

Sociological Perspectives on Socialization

Within sociology there have been two major orientations to socialization and several minor ones. One of the oldest, associated primarily with structurefunctionalism, considers socialization mainly as the learning of social roles. Parsons (1955), a major architect of this theoretical perspective, maintained that individuals become integrated members of society by learning and internalizing the relevant roles and statuses of the groups to which they belong. Since roles are important elements of social and cultural systems, comprising normative and value components, socialization into roles becomes a major means of integrating individuals into social systems and, thereby, enabling the continuity of these systems. This integration is viewed as functional for individuals and for society, although Parsons's interest was more in the latter than the former. Merton (1957), another key figure in American functionalism, also viewed socialization as the learning of social roles, but conceived of the process as more problematic. His concept of 'latent function' points to the possibility of unintended and undesirable consequences of normative and institutional behavior, such as the perpetuation of social inequalities or the development of individual dysfunction. Functionalism was the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology in the 1950s and 1960s.