

Assess the contribution of functionalist theory to our understanding of society

Functionalism sees society as a system, that it is a set of interconnected parts which can work together in unison to form a whole. The early functionalists drew an analogy between society and an organism, i.e, the human body. They said that an understanding of an organ of the body involves understanding its relationship with every other organ and its contribution to the organism as a whole; therefore they said that this could also describe society, that every part requires its own analysis to see what it contributes to the society as whole. Functionalists have also continued this argument to say that just like an organ has simple basic needs to survive, so does society, and that if one part fails it will all diminish. Thus social institutions such as the family and religion are analysed as a part of the social order rather than isolated units.

Functionalist analysis has focused on the question of how social systems are maintained. With the functionalist concern for investigating on how functional prerequisites (basic needs or necessities of existence) are met. This emphasis has resulted in many institutions being seen as beneficial and useful to society. But this view has led critics to argue that functionalism has a built-in conservative bias which supports the status quo.

Within society the functionalists outline what they call functional prerequisites, these are what society requires in order to exist. Some functionalists believe that these prerequisites are institutions such as family or social stratification. They are easily identified in every type of society even though they can vary, like the caste system in India varies a great deal from our own stratification system but affects the whole society and makes it functional which fits their definition of a prerequisite. This view is held by sociologists such as Davies and Moore (1967) and Murdock (1949). However this does not show how much these prerequisites can differ between societies and satisfy a different need. Opposing this is the functionalist Marion Levy (1952) who says that the prerequisites are essential parts for society like reproduction, also that every essential job in society is carried out contributing to the whole.

The concept of functionalism is what the functionalists use to describe the relationship between the individual aspects of society in relation to the whole. They outline all institutions as beneficial but three as indispensable as well, which in modern sociology it is still the case. The functionalists do not talk about many dysfunctional institutions but do say they exist, in line with current views about society. The three indispensable institutions are religion, social stratification and the family. All three are present in all societies and under a conservative view they are all considered important and functional. In line with this way of thinking they are not changed because of what they offer is essential whether or not an alternative can be provided.

The functionalist Durkheim introduced the idea of social facts. These can be like laws that don't affect the person in society apart from stopping a certain aspect of their behaviour from occurring. Durkheim suggests two ways in which these can occur firstly by determining the cause of it from previous facts, the other that it is needed to help one of the functions of society. Both are present in society as a whole, these according to functionalists control and maintain the functions of society that is mainly true in today's society with law and order as a form of social control. Durkheim pointed out that in society a combination of social facts like morals and values and needs like food and reproduction, which are essential. In present society this is also clearly present with values and norms

taught throughout the socialization process and societies control that is mostly accepted and holds functions of society together and keep them functional. The functionalists are aware that these functions may not always run smoothly but believe there will always be enough compliance from all other 'organs' of society to keep it functioning.

Parsons shares one of Durkheim's view that was social control in society is more than just fear, that individuals have moral constraint and compared it to a business deal. Whereby a certain amount of agreement is made on what is wanted from society and then rules are based around this. All societies have this morality in order to stay functional and realise it is constructive. With these same values amongst most members of society a common identity is formed and common goals can be achieved, modern society in a lot of ways conforms to this in that we have divisions which are accepted and rules that are accepted, a society which we are meant to perceive as fair. Functionalists' views put forward an existing social equilibrium where by a combination of social control and socialization run society and its institutions. Parsons also uses the functionalists' term of a prerequisite only he has four parts to it adaptation, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance. All of these need to be in place for society to function. In any society the basic functions will emerge, food shelter etc, but then these need to be maintained. After this new members to the society are taught to behave to conform to this by laws and values, the institutions acceptable to most of society causing its existence. Parsons believes that religion is at the root of all societies and justifies norms and values to individuals. At present religion has much less control over individuals and all control is of less relevance today with strikes crime and contempt for the way society's institutions operate. Although this is not enough to stop or change these institutions as they are still helpful within society.

Social differentiation is the only way functionalism provides reasoning for change. As society develops institutions become more specialised and precise in their values and carry out fewer functions, this leads to a lapse in overall society values which changes society and re-integrates institutions with new prerequisites. I think this differentiation of society has happened but that the re-formation of the overall society as one system has not entirely happened like that functionalists describe society as.

Critics of functionalism throw up arguments which suggest that it has never been properly relevant therefore suggesting it isn't contributing reasonable arguments for a modern society. Functionalism points out the reasons for functions within society but the effect of these can only be seen once they have developed and that the cause behind them is that they are essential to society in order for survival. There is no evidence that individuals create institutions to keep society working only that they develop because they are essential. It is difficult to determine whether the effects of institutions are good for society or not and whether it is purely down to them. These are constantly changing so the effects can not always be tied to one institution so elimination of these may or may not prove dysfunctional, functionalism would disagree that every institution is there and has developed and should stay shared by conservatives, saying it is there and must be for a reason so changing it would be too bigger risk.

Parsons says control is through consensus but there is no evidence to show this and I think in today's society this may be true as a majority but not the whole system of society. The main problem with all functionalist perspectives is that they share the view that society dictates how every individual acts and will act throughout their life and everything is predetermined for them, this is very much disagreed with by anti-positivists theories of

research which looks into the individuals rather than the society and tries to reason that they have control over what institutions society creates and how they control them.

Therefore functionalism has lost some of its relevance in relation to modern day society; it still holds the base ideas about institutions and functions which other theories have been based and created from. No theory can provide all the answers at the time it was created so it is not expected that it is entirely relevant more than 150 years later. Different aspects of society may be explained by these very different views but overall functionalism is able to give us an understanding of society and is still relevant in some aspects to explaining modern day societies.