19.2A: The Functionalist Perspective

In the functionalist model, Parsons argued that illness is a form of deviance that disturbs the social function of a society.

Learning Objectives

• Discuss the functionalist perspective on illness in society, specifically the role the sick play in a specific society and how that role affects others

Key Points

• Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements (namely norms, customs, traditions, and institutions), much like the interacting organs within the human body.

• Prominent functionalist theorists include Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, Robert Merton, and Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell.

• Functionalism is a framework that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability.

• Functionalists argue that a sick individual is not a productive member of society; therefore this deviance needs to be policed. This is the role of the medical profession.

• Structural functionalism reached the peak of its influence in the 1940s and 1950s, and by the 1960s was in rapid decline, replaced by conflict-oriented approaches in Europe and more recently by structuralism.

Key Terms

• **deviance**: Actions or behaviors that violate formal and informal cultural norms, such as laws or the norm that...
discourages public nose-picking.

• **structuralism**: A theory of sociology that views elements of society as part of a cohesive, self-supporting structure.

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. This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation, which is a broad focus on the social structures that shape society as a whole. This approach looks at both social structure and social functions. Prominent functionalist theorists include Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, Robert Merton, and Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell.

![Herbert Spencer](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_(Boundless)/19%3A_Health_and_Illness/19.02%3D...)

**Herbert Spencer**: Herbert Spencer was a prominent functionalist sociologist, who likened the functioning parts of society as organs within a body.

Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements; namely norms, customs, traditions, and institutions. A common analogy, popularized by Herbert Spencer, presents these parts of society as “organs” that work toward the proper functioning of the “body” as a whole. For Talcott Parsons (1902–1979), an American sociologist, “structural-functionalism” came to describe a particular stage in the methodological development of social science, rather than a specific school of thought.
The Sick Role

Sick role is a term used in medical sociology regarding sickness and the rights and obligations of the affected. It is a concept created by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons in 1951. Parsons was a functionalist sociologist who argued that being sick means that the sufferer enters a role of “sanctioned deviance”. This is because, from a functionalist perspective, a sick individual is not a productive member of society. Therefore this deviance needs to be policed, which is the role of the medical profession.

In the functionalist model, Parsons argued that the best way to understand illness sociologically is to view it as a form of deviance that disturbs the social function of the society. The general idea is that the individual who has fallen ill is not only physically sick, but now adheres to the specifically patterned social role of being sick. “Being Sick” is not simply a “condition”; it contains within itself customary rights and obligations based on the social norms that surround it.

The theory outlined two rights of a sick person and two obligations. The sick person’s rights are twofold: the first one is being exempt from normal social roles; the second one is not being responsible for their condition. Conversely, the sick person’s obligations included trying to get well and cooperating with the medical professionals. Parsons concluded that there are three versions of the sick role: conditional, unconditional legitimate, and illegitimate (a condition stigmatized by others).

Critics of the Functionalist Perspective

Critics of Parsons and the functionalist perspective point to different flaws they see with his argument. The model assumes that the individual voluntarily accepts the sick role. It also assumes that the individual may not comply with expectations of the sick role, may not give up social obligations, may resist dependency, and may avoid the public sick role if their illness is stigmatized. The model also blames the sick, where “rights” do not always apply.

Structural functionalism reached the peak of its influence in the 1940s and 1950s, and by the 1960s was in rapid decline. By the 1980s, its place was taken in Europe by more conflict-oriented approaches, and more recently by “structuralism”. While some of the critical approaches also gained popularity in the United States, the mainstream of the discipline has instead shifted to a myriad of empirically-oriented middle-range theories with no overarching theoretical orientation. To most sociologists, functionalism is now obsolete.