Social Institutions

Definition

Social institutions are a system of behavioral and relationship patterns that are densely interwoven and enduring, and function across an entire society. They order and structure the behavior of individuals by means of their normative character. Institutions regulate the behavior of individuals in core areas of society: a) family and relationship networks carry out social reproduction and socialization; b) institutions in the realm of education and training ensure the transmission and cultivation of knowledge, abilities and specialized skills; c) institutions in the labor-market and economy provide for the production and distribution of goods and services; d) institutions in the realm of law, governance and politics provide for the maintenance of the social order; e) while cultural, media and religious institutions further the development of contexts of meaning, value orientations and symbolic codes.

Description

Social institutions are important structural components of modern societies that address one or more fundamental activity and/or specific function. Without social institutions, modern societies could not exist. Societies consist of a range of institutions that play myriad specific roles in facilitating human social life, and which themselves are dependent upon one another for the performance of their respective functions. A given institution can also perform different functions at once and/or over time. In this respect they differ from formal organizations, which are hierarchically differentiated via an organizational structure and serve primarily to facilitate rational action (Zweckhandeln) and the realization of particular interests.

In sociological theory, there are three prevailing interpretations of social institutions: functionalist approaches, Marxist-inspired conflict-oriented explanations, and neo-institutionalist approaches.

Functionalist approaches in the tradition of Durkheim and Parsons emphasize the importance of social institutions for the maintenance of social systems. Social integration is only possible when institutions perform core functions. Three such functions can be distinguished: first, institutions structure human social relationships and serve as a catalyst for the role expectations with which individuals are confronted in their everyday actions. Second, institutions regulate the distribution of gratifications and the allocation of suitable persons to positions of power. Third, by means of symbols, policies and ideologies, certain social institutions represent and stabilize the value canons and contexts of meaning of social systems.

In contrast to functionalist approaches, conflict theory (Coser) has as its point of departure the insight that because conflict and inequality are inherent in modern societies, social institutions do not perform equally well for all members of society. From this perspective, institutions are seen as instruments for the realization of power and hegemony, and help stabilize prevailing inequalities. For scholars in this tradition, it is easy to demonstrate that ethnic minorities, women and those in lower social strata benefit less from the functioning of institutions, or are shaped by them in specific ways. Moreover, several members of the Frankfurt School of critical theory (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) underscore that institutions can function in manipulative and alienating ways, for they serve first and foremost to legitimate prevailing power relations. They
can even have anomic and dysfunctional effects, as is sometimes the case in “total institutions” (Goffman, Foucault) such as psychiatric institutions, prisons or military barracks.

Neo-institutionalist theory (Powell, DiMaggio, Williamson) argues that institutions are important for the enactment of action routines. In ever more complex environments, institutions unburden individuals and make their social environments more predictable. Institutionalized action routines often remain unquestioned, and individuals carry them out as adaptations to the situational and role expectations of their social environment. Institutions can hereby spare individuals costs and resources, and also help them solve problems in their everyday lives. In this line of thinking, an essential element in the functioning of social institutions is the existence of trust and transparency.

Despite their varying points of emphasis, these theories agree that several institutions are particularly important to modern society. Among these are the institutions of the family and education, those regulating the labor market and economy, those in the realm of law, governance and politics, and those in the sphere of culture, media and religion.

The behavioral and relationship patterns institutionalized through family structures and kinship networks are of fundamental importance to modern society. Family and kinship networks are where children grow up and receive their primary socialization. A family is a group of people directly linked by kinship connections. Ideally, families are characterized by affection, care and companionship, and provide their members with love and intimate relationships, helping them to feel protected, secure and satisfied. Indubitably, families are also pivotal in the reproduction of status positions. Children inherit a social position because of a distinct family background, i.e. the socioeconomic status and prestige of their ancestors.

Institutions in the realm of education and training provide for the transmission and cultivation of knowledge, abilities and specialized skills, and for the broadening of the individual horizon. They can also be seen as instruments for the secondary socialization of individuals. These institutions can operate in myriad social settings. To oversimplify: one can distinguish between formal schooling and education by adults and family members, and personal experience or experience within friendship networks. Like other social institutions, formal institutions in the realm of education and training have manifest and latent functions. Among the manifest functions are the transmitting/learning of (foreign) language skills, mathematical and natural-scientific competencies, and knowledge in the areas of economics, geography, history and government. Among the latent functions are transmitting cultural codes, maintaining social control and social hierarchy, and promoting social integration. Clearly, educational and training institutions and the content transmitted through them are societally contested terrain. The questions negotiated herewith include: What kind of values should underpin educational institutions? What kind of education should we promote and how? And should all children learn the same curriculum regardless of differences in gender, ethnicity and wealth?

Economic and labor market institutions are also critically important to modern societies. Their function is to provide an environment that ensures the production and distribution of goods and services. In all societies, work is the basis of human existence. The nature of a society’s economic institutions depends on both its level of technological development and the extent of government regulation of the economy. In market driven, capitalist societies, the primary economic institution is private property, in particular private ownership of the means of production, and the main incentive for economic activity is the accumulation of individual profit and wealth. The enduring,
densely interwoven behavioral and relationship patterns in the economic sphere are strongly shaped by conflicts between interest groups representing employees and the owners of capital. Institutional actors in the economic sphere negotiate working conditions and hours, compensation, occupational mobility, hiring and firing.

The existence and exercise of power and hegemony are common to all human societies. Critical decisions about how to utilize resources and how to allocate goods are always relegated to distinct groups of people. Institutions in this realm essentially have two functions: protection against external threats, and upholding of the internal social order. The densely interwoven, enduring behavioral and relationship patterns in this realm can be realized by various social actors. Parties, unions, trade associations and other civil-societal organizations are just as integral to society’s power relations as are individuals, lobbying groups and large enterprises. Power relations can be highly conflictual. In developed capitalist societies, not until the widespread introduction of democratic and welfare-state institutions was the primary societal power conflict – namely class conflict – largely pacified.

Institutions in the domains of culture, media and religion are responsible for the transmission of contexts of meaning, value orientations and symbolic codes. For centuries, religious institutions had a monopoly here. In the 20th century, institutions in the spheres of mass media and cultural production began to convey values, norms and symbolic codes, reaching broad segments of the population.

A final point concerns the question of institutional emergence, continuity and change. Consensus reigns among social scientists that institutions are not static. Processes of institutionalization and deinstitutionalization of behavioral and relationship patterns occur continuously. Over time, then, the meaning of institutions changes. They can also be a locus of social change. For example, the institution of the family has undergone fundamental change since the middle of the 20th century, with family forms becoming highly differentiated. Alongside the traditional middle class Christian family model which linked sexuality, cohabitation and child-rearing in a clearly defined form – namely marriage – a range of new family household forms have emerged. Here, the spectrum ranges from households led by unmarried lone parents, to homosexual households (with or without a certificate of marriage or civil union), to patchwork families, to so-called DINKs (double income no kids). The institution of the family has survived despite – many would say primarily because – of this process of ongoing transformation, and it continues to play a vital role in modern societies. Similarly, the institution of the church/religion has undergone a transformation in its meaning and function. In pre-modern societies, the production and transmission of new knowledge was one of the central functions of religious institutions, alongside the propagation of value orientations and cultural codes. In modernity, educational institutions have completely taken over the first task. The church has limited itself to its core mission of imparting meaning and interpreting the world. However, institutions in the cultural and media spheres have increasingly become competitors to the church in this realm. At the same time, modern societies have witnessed a marked differentiation of religious practices and a growing pluralism of world religions.

Cross References

→ Education

→ Class
References


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