within a large society. In addition to this, since functionalism is a consensus theory, everyone views the society as fair with everyone having the same norms and values (The Functionalist Perspective).

For example, a woman is known to nurture her children in a family. When a woman does not care for her children, this is considered abnormal. However, functionalists fail to acknowledge that there are inequalities in societies such

as age, gender, race and class. They go beyond explaining how a society is organized to the point where they prescribe how individuals within a society should behave. The functionalism theory has just as much strengths as weaknesses.

Functionalism acts as a basis for building theories which view society as a complex system whose parts work together to perform stability. When observing society, it helps understand how all the institutions are linked together and work together. It believes that the basic needs are to be met in order for the society to survive. Also, functionalism is viewed as a consensus theory. Therefore, order and stability is brought about by value consensus as majority of individuals in societies share the same values and norms.

It sees society as fair and realizes that many societies have democracy. For example, it is very well known that wealth is good and murder is bad. Individuals and groups need to accept their roles in society. An example of functionalism in a classroom would be when a teacher is sorting students. To some students it is obvious that the teacher knows which students are problematic and which are successful. The problematic students were lectured for every little bad thing they did whereas, the successful students were able to get away with it.

One time, two boys were constantly talking while the teacher was speaking. One was perceived to be the problematic and the other was perceived to be a smart student. Immediately, the teacher told the problematic student to switch seats. The teacher goes on to scold the student and says, “ Go to another table and finish your work. If you are not done your work by lunch time, you are staying in”. Functionalism is taking place here as the students

were sorted and separated into their groups and the teacher treated them accordingly.