

Theories of learning: functionalism essay



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In the field of sociology and other fields, functionalism is the most common and oldest theoretical perspective. The ideology behind this theory is based on two emphases - the use of analogy between a society and an individual and use of scientific methods in a social world that is objective. Thus, this theory is associated mostly with socio-cultural anthropology and sociology, and it is credited to Emile Durkheim among other theorists.

Hence, on the perspective of scientific world, functionalists assert that social study of the world can take place as studying the physical world. They use techniques such as interviews and social surveys to better understand the social world. Moreover, regulations, rules and values provide a means in which societies can appreciate and accomplish their responsibilities. The institutions that are found in the society e. g. religion, family and education helps to shape the social structure since they are made by roles that are interconnected.

Nevertheless, according to Holmwood (2005), there are concepts that revolve on this theory. These concepts are society is viewed as a system, functional requirements to ensure survivability of the society and phenomena. Most functionalist compare society as an organism in that the organism is made up of interdependent parts and systems that should work together to ensure that the entire body functions. Hence, through the same analogy, the society with different parts such as family and religion should contribute towards making the society to be functional.

Generally, functionalism relies on the aspect that many minor components come together to ensure that the entire system operates (Holmwood, 2005).

Various theorists have championed the ideologies of functionalism and one of them was Herbert Spencer who was viewed as the true functionalist.

Other theorist such as Durkheim is believed to have used the writings of Spencer to cull his own analysis of functionalism (Turner, 1985).

Most of the writings of Spencer revolve on organism analogy exemplifying simple organisms, society, humans, cells and animals. Spencer view on functionalism is an evolutionary model in that organic body becomes complex because of differentiation, followed by equilibrium and disequilibrium fluctuation and finally a state of dissolution or disintegration. Spencer attributed this to constant selection pressures that the society faces forcing the society to adapt to the new conditions (Turner, 1985). Moreover, views of Spencer were those of political sociologist in that centralization and consolidation of authority will either make or break the ability to adapt.

Nevertheless, the perspectives of Spencer can be recognized through three functional needs that are resultants of selection pressure: production, regulation and distribution. Hence, differentiation ensures that specialized functions can be fulfilled. Another important functionalist theorist was Talcott Parsons utilized the writings of Max Weber and Durkheim creating his own theory – grand theory (Parsons, 1961).

Parson examined the individual and their relevant actions and extrapolating this into two individuals. Individuals are guided by different social and physical factors that results into making a variety of choices that are guided by accepted norms. Individuals compare their actions and reactions with those of other individuals based on the values of the society. Since the

behaviors are repeated and expectations are in place, it ensures that an institutional role is created. Roles theoretically can be accomplished by different individuals within the society in which Parsons develops the idea of roles into collective roles and complements them into functions within the society. Moreover, Parsons analyses that important components within a society are the social control e.

g. punishments and socialization e. g. sanctioning of role behaviors resulting in a society that is stable. Generally, Parson functionalist perspective may be described as a moving equilibrium in that social change is embraced according to roles and norms that guarantee social order (Parsons, 1961).

Robert Merton was another functionalist who supported the ideas of Parson. He was able to deal with various limitations that were associated with grand theory resulting in development of middle range theory (Elster, 1990). Some of the limitations that he pinpointed were indispensability, universal functionalism and functional unity. Moreover, he developed the idea of deviance in that he differentiated latent functions and manifest. Merton uses an example of an actor stating that actors face five complexities: innovation, retreatism, ritualism, rebellion and conformity. This he uses to state that change can occur internally through rebellion or innovation and even if they face social control by the time rebellion and innovation builds momentum it may require the society to adapt or face dissolution (Elster, 1990). Functionalist theorists see education as a role that is used to convey skills and knowledge to the future generations. Education brings diverse people together championing socializing aspect of functionalism thus 'moral education'.

Moreover, education ensures social control and core values are championed into the learning theories (Holmwood, 2005). The classroom champions the idea of individualism through developing their identities and self-esteem resulting in an environment of social esteem. Moreover, competition is an important aspect in various educational settings in that best performers are awarded according to their accomplishments. Social placement as advocated by Parsons is exemplified by sorting through sorting in terms of merits and channeling best merit students to important occupations.

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