

# High Storrs Sixth Form

## 2024 Bridging Work

**Subject: Sociology**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_



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# A level Sociology at High Storrs School – Preparatory ‘Bridging the gap’ work.

Read the information below and complete the task outlined on page 4.

*The following information contains some information on one perspective on society.*

## **Functionalism: understanding aspects of contemporary society**

Functionalism is a structural theory (sometimes called a macro theory) that studies sociology as a whole. It sees society as a system with all parts inter-related and working together to meet the needs of society. In other words, society operates like a living organism (the body) with interdependent structures of society such as medicine, families, education and religion, (the heart and lungs).

Every society is made up of four sub-systems: economic, political, family, and cultural systems such as education, religion and the media. Each sub-system functions to maintain a healthy society. Cultural systems socialise individuals to conform to society’s norms and values. This creates a value consensus, which is a shared agreement of norms and values by all individuals in society. This maintains social order so that society is able to function properly, creating a stable and harmonious society. Because of this social change will be slow and gradually evolves. If one part of the system does break down and becomes dysfunctional then this can affect all other aspects of society. For example, dysfunctional families have been connected to crime, mental illness and low levels of educational achievement, in this way social order and stability are threatened, (in the same way heart disease will cause the whole body to become weak).

Functionalists are very positive about society and always see the good in everything. They even think that crime is good for society! Functionalists believe that each part of society has a function (a job to do) to make sure that society runs smoothly and everything stays in harmony. For example, education has a function to make sure people are educated to be good at the job they will get after school.

### **Functionalists view of the Family**

Functionalists see the modern isolated nuclear family as being dominant in society. They see the family as a good thing: it is functional for its members and the wider society.

#### **Murdock (1949)**

Murdock argued on the basis of his studies that the nuclear family was a universal social institution and that it existed universally because it fulfilled four basic functions for society: the sexual, reproductive, economic and education functions.

### **Talcott Parsons**

The Functionalist perspective on the family has been further developed by Talcott Parsons whose theories focus heavily on nuclear, heterosexual families to the exclusion of other family forms. Talcott Parsons believed that the family is very functional as it passes on ideas about gender to children. The traditional mother/ father roles of the traditional nuclear family are a way of passing on social norms. In Parsons' view women play the expressive role in the household - sensitive, caring and emotional. Meanwhile the man is instrumental - rational and self-assured- a provider.

According to Parsons the family had two irreducible functions

1. The primary socialisation of children: Instilling norms and values and getting children 'ready' for society
2. The stabilisation of adult personalities: For adults the family provides emotional support and a release from everyday life.

### **Evaluation**

- They ignore growing family diversity. The growth in other types of families e.g., single parent families and gay and lesbian families suggest that the nuclear family is not in fact universal which in turn suggests that Functionalist theories of the family focus excessively on the nuclear family form and insufficiently on other family types.
- Lengerman and Wallace (1985) say that today women's ability to control reproduction grants them greater control over their lives- they no longer have to play the expressive role.
- Functionalists have been accused of idealising the family
- They ignore conflict and abuse within families
- They ignore gender inequality within families
- They ignore the rising divorce rates

### **Functionalist explanations of deviance and crime**

If society is functioning successfully why do people commit deviant acts? Durkheim (1964) believed that high levels of crime are dysfunctional and destabilise society but some crime is necessary as it helps the social system survive. Crime also keeps large numbers of people in employment and generates economic activity e.g. judges, prison officers, locksmiths etc.

Crime is therefore:

1. Functional

- Boundaries of acceptable behaviour are made known by the arrest of those who transgress
- Strengthens bonds between people and reaffirms values when they are drawn together by horrific crimes

## 2. Inevitable

- It is impossible for everyone to be equally committed to the norms and rules of society. Even in a society of saints a distinction would be made between what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

## 3. Normal

- There is no society where there is no crime. Abnormal levels of crime occur in times of upheaval.

Durkheim believed that suicide rates rise and fall in line with social factors such as economic depression and boom and times of war. His research led him to theorise that the more cohesive and harmonic the society the lower the rate of suicide- more integrated societies had a lower rate of suicide.

According to Parsons (1956) deviant subcultures are used by teenagers to deal with their transitional state, as they don't have a clear role in society. People turn to deviant acts when there is a gap between their goals and what they can actually achieve.

Merton's (1949) research led him to believe that young working-class males found themselves frustrated by culturally ascribed goals. At school they were taught that if they work hard they could achieve. However, on realising they were unable to meet society's goals they created their own deviant subcultures where different qualities are championed. Examples of these sub cultural groups are Teddy boys (50's and 60's) Skinheads and Punks.

## Evaluation

- Functionalist theories of crime do not explain individual motivations and why some people commit crime
- Over-emphasis on degree of consensus in society
- Assumes a consensus of goals

## **Functionalist view of stratification and social inequality**

Functionalists claim that stratification contributes to social order – therefore class inequality is beneficial, positive and necessary. All societies have to ensure that their most functionally important positions are filled with people who are talented and efficient. Talent and skill, however, are in short supply and top jobs require an intensive amount of training and time to acquire the necessary expertise. Education and the stratification system function to allocate all individuals to an occupational role that suits their abilities. Stratification encourages all members of society to work to the best of their ability because class societies are

meritocracies – high rewards in the form of income and status are guaranteed in order to motivate gifted people to achieve. Therefore, according to Davis and Moore social inequality is a permanent and universal feature of human societies and is necessary for societies to function. By rewarding people with income and status people follow the route into the ‘best’ job for them

Saunders (1990) is a more recent supporter of the functionalist perspective of stratification claiming that even if there are some problems, competition and rewards keep society innovative and the economy strong.

### Evaluation

- Some positions in society are functionally more important than others. This is a value judgement. Well paid jobs may seem more important.
- Few people have the natural talent to perform the tasks needed and the developing of talents into skills, through training requires sacrifices such as loss of earnings. Sacrifices are not always necessary – grants, rich parents could finance education and training.
- Unequal rewards lead to differences in prestige attached to positions which become generally accepted and the basis of stratification. Davis and Moore are better at explaining inequality in rewards for positions at one moment in time, rather than the inheritance of advantages which results in stratification, They assume equality of opportunity to ensure the best get to the top, Stratification prevents this.

## **The functionalist view of education**

Functionalists explain education by examining the relationship between education and other social institutions, and the contribution education makes to meet the functional needs of the social system as a whole.

Functionalists claim that the education system has three main functions:

### 1. Socialisation

It socialises young people into key cultural values such as equality of opportunity, competition and religious morality. Education is said by functionalists (especially Durkheim) to emphasise moral responsibilities in society that people should have towards each other. If these norms were not passed down through generations then there would be a tendency for individualism (where people believe that they are more important than social groups). Citizenship and religious education were introduced as compulsory subjects in schools as a way of passing on these values.

### 2. Teaching skills

The second function is to do with the skills that education teaches children, from literacy and numeracy to more job-specific skills. Occupational jobs are becoming more specialised and this in turn will lead to more years in education.

### 3. The allocation of job roles in society

According to functionalists, education assists in the allocation of roles of young people in society. Examinations and qualifications are said to allocate people for their most suited job. In Durkheim's view education doesn't just teach children facts; it also teaches them a sense of community and belonging. Your levels results allow employers to compare you to other candidates and tell society what skills you have.

Parsons saw schools as a bridge between the family and wider society. It is a training ground for the real world- punctuality, attendance, uniform a sense of rules and responsibility and competitiveness. To Parsons, school is a level playing field where

students are encouraged to do well regardless of their background. This maximises grades and boosts the quality and choice of the workforce of a society.

#### Evaluation

- Can schools really be meritocratic- does education allow individuals to be rewarded on the basis of merit rather than factors such as class, gender, ethnic group? Does a teacher accept the same things from the boys and the girls? Do people's racial views affect schooling? Are schools geared towards all social classes?
- The use of tutors, private schools and resources puts some children at an advantage even before they start primary school! Education is now more attainable to all with comprehensive schooling and the **Every Child matters Agenda** but there are still the costs that goes with university tuition and further education. Is it still just as tempting for people from poorer backgrounds to go straight into work after their GCSE's?

#### TASK

Having read how functionalists explain the areas of the family, education, crime, deviance and stratification, **write a report of 400 words [total] explaining how you think functionalists view:**

**a) The media, and**

**b) Religion**

Write **200 words on each** – and try to use some of the concepts that are common to the work of functionalists referred to in the reading (e.g. roles, values, norms, consensus, etc.). You may do some additional reading on both areas, if you can, and include references to sociologists. For each area try also to write one criticism of the functionalist view on that area – e.g., what weakness might there be in the functionalist view of the media?

**Hand in your report during your first Sociology lesson in September.**