

The Structural-Functional Theory of Social Stratification

Below are the seven propositions that make up the structural-functional theory of social stratification (Davis and Moore) as summarized by Melvin M. Tumin.* these statements argue that social stratification (inequality) is functional and it is necessary for maintaining a society's state of equilibrium (stability).

Certain positions in any society are more functionally important than others and require special skills for their performance.

Only a limited number of individuals in any society have the talents which can be trained into the skills appropriate to these positions (i.e., the more functionally important positions).

The conversion of talents into skills involves a training period during which sacrifices of one kind or another are made by those undergoing the training.

In order to induce the talented persons to undergo these sacrifices and acquire the training, their future positions must carry an inducement value in the form of differential, i.e., privileged and disproportionate access to the scarce and desired rewards which the society has to offer.

These scarce and desired goods consist of rights and perquisites attached to, or built into, the positions and can be classified into those things which contribute to A) sustenance and comfort; B) humor and diversion; Q self-respect and ego expansion.

This differential access to the basic rewards of the society has as a consequence the differentiation of the prestige and esteem which various strata acquire. This may be said, along with the rights and perquisites, to constitute institutionalized social inequality, i.e., stratification.

Therefore, social inequality among different strata in the amounts of scarce and desired goods, and the amounts of prestige and esteem which they receive, is both positively functional and inevitable in any society.

To read the original Davis and Moore article click here. *(American Sociological Review, Vol. 18 (August, 1953))

The Functionalist theory assumes that the various structures and processes in society exist because they serve important functions for society's stability and continuity. In line with this view, functionalist theorists in sociology assume that stratification exists because it also serves important functions for society.

This explanation was developed more than 60 years ago by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (Davis & Moore, 1945) in the form of several logical assumptions that imply stratification is both necessary and inevitable. When applied to American society, their assumptions would be as follows:

Some jobs are more important than other jobs. For example, the job of a brain surgeon is more important than the job of shoe-shining.

Some jobs require more skills and knowledge than other jobs. To stay with our example, it takes more skills and knowledge to do brain surgery than to shine shoes.

Relatively few people have the ability to acquire the skills and knowledge that are needed to do these important, highly skilled jobs. Most of us would be able to do a decent job of shining shoes, but very few of us would be able to become brain surgeons.

To induce the people with the skills and knowledge to do the important, highly skilled jobs, society must promise them higher incomes or other rewards. If this is true, some people automatically end up higher in society's ranking system than others, and stratification is thus necessary and inevitable. To illustrate this, say we have a society where shining shoes and doing brain surgery both give us incomes of \$150,000 per year. (This example is very hypothetical, but please keep reading.) If you decide to shine shoes, you can begin making this money at age 16, but if you decide to become a brain surgeon, you will not start making this same amount until about age 35, as you first must go to college and medical school and then acquire several more years of medical training. While you have spent 19 additional years beyond age 16 getting this education and training and taking out tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, you could have spent these 19 years shining shoes and making \$150,000 a year, or \$2.85 million overall. Which job would you choose?

A surgeon and a shoe shiner

Functional theory argues that the promise of very high incomes is necessary to induce talented people to pursue important careers such as surgery. If physicians and shoe shiners made the same high income, would enough people decide to become physicians?

As this example suggests, many people might not choose to become brain surgeons unless considerable financial and other rewards awaited them. By extension, we might not have enough people filling society's important jobs unless they know they will be similarly rewarded. If this is true, we must have stratification. This all sounds very logical, but a few years after Davis and Moore published their functionalist theory of stratification, other sociologists pointed out some serious problems in their argument (Tumin, 1953; Wrong, 1959).

First, it is difficult to compare the importance of many types of jobs. For example, which is more important, doing brain surgery or mining coal? Although you might be tempted to answer "brain surgery," if no coal were mined, much of our society could not function. In another example, which job is more important, attorney or professor? (Be careful how you answer this one!)

Second, the functionalist explanation implies that the most important jobs have the highest incomes and the least important jobs the lowest incomes, but many examples, including the ones just mentioned, counter this view. Coal miners make much less money than physicians, and professors, for better or worse, earn much less on the average than lawyers. A professional athlete making millions of dollars a year earns many times the income of the president of the United States, but who is more important to the nation? Elementary school teachers do a very important job in our society, but their salaries are much lower than those of sports agents, advertising executives, and many other people whose jobs are far less essential.

Third, the functionalist view also implies that people move up the economic ladder based on their abilities, skills, knowledge, and, more generally, their merit. If this is true, another implication is that if they do not move up the ladder, they lack the necessary merit. This view ignores the fact that much of our stratification stems from lack of equal opportunity, as our Monopoly example at the beginning of the chapter made clear. Because of their race, ethnicity, gender, and class standing at birth, some people have less opportunity than others to acquire the skills and training they need to fill the types of jobs addressed by the functionalist approach.

Finally, the functionalist explanation might make sense up to a point, but it does not justify the extremes of wealth and poverty found in the United States and other nations. Even if we do have to promise higher incomes to get enough people to become physicians, does that mean we also need the amount of poverty we have? Do CEOs of corporations really need to make millions of dollars per year to get enough qualified people to become CEOs? Don't people take on a CEO job or other high-paying job at least partly because of the challenge, working conditions, and other positive aspects they offer? The functionalist view does not answer these questions adequately.