1.3B: The Functionalist Perspective

The functionalist perspective attempts to explain social institutions as collective means to meet individual and social needs.

Learning Objectives

- Apply the functionalist perspective to issues in the contemporary world

Key Points

- In the functionalist perspective, societies are thought to function like organisms, with various social institutions working together like organs to maintain and reproduce societies.
- According to functionalist theories, institutions come about and persist because they play a function in society, promoting stability and integration.
- Functionalism has been criticized for its failure to account for social change and individual agency; some consider it conservatively biased.
- Functionalism has been criticized for attributing human-like needs to society.
- Emile Durkheim’s work is considered the foundation of functionalist theory in sociology.
- Merton observed that institutions could have both manifest and latent functions.

Key Terms

- **functionalism**: Structural functionalism, or simply functionalism, is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability.
manifest function: the element of a behavior that is conscious and deliberate

social institutions: In the social sciences, institutions are the structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation governing the behavior of a set of individuals within a given human collectivity. Institutions include the family, religion, peer group, economic systems, legal systems, penal systems, language, and the media.

latent function: the element of a behavior that is not explicitly stated, recognized, or intended, and is thereby hidden

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**Functionalism**

The functionalist perspective attempts to explain social institutions as collective means to meet individual and social needs. It is sometimes called structural-functionalism because it often focuses on the ways social structures (e.g., social institutions) meet social needs.

Functionalism draws its inspiration from the ideas of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim was concerned with the question of how societies maintain internal stability and survive over time. He sought to explain social stability through the concept of solidarity, and differentiated between the mechanical solidarity of primitive societies and the organic solidarity of complex modern societies. According to Durkheim, more primitive or traditional societies were held together by mechanical solidarity; members of society lived in relatively small and undifferentiated groups, where they shared strong family ties and performed similar daily tasks. Such societies were held together by shared values and common symbols. By contrast, he observed that, in modern societies, traditional family bonds are weaker; modern societies also exhibit a complex division of labor, where members perform very different daily tasks. Durkheim argued that modern industrial society would destroy the traditional mechanical solidarity that held primitive societies together. Modern societies however, do not fall apart. Instead, modern societies rely on organic solidarity; because of the extensive division of labor, members of society are forced to interact and exchange with one another to provide the things they need.

The functionalist perspective continues to try and explain how societies maintained the stability and internal cohesion necessary to ensure their continued existence over time. In the functionalist perspective, societies are thought to function like organisms, with various social institutions working together like organs to maintain and reproduce them. The various parts of society are assumed to work together naturally and automatically to maintain overall social equilibrium. Because social institutions are functionally integrated to form a stable system, a change in one institution will precipitate a change in other institutions. Dysfunctional institutions, which do not contribute to the overall maintenance of a society, will cease to exist.

In the 1950s, Robert Merton elaborated the functionalist perspective by proposing a distinction between manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are the intended functions of an institution or a phenomenon in a social system. Latent functions are its unintended functions. Latent functions may be undesirable, but unintended consequences, or manifestly dysfunctional institutions may have latent functions that explain their persistence. For example, crime seems difficult to explain from the functionalist perspective; it seems to play little role in maintaining social stability. Crime, however, may have the latent function of providing examples that demonstrate the boundaries of acceptable behavior and the function of these boundaries to maintain social norms.
Social Institutions

Functionals analyze social institutions in terms of the function they play. In other words, to understand a component of society, one must ask, “What is the function of this institution? How does it contribute to social stability?” Thus, one can ask of education, “What is the function of education for society?” A complete answer would be quite complex and require a detailed analysis of the history of education, but one obvious answer is that education prepares individuals to enter the workforce and, therefore, maintains a functioning economy. By delineating the functions of elements of society, of the social structure, we can better understand social life.

Criticism of Functionalism

Functionalism has been criticized for downplaying the role of individual action, and for being unable to account for social change. In the functionalist perspective, society and its institutions are the primary units of analysis. Individuals are significant only in terms of their places within social systems (i.e., social status and position in patterns of social relations). Some critics also take issue with functionalism’s tendency to attribute needs to society. They point out that, unlike human beings, society does not have needs; society is only alive in the sense that it is made up of living individuals. By downplaying the role of individuals, functionalism is less likely to recognize how individual actions may alter social institutions.

Critics also argue that functionalism is unable to explain social change because it focuses so intently on social order and equilibrium in society. Following functionalist logic, if a social institution exists, it must serve a function. Institutions, however, change over time; some disappear and others come into being. The focus of functionalism on elements of social life in relation to their present function, and not their past functions, makes it difficult to use functionalism to explain why a function of some element of society might change, or how such change occurs.