

## Sociological Paradigm #1: Functionalism

**Functionalism**, also called structural-functional theory, sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society.

Functionalism grew out of the writings of English philosopher and biologist, **Hebert Spencer (1820–1903)**, who saw similarities between society and the human body; he argued that just as the various organs of the body work together to keep the body functioning, the various parts of society work together to keep society functioning (Spencer 1898). The parts of society that Spencer referred to were the **social institutions**, or patterns of beliefs and behaviors focused on meeting social needs, such as government, education, family, healthcare, religion, and the economy.



Émile Durkheim, another early sociologist, applied Spencer's theory to explain how societies change and survive over time. Durkheim believed that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability (Durkheim 1893), and that society is held together by shared values, languages, and symbols. **He believed that to study society, a sociologist must look beyond individuals to social facts such as laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashion, and rituals, which all serve to govern social life.** Alfred Radcliff-Brown (1881–1955) defined the **function** of any recurrent activity as the part it played in social life as a whole, and therefore the contribution it makes to social stability and continuity (Radcliff-Brown 1952). In a healthy society, **all parts work together to maintain stability, a state called dynamic equilibrium** by later sociologists such as Parsons (1961).

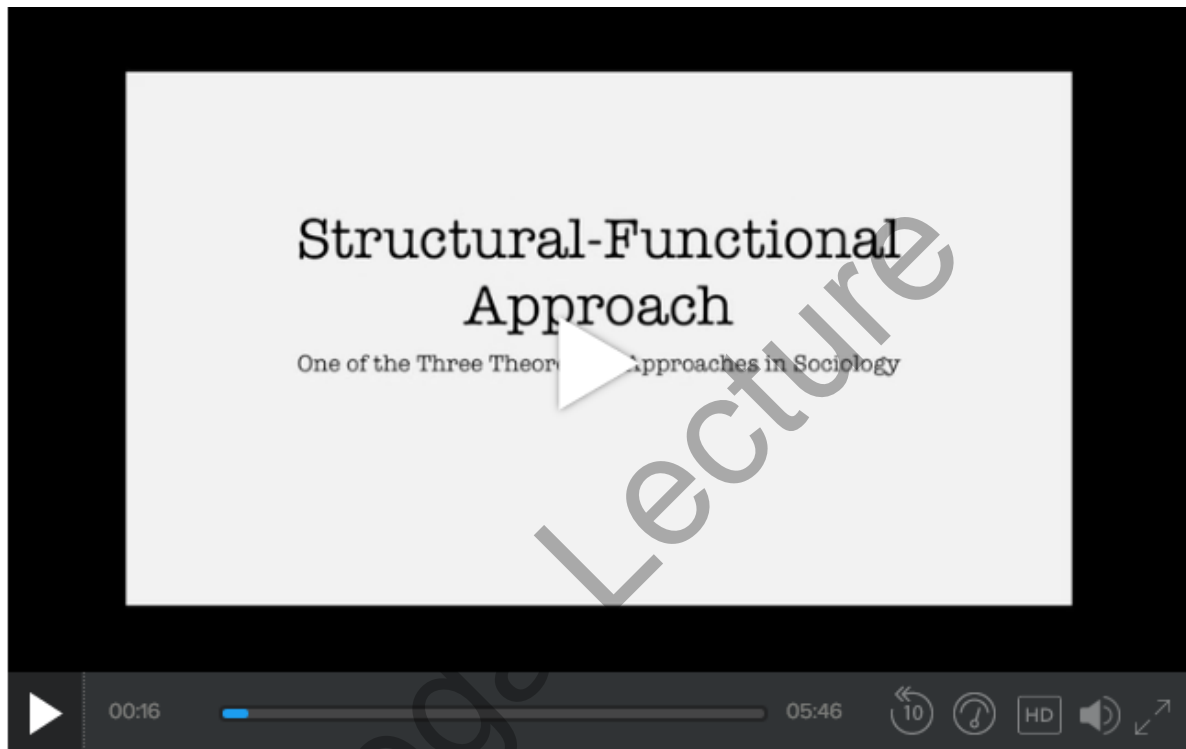
Durkheim believed that individuals may make up society, but in order to study society, sociologists have to look beyond individuals to social facts. **Social facts** are the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life (Durkheim 1895). Each of these social facts serves one or more functions within a society. For example, one function of a society's laws may be to protect society from violence, while another is to punish criminal behavior, while another is to preserve public health.

Another noted structural functionalist, Robert Merton (1910–2003), pointed out that social processes often have many functions. **Manifest functions** are the consequences of a social process that are sought or anticipated, while **latent functions** are the unsought consequences of a social process. A manifest function of college education, for example, includes gaining knowledge, preparing for a career, and finding a good job that utilizes that education. Latent functions of your college years include meeting new people, participating in extracurricular activities, or even finding a spouse or partner. Another latent function of education is creating a hierarchy of employment

based on the level of education attained. Latent functions can be beneficial, neutral, or harmful. Social processes that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society are called **dysfunctions**. In education, examples of dysfunction include getting bad grades, truancy, dropping out, not graduating, and not finding suitable employment.

### BRING IT HOME

Watch the following video to see more applications of the structural-functional theory.



Click on the image to open the video in a new tab.

## Criticism

One criticism of the structural-functional theory is that it can't adequately explain social change. Also problematic is the somewhat circular nature of this theory; repetitive behavior patterns are assumed to have a function, yet we profess to know that they have a function only because they are repeated. Furthermore, dysfunctions may continue, even though they don't serve a function, which seemingly contradicts the basic premise of the theory. Many sociologists now believe that functionalism is no longer useful as a macro-level theory, but that it does serve a useful purpose in some mid-level analyses.