

The Structuralists: The theories that seek to explain our identity by how we are conditioned by society e.g. Functionalism and Marxism

Functionalists

The functionalist perspective perceives society as operating in a way comparable to the functioning of a biological organism. Social institutions thus function in combination with one another and for the benefit of society as a whole, just as the various parts of the body function in relation to one another and to the whole body. In each case society and the body are more important than their various parts. What we have then is a structure in place which itself has a function.

Functionalists have tended to concentrate on society as a place that depends largely upon consensus in order for it to exist. They believe that it is necessary that some individuals and groups are more powerful than others, because only a limited number can take important decisions (hierarchy). They argue that there must be leaders in society and within the organisations within that society; otherwise there would be chaos. People accept these leaders and consent to them because everybody is taught to share the same values through their parents, schools and through the media.

Functionalism And Social Change

From this introduction to Functionalism we have been set a picture of a society where little change takes place. Within this perspective social change occurs only when it is functionally necessary for it to do so.

EG. The recent changes in our health service have taken place because the government proposes that the NHS must be more efficient and cost-effective especially during economic recession.

Change may occur through adaptation or integration. Adaptation occurs when an existing institution readjusts to meet new needs (as in the example above). Integration occurs when a society adopts a new element and makes it part of itself. EG. The immigrants of the West Indies and Asia since the 1940's have tended to be **integrated** into British society.

In general, Functionalists see change as evolutionary (gradual) not revolutionary (rapid)

Key Terms

Social Solidarity – a sense of community

Social Integration – a sense of belonging

Identity and behaviour $\xrightarrow{\text{controlled by}}$ value consensus \longrightarrow clear expectations of roles

Manifest Functions – an intended function of the institution when it was established

Latent Function – an unintended function of the institution

Functional alternatives – a particular function can be performed by different structures (thus no single structure is essential in a society)

Dysfunction – a particular structure can have harmful effects as well as positive upon society

Key Theorists

Talcott Parsons (1902 – 79)

Emile Durkheim

Coser – conflict can strengthen society:

- creation of new ideas
- solidify public opinion e.g. 9/11

R.K. Merton – manifest and latent functions + functional alternatives and dysfunctions

Key Criticisms

P. Berger (1966) – society is portrayed as a prison or a puppet theatre

- over emphasis upon consensus (conflict theory)
- socialisation is NOT foolproof (social action theory)
- society and the power within it are unequal – whose values are they?