

Functionalism



Functionalism is a consensus perspective that sees society as based on shared values into which members are socialized. It sees society as like an organism, each part performing functions to maintain the system as a whole. For example, religion, the education system and the family perform socialization functions. The functionalist theory though developed from the ideas of theorists such as Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim, can trace its origins as far back as the founding father of sociology, Auguste Comte.

Stratification refers to the system where society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy of classes (upper, middle and lower class) based on a criterion or a combination such as religion, color, race, age, sex, wealth, occupation, and education. It represents the structured inequality characterized by groups of people with differential access to the rewards of society because of their relative position in the social hierarchy. The functionalist theory has much strength as well as weaknesses.

One of the strengths of Functionalism is that it asserts that there are purposes for social conditions or facts. For example, under a functionalist point of view the janitor and the sewer worker all contribute to the function of the entire unit. Without serving these purposes, the social structure would not function properly. Functionalists are of the assumption that the needs of society are greater than the needs of individuals: in other words, the good of society is greater than the good of the individual thus contributing to the maintenance of society.

Davis and Moore argue that all societies need some mechanism for insuring effective role allocation and performance. This mechanism is social stratification which they see as a system which attaches unequal rewards

and privileges to the positions in society. They concluded that social stratification is a device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons. One of the weaknesses of this perspective, however, is that some could arguably assert that poverty serves a function in such a society.

According to Melvin Tumin, Davis and Moore did not fully appreciate the importance of power in determining the unequal distribution of rewards. He went on to conclude that the differences in prestige and pay between different groups had been as a result of power rather than functional importance. For example in Trinidad and Tobago, the difference in salaries and wages between workers in the oil and cocoa industry may be a result of the relative bargaining power of the two groups of workers.

Social stratification systems function to provide the elite with the political power necessary to procure the acceptance and dominance of an ideology which rationalizes the status quo. One other strength of functionalism is the belief that society is held together by social consensus, or cohesion, in which members of the society agree upon, and work together to achieve, what is best for society as a whole. Talcott Parsons believe that order, stability and cooperation in society are based on value consensus; that is a general agreement by members of society concerning what is good and worthwhile.

He further believes that the stratification system is derived from common values it follows from the existence of values that individuals will be evaluated and therefore placed in some form of rank order which is a necessary contribution to the maintenance of order in society. Based on social stratification in Trinidad and Tobago, Lloyd Braithwaite observed that

although ethnic affiliation and purification were the values upon which the social structure was erected, the distinct groups were kept together by an assimilation of white values, which was held up as being the 'ideal'.

This assimilation of the Anglo-Saxon value system allowed for the functional prerequisites of the society to be achieved. For example, English was accepted as the official language, and the title of Doctor and Lawyer became symbols of prestige and status in society. He went on further to argue that it was not only force that held order in societies but also an acceptance of the basic values or consensus emanating from the metropolitan nexus.

However, a criticism of this perspective is the argument that it is somewhat "naive" in that it assumes that there is consensus: that everyone in the structure holds the same norms and values; that we all essentially believe in and work for the same thing. Many theorists take issue with this component and argue that Western society is more accurately characterized as groups of people in a society competing for resources, wealth, and power. More importantly, these groups do not all believe the same thing (in fact, any are counter-culture) and are thus in conflict with each other. Many Conflict theorists would take the pessimistic view expressed earlier that poverty serves a function in a society. In addition, a weakness to this theory is that the functionalists overlook the fact that social patterns vary from place to place and they can change overtime. Dominant social values are not entirely accepted by large sections of the population. Even when common values are accepted this may be only pragmatic and partial.

Following M. G. Smith's plural society thesis it can be argued that as a result of the significant existence of the cultural diversity in the Caribbean, the

different ethnic or cultural groups practiced distinctive forms of the same institutions in society. For example, in Trinidad the Hindus have a distinctive marriage practice, extended family type, and a patriarchal family system that neither the whites nor the Africans observed in a similar manner.

As a result of this argument, one can conclude that the dominance of the white values previously mentioned in Braithwaite's arguments was possibly achieved through their political system and the economy. Given Smith's view of society he believed that colonial society was held together by the use of force rather than consensus. In looking at the functionalist approach, another strength that can be identified is that functionalism sees each part as being interrelated and interdependent, and therefore contributing to the maintenance of the whole.

Change in any part will affect the other parts and will require each part to adapt as necessary. Each individual in society has a part to play which leads to the interdependence of individuals which in turn influences the smooth running of society. The government, or state, provides education for the children of the family, which in turn pays taxes on which the state depends to keep itself running. That is, the family is dependent upon the school to help children grow up to have good jobs so that they can raise and support their own families.

In the process, the children become law-abiding, taxpaying citizens, who in turn support the state. If this pattern is followed, the parts of society produce order, stability, and productivity. However if society does not follow this pattern, the parts of society then must adapt to recapture a new order, stability, and productivity. Critics of this theory claim that the perspective

justifies the status quo and complacency on the part of society's members. Functionalism does not encourage people to take an active role in changing their social environment, even when such change may benefit them.

Instead, functionalism sees active social change as undesirable because the various parts of society will compensate naturally for any problems that may arise. In conclusion, Functionalism could be described as the most generalized and ineffective of the sociological schools. It is not logically in sync with variability between cultures and it cannot effectively explain change. Still, it has its strong points, such as its ability to explain social ills in society. Functionalism essentially serves as the most conservative of the sociological schools of thought.