

Functionalist Theory

The [functionalist perspective](#), also called functionalism, is one of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology. It has its origins in the works of [Emile Durkheim](#), who was especially interested in how social order is possible or how society remains relatively stable.

Functionalism interprets each part of society in terms of how it contributes to the stability of the whole society. Society is more than the sum of its parts; rather, each part of society is functional for the stability of the whole society. The different parts are primarily the institutions of society, each of which is organized to fill different needs and each of which has particular consequences for the form and shape of society. The parts all depend on each other.

For example, 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. 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 all goes well, the parts of society produce order, stability, and productivity. If all does not go well, the parts of society then must adapt to recapture a new order, stability, and productivity.

Functionalism emphasizes the consensus and order that exist in society, focusing on social stability and shared public values. From this perspective, disorganization in the system, such as [deviant behavior](#), leads to change because societal components must adjust to achieve stability. When one part of the system is not working or is dysfunctional, it affects all other parts and creates social problems, which leads to social change.

The functionalist perspective achieved its greatest popularity among American sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s. While European functionalists originally focused on explaining the inner workings of social order, American functionalists focused on discovering the functions of human behavior. Among these American functionalist sociologists is [Robert K. Merton](#), who divided human functions into two types: manifest functions, which are intentional and obvious, and latent functions, which are unintentional and not obvious. The manifest function of attending a church or synagogue, for instance, is to worship as part of a religious community, but its latent function may be to help members learn to discern personal from institutional values. With common sense, manifest functions become easily apparent. Yet this is not necessarily the case for latent functions, which often demand a sociological approach to be revealed.

Functionalism has been critiqued by many sociologists for its neglect of the often negative implications of social order. Some critics, like Italian theorist [Antonio Gramsci](#), claim that the perspective justifies the status quo, and the [process of cultural hegemony which maintains it](#). 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 in a seemingly natural way for any problems that may arise.