



10 Functionalism Examples (In Schools, Families & Religion)

By Chris Drew (PhD) / December 22, 2022

FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalism in sociology sees the parts of society as components of a cohesive whole. Each part performs a useful function.

EXPLANATION

Functionalism was the predominant theoretical framework for sociological thinking till the 1960s, after which it began to retreat following critiques from feminism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. The functionalist perspective in sociology views the family as the basic building block of society. It performs several functions that are critical to the smooth functioning of society.

KEY INSTITUTIONS

Religion, schools, and families are important social institutions according to functionalists.

The family is the primary agent of socialization for a child.

The school is an intermediary between the family and the society at large.

Religion provides a sense of security and belonging much like a family.

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Functionalism in sociology sees the parts of society as components of a cohesive whole. Each part performs a useful function. For example, the parents in a family provides for the children, who will in turn care for the parents when they become elderly.

Similarly, the person who builds the road will build roads that the farmer drives on to get his produce to market, which the road builder will then buy to eat. *We all have a role to play in the proper functioning of society.*

All the institutions, structures, and people that make up a society perform important roles. They are *interdependent* on each other.

Functionalists think of parts of society as organs of a body (Herbert Spencer). Each part of society performs a function that makes it work as a whole, just as a human body needs all the organs to perform their parts to make the body work (Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons).

Functionalism is also sometimes called **structural-functionalism** because it views society as made up of social structures. All the individual components of these structures perform indispensable functions.



Origins Of Functionalism

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), one of the early proponents of functionalism was a biologist by training. So, some of the earliest formulations of functionalism were expressed in the language of natural biology.

Even before Spencer, Auguste Comte (1798-1857), regarded as the founder of sociology, wanted the sociological discipline to be based on natural sciences such as biology, physics, and chemistry.

Hence it was natural that early functionalism came to be modeled on the natural sciences.

Emile Durkehim's (1858-1917) doctoral dissertation, *The Division of Labour in Society* published in 1893, was considered a seminal text of structural functionalism.

Durkheim attempted to reorient functionalist thought towards a more capitalist-industrialist way of thinking. This was in keeping with the rapid transition of traditional societies to industrial capitalist societies during his time.

Functionalism was the predominant theoretical framework for sociological thinking till the 1960s, after which it began to retreat following critiques from various intellectual quarters such as [feminism](#), [postmodernism](#), [postcolonialism](#), etc.

Applications of functionalism today tend to be a lot more nuanced and take into account the critiques offered by the various schools of thought.

Examples Of Functionalism In Families

The functionalist perspective in sociology views the family as the basic building block of society. It performs several functions that are critical to the smooth functioning of society. Below are a few examples:

1. Murdock's 4 Functions Of The Family

George Peter Murdock (1949) was among the first to articulate clearly the functionalist perspective on the family.

Murdock proposed that a family serves 4 essential functions:

- Satisfaction of the biological need for sex.
- Ensuring procreation and thus the propagation of the species.



- Ensuring the transmission of social and cultural values to the young.
- Making sure that the essential needs – food, shelter – of the members of the family are met.

2. Parsons' Nuclear Family

Talcott Parsons (1951) took the argument on the functionalist perspective of the family one step further.

He argued that not only does the family perform all the functions mentioned by Murdock, the family is also a highly adaptive unit capable of modifying itself according to the demands of the society. The family thus mimics the functioning of an organism that adapts itself to change to continue being functional.

As an example, Parsons gave the case of the emergence of the [nuclear family](#) in response to industrialization that served all the critical familial functions demanded of it.

Parsons argued that the pre-industrial extended family could not adapt to the new demands of mobility imposed upon the working populations. As workers, and consequently, families needed to be constantly on the move, the structure of the family adapted itself to the new function required of it.

3. Care Of The Elderly

In some countries, such as the United States, there exist state-funded facilities to care for the elderly.

However, in most parts of the world, elderly care is the responsibility of the family. In this, the family performs a critical function of taking care of the aged and the infirm.

Examples Of Functionalism In Schools

A school is a microcosm of society. The functionalist perspective applied to schools examines the function performed by the school in contributing to society. Below are a few examples of how functionalism is applied to education:

1. Imparting Skills

One of the primary functions of schools is to impart skills to students and make them employable or capable of generating employment.

To this effect, schools teach skills such as language, numeracy, and vocational and technical skills.

The school is thus an institution that helps a society function by producing individuals capable of sustaining the system of economic relations that is crucial to the survival of any society.



2. Socialization & Respect For Law

Durkheim viewed schools as “socialization agencies” where children learn how to be a part of society by interacting with others (Durkheim, 1956).

A child learns skills such as cooperation, coexistence, and conflict management within the school environment.

In ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse societies, children learn how to accept and be welcoming of differences, helping to create a more accommodating society.

Children also learn how to obey rules and the consequences of transgressing rules, that condition them into becoming law-abiding adults later on in life.

3. Inculcation Of Values

Every society has a certain set of values and its education system is primed to inculcate those values in its students.

For instance, the American sociologist Talcott Parsons believed that a school uses the [hidden curriculum](#) to instill values such as competition and individualism that are characteristic of American society, and essential to its continued progress.

Parsons believed that it is in a school that children understand the [meaning of a meritocracy](#) where your achievements and your status are a function of the effort you put in; the notion of meritocracy being another cherished value in American society.

Examples Of Functionalism In Religion

The functionalist perspective views religion as being essential to human society as it performs certain vital functions.

Below are a few examples of the useful functions that functionalist thought believes religion provides in society:

1. Sense Of Belonging To The Community

Emile Durkheim (1912) believed that one of the most important functions of religion is fostering a sense of belonging of the individual to a wider community.

Durkheim based his views on a study of Australian Aboriginal tribes but we can experience this function of religion even today. For many people, their strongest sense of identity is often with their religion, rather than



with other institutions such as the nation or linguistic community.

For instance, religious nationalism is a vital force in many parts of the world such as South Asia, where the sense of belonging to the wider community fostered by religion overcomes linguistic, ethnic, and racial divides.

For more on Durkheim, see his work on [social facts](#).

2. Psychological And Emotional Function

A critical function that religion serves is fulfilling psychological and emotional needs.

For many people religion can act as a form of support that helps them deal with mentally and emotionally overwhelming situations.

For others religion provides a way of dealing with trauma and provides answers to the deepest questions of human existence, such the meanings of life and death, that neither science, nor art can provide.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1925) showed through his anthropological work that religion acts as a coping mechanism for individuals and society when faced with the essentially unpredictable nature of life.

3. Providing Moral And Social Codes

Religion can be a source of morality that in turn helps maintain order in society by influencing our idea of what is right and what is wrong.

Some of the oldest legal codes in the world are to be found in religious texts, such as the Law of Moses that is found in the Torah. Many countries in the Islamic world are governed by the Islamic Shari'a law.

Beyond formal legal codes, religions also shape our ideas of morality. For instance several principles that we almost unconsciously imbibe in our everyday life, and which influence the definition of ideal human morality such as "love thy neighbor" or "do unto others as you would have others do unto you" are of Biblical origin.

Similarly, the practice of charity and helping the poor are institutionalized in the form of obligatory practice in many religions such as Sikhism. Talcott Parsons believed that this aspect of religion performed the critical function of maintaining social order.

4. The Family Unit

Functionalism also tends to also cohere well with Christian thought. A Christian view of the family sees it as the cornerstone of society.



The mother and father form the leadership team. Within that team, traditionally the mother and father have also been seen as taking on gender roles granted to them by god. It is through this team, with each team member taking on a defined role, that the functioning nuclear family can produce future moral citizens.

The parents also take on the role of providers. as with Murdock's 4 Functions of the Family model outlined earlier, the nuclear family unit is seen as essential in Christianity so that the children may be provided for. Here, we will often see the strengths of the mother and father both employed to create a well-rounded environment for children's growth.

Within the family unit, the children also take on important social roles. They spend their formative years learning morality, respect, and discipline from the leadership team (the parents).

Conclusion

Functionalism is a [theory](#) that views the various structures and institutions within a society as not just performing useful functions, but also being interdependent on each other.

In the examples cited above, the family, the school, and religion not just perform useful functions for society by themselves, but are also interdependent.

Functionalists view the school as an intermediary between the family and the society at large, thus being linked to, and dependent on both. Religion provides a sense of security and belonging much like a family, but at a higher level of organization, and it provides values and enables socialization just like a school.

Almost all religions lay stress on the importance of family life, and provide mechanisms for the education of their adherents in their religious doctrines through religious schools. Thus, each structure, in interdependent, and performs a useful function in the smooth running of society.

RELATED ARTICLES ON SOCIAL NORMS:

- [The 4 Types of Social Norms](#)
- [65 Examples of Taboos](#)

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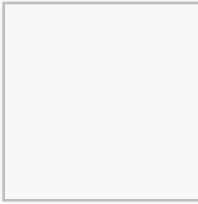
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Dr. Chris Drew is the founder of the Helpful Professor. He holds a PhD in education and has published over 20 articles in scholarly journals. He is the former editor of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education.

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