**SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS: MEANING, CHARACTERISTICS, PROCESS OF EMERGENCE AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETY**

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**Background**

The need to holistically understand social groups or society is of primary concern to sociology. In this task, the discipline engages herself in a systematic process of analysis which cut across various aspects of society. It looks at the nature and dynamics of diverse socio-cultural attributes of different societies. These include patterns of social interaction, belief systems, norms, values and social roles required in specified social positions etc. Also of crucial importance to the discipline is the examination of types, character and functions of the major parts of the social structure without which social organization and social functioning of the society will be defective. Among those critical organs that enable society experience cohesion and stability are her social institutions. Such institutions form the bedrock for a meaningful social existence and provide guiding templates for social processes in society. Indeed, the social system is essentially made up of social institutions which represent the engine house or heart beat of society.

**Meaning of the Concept of Social Institutions**

The concept of institution has been regularly used among scholars to describe cherished socio-cultural landmarks of groups, time –honoured traditions or ancestral structures and sites. However, sociologists view social institutions in broader perspective as complex social relationships among people directed toward satisfying basic needs, including the rules governing those relationships. According to Nnatu (2007) a social institution is a recognized normative pattern, a system of required, concerted, co-operative and reciprocal relationships and practices whereby people concerned tend to satisfy their individual and social needs.

Igbo (2003) notes that a society has basic needs of procreation, training of member, transmission of culture, provision of food, shelter and clothing as well as allocation of power and maintenance of order. According to him, society creates the institutions of the family, education, polity, economy and religion to cater to such needs. On their part, Schaefer and Lamm (1997) defined social institutions as organized patterns of beliefs and behaviour centered on basic social needs. They re-affirmed that institutions are organized in response to particular needs such as replacing personnel (family), and preserving order (the government).

It could be concluded therefore, that social institution constitute an enduring system of norms, values, statuses, roles, internal clusters of people (groups), regulative principles and culture which organize behaviour toward fulfilling some basic and recurring human needs. They ensure perpetuation of those necessary and acceptable aspects of social life and are very essential for overall survival of society. Social institutions are part and parcel of the culture of the people. Although, groups or associations constitute part of social institutions, the concept of social institutions represents both groups and processes or patterns of beliefs and practices peculiar to the group.

**Characteristics of Social Institutions**

From the definitions and explanations discussed above, we can summarize the characteristics of social institutions as follows:

1. They consist of norms, values, rules regulating conduct, roles, sanctions, rewards, organized patterns of belief, clusters of people etc.
2. They are centered on basic social needs and survival of society. This means that they specifically address functional prerequisites of distinct parts of society.
3. They are well organized and do not haphazardly emerge and or applied.
4. They function in an established, stable and predictable manner.
5. They represent standardized pattern of behaviour and procedure which differentiate distinct segments of human social life from others (Otite and Ogionwo 1979; Perl, 1977).
6. Social institutions are relatively enduring in nature rather than being short lived or temporal.
7. Aggregate of social institutions constitute the social system.
8. Social institutions are like other parts of human body. Each has its particular set of functions but all are related to the whole. They constitute in the process, a social corpus (social body) of formalized and integrated roles.
9. Social institutions are nexus of roles.

**Process of Emergence of Social Institutions in Society**

Social institutions constitute integral part of the culture of the people. Like other aspects of culture, they emerge and develop as members of society seek solutions to every day problems arising from their physical and social environments (Igbo 2003).In other words, as people search for practical ways of meeting their needs, they often settle for some workable patterns which through repetitions become standardized customs with guiding rules and procedures that may be codified in written forms and recognized by all.

Social institutions do not emerge spontaneously nor consist of experimental behaviour. They are deliberate, time –tested, well established and consistent patterns of behaviour and response typical of the social structure of a particular group or society. Institutionalization gives rise to patterned, regular, standardized and predictable social behaviour in prescribed situations with appropriate sanctions for deviants.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Roles of Social Institutions in Society**

The relevance or role of social institutions could be examined in the context of three sociological theories. These are functionalism, interactionism and conflict viewpoints.

Functionalist theorists in sociology emphasize how social institutions fulfill essential functions for the survival of society. They see the institutions as necessary and desirable to all. They identified five major tasks or functional prerequisites, that a society or relatively permanent group must accomplish through her social institution if the society is to survive. Egbue and Edokobi (2002) summarized such tasks or functional prerequisites and their associated social institutions as shown in the Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** **Functional Prerequisites of Society and Their Associated Social Institutions.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Functional Prerequisites** | **Social Institutions** |
| Replacing Personnel | Family, Government (Immigration) |
| Teaching New Recruits | Family (Basic Skills)  Economy (Occupations)  Education (Schools)  Religion (Sacred Teachings) |
| Producing and Processing | Family (Food Processing)  Economy  Government (Regulations) regarding Health care commerce |
| Preserving Order | Family (Child Rearing Regulations)  Government  Religion (Morals) |
| Providing and Maintaining sense of Purpose. | Government (Patriotism)  Religion |

**Source:** Egbue N.G. & Edokobi, A.C. (Eds.) (2002) Sociology: An Introduction. Enugu; Oktek Publishers.

It is noteworthy that to functionalists, social institutions are not mere responses to social needs but indispensable tools through which society discharge her functional prerequisites and guarantee her survival over time.

Conflict theorists in sociology accept that social institutions are organized to meet basic social needs but reject the functionalist position that the outcome of institutionalization is necessarily efficient and desirable (Schaefer and Lamm, 1997). To conflict theorists, social institutions accommodate inherent biases and inequity that help to maintain the priviledges of the upper class and the subservient position of others. They frown that social institutions like religion, education and polity have inherent conservative postures which shield imbalances in opportunity across social segments of society. They also frowned at the dysfunctional view of social change by functionalists and preferred that social institutions or other aspects of the social structure which operate in unfair and discriminatory manner should not be preserved in society.

Interactionist theorists emphasize that social behaviour is conditioned by the roles and statuses which individuals accept, groups to which they belong and the institutions within which they function. They submit that social institutions affect daily lives of individuals to the extent that their everyday behaviour is governed by such institutions.

In summary, the different theoretical platforms do not contest the relevance of social institutions in meeting the needs of society. They however differ in their interpretations of how such institutions affect behaviour and opportunities of individuals and groups within the social structure. While functionalists see institutions as necessary and desirable to all, conflict theorists argue that they serve particularly the interest of the priviledged class. They perpetuate the control and subjugation of other groups in society. Interactionists on the other hand explain behaviour as being conditioned by social institutions and other social attributes within which people function.

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**TYPES AND FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN SOCIETY**

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**Types of Social Institutions**

There are five basic social institutions which could be identified in all human societies whether primitive or modern (Igbo 2003, Nnatu 2007, Nonyelu 2009). These are the family, educational, economic, political and religious institutions. Rose, Glazer and Glazer (1976) however observed that in tribal and preindustrial societies, members lack functional specialization and their activities or roles are not restricted to any of the five basic social institutions. According to them, in such societies, functional pre-requisites of social institutions are not only fluid across institutions, but are also discharged by same group of individuals mostly at the family level.

On the other hand, industrial societies require high degree of specialization of their members. Consequently, the family group in such societies is located in the home; the educational functions are carried out in schools; religious functions in places of worship; economic functions in factories, offices, shops and markets; and political or government functions in city halls, police stations, court houses, legislative houses etc. The lack of functional limitation or boundary which differentiated social institutions of pre-industrial societies from those of industrialized groups is not their only points of departure.

Schaefer and Lamm (1997) identified the mass media and health care system as other social institutions that operate alongside the five basic ones in the United States. This suggests that more social institutions emerge as society experiences advancements and institutionalizes (structures) activities of desired sectors into patterned, regular and predictable forms. In this sense, advanced industrialized societies are likely to have elaborate list of social institutions than poorly organized or less industrialized groups.

**Functions of Social Institutions in Society**

**The Family Institution**

Although sociologists may approach the definition of family from diverse perspectives, they all agree that the family is a very important social institution. It is found in all societies although its form may vary from one culture to another, and across different epochs within one culture. A family is a bio-social group united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption and primarily responsible for procreation, socialization of the new born and for other human needs. It constitutes a microcosm, a corner stone and foundation of society.

The family unit is vital to the daily lives of most individuals in society. It contributes significantly to the maintenance of society and transmission of any society’s culture to its new generation.

There are several view points on the origin of the family. For Kathleen Gough, the family emerged more than two million years ago. She traced family life of man to social and physical lives of man’s closest relatives like apes and monkeys. The bible account locates the origin of the family to God’s creation of Adam and Eve as first parents of man. They lived in companionship and raised children in line with realities of the definition of a family. On their part, evolutionary theorists argue that family and marriage evolved through a lineal process that ran through promiscuity, group marriage, polyandry up to the present stage of monogamy. However, Marxist perspective championed by Marx and Engels (1972), original publication 1884) had a contrary view. They contended that the family arose in response to the development of private property and inheritance. In their opinion, private property and the desire of men to pass on their belongings to their own children not only define the origin and persistence of the family in society, but also fuels her critical role in the reproduction of the capitalist system.

There are two major types of the family. The **nuclear family**, also called conjugal family consists of an adult couple and their unmarried children living together. The other type is the **extended family** in which relatives in addition to parents and their children live together or close to one another. An extended family consists of several nuclear families united by social ties of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, children, wives, husbands, parents and grand parents etc. The structure of the extended family enables it to fulfill basic functions of the family better than her nuclear counterparts. For instance, the presence of more adults facilitates effective child care and socialization (Egbue 2002). Also, crises situations like death, divorce and illness involve less strain for family members since there are more people who can provide assistance and emotional support (Scheafer and Lamm, 1997). Presence of large number of family members in the extended family arrangement might as in traditional agricultural societies boost prosperity. This is because as it means more hands to work the farms and more sources of economic support to members in difficult situation. Nonetheless, frequent intra-family conflicts are often experienced in extended than nuclear families and this could also be counter productive.

Despite differences in family type, sociologists acknowledge the universality of the family unit in one form or the other in all human society. They also recognize the declining prominence of the family in modern times with gross erosion of its cherished functions and stability.

**Functions of the Family**

The family fulfills the following functions in society:

1. **Procreation –** The family contributes to human survival through its function of reproduction.
2. **Socialization –** Parents and older members of the family consciously and unconsciously act as role models, transmitting in the process, behaviours, values, attitudes, norms, languages and totality of roles appropriate to one’s social position.
3. **Social Control –** The family is a foremost agent of social control. It equips individuals with responsible participation and appropriate ways of realizing goals without recourse to deviance or threat to public peace and security.
4. **Status Placement –** One’s initial social identity and class position in society is related to the family he or she was born into. Such ascribed status may however not persist throughout life.
5. **Protection/Security –** The family undertake the ultimate responsibility of protection of children and other members. It guarantees them security needed to realize their potentials even in difficult situations.
6. **Love and Companionship –** The family provides members with attention, warmth and intimate relationships. These enable them to feel satisfied, have a sense of belonging and emotional stability to surmount the challenges of life individually and collectively.
7. **Economic Support/Sustenance –** The family was originally the basic economic unit. Today, economic survival of the society still derives energy from the labour contributed by members of the family. There is enormous complimentary relationship between the family and the economic institution.
8. **Regulation of Sexual Behaviour –** Standard of sexual behaviour are most clearly defined and maintained within the family group. Individuals are trained to satisfy their sexual urge within limits set by society.
9. **Physical Maintenance of the Young and the Aged –** The family provide care, nurture and protection of the young. It also bears substantial responsibility of caring for aged members until their death.

**The Economic Institution**

The economic institution, often simply referred to as “the economy” is responsible for the production, exchange, distribution and consumption of goods and services in society. It could also be called **economic system**, a term which refers to the social institution through which goods and services are produced, distributed and consumed in society. The ultimate aim is the satisfaction of economic and bio-social needs of society through rational use of limited resources available. Basic among the economic needs of society are food, clothing and shelter.

The economic institution has strong link with other institutions of society. Its character impact on social behaviour and influences the nature of other social institutions. Goods, services and fund from the economic sector are indeed essential for survival of society and its institutions. In recognition of the immense importance of economic institution, Marx described it as the foundation or ‘infrastructure’ upon which other social institutions which he collectively defined as ‘superstructures’ revolve. It is noteworthy however, that the economic institution is in turn influenced by other social institutions.

There are a variety of forms which the economic institution or system have taken in history across societies. Such diverse modes of economic organization practiced over the years by different societies were influenced by several factors including the level of technology at their disposal for tasks of production and distribution.

Among preindustrial societies, Egbue (2002) identified and discussed the following economic systems which sequentially emerged among the people.

1. **Hunting and Gathering Societies:** These are the earliest form of economic system. It was composed of small groups of people related to one another who constantly migrate in search of food. They had minimal technology and lacked division of labour. Also, there was little inequality in terms of material goods. The basis for social differentiation was ascribed characteristics as gender, age and family background.
2. **Horticultural Societies:** They were less nomadic and planted seeds and crops with the aid of digging sticks and hoes. Technology remained limited. This economic system which emerged more than 900 years ago achieved some social surplus in food production to meet the needs of those not engaged in agriculture. This development gave room for specialization in other tasks within horticultural societies.
3. **Agrarian societies:** It is the last stage of pre-industrial development. Members primarily engaged in production of food enhanced by technological innovations and bounteous harvest. Division of labour and specialization was more extensive.

On the other hand, industrial societies according to Dushkin (1991) are societies that rely chiefly on mechanization for production of their goods and services. This is in contrast to post-industrial societies which are technologically advanced nations whose economic system have shifted from manufacturing to service industries with processing and control of information at centre stage. Industries may however be categorized as primary, secondary or tertiary. At onset of industrialization in a society, production is usually at primary industrial stage.

According to Scheafer and Lamm (1997), contemporary industrial societies are characterized by two competing economic systems of capitalism and socialism.

1. **Capitalism.** This is an economic system in which the means of production are largely in private hands and the main incentive for economic activity is accumulation of profits (Rosenberg, 1991). There are two major variants of capitalism related to the degree to which private ownership, profit making and economic activity are regulated by government. These are the laissez faire model where there is minimal government intervention and the contemporary model where extensive government regulation of economic relations is the rule. Capitalist systems may also differ in terms of the extent to which monopoly and free enterprise system are allowed.
2. **Socialism.** In socialist economic system, the means of production and distribution in society are collectively, rather than privately owned. It is intended to eliminate economic exploitation, meet people’s needs and does not emphasize profits. Government occupies a central position in planning economic activities. She exercises maximum control on what and how to produce. There is also a deep commitment to social service programmes in socialist economies. It is noteworthy that communism as a final stage of socialism anticipated by Karl Marx is yet to materialize in any nation.
3. **Mixed Economy.** This is an economic system that is partly capitalist and partly socialist. In this model, free enterprise systems are punctuated by deliberate government controls of aspects of the economy. Such economies allow big corporations, petty businesses, and social security and welfare measures with considerable government regulation.

**Functions of the Economic Institution**

Irrespective of the economic system in place in a society, the expected functions could be summarized as follows.

1. To promote physical wellbeing of members through economic arrangements that ensure shelter, clothing and prompt satisfaction of other economic and bio-social needs.
2. To manage the scarce resources of society in the most prudent manner possible.
3. To distribute goods and services across socio-cultural and geographical divides with minimal disadvantages to social groups.
4. To strive and maintain smooth, synergistic link with other social institutions for effective functioning of society.

**The Political Institution**

Man is a political animal; hence sociologists see politics, government or political system as a cardinal feature of every society. Irrespective of their size, all social groups have members with powers to control others and to entrench order in their domain. There were forms of political organization even among stateless societies that cut-across kin-group meetings, age-set command, gerontocracy, royal court, women groups etc. All these constitute aspects of political systems.

A political system refer to a set of rules and some apparatus for keeping social order, distributing power and allowing decisions to be made in a society. The ultimate aim of the system is the achievement of set goals of the group.

The issues of ‘power’ and ‘authority’ are central to all political systems. While power is the ability to manipulate others with or without their consent, authority is the formally recognized right to exercise power (Rose, Glazer and Glazer, 1976).

Weber (1947) distinguished between traditional authority conferred by custom and accepted practice; legal-rational authority made legitimate by law, and charismatic authority which is power legitimized by the charisma of the individual.

Among traditional societies of Africa, two major types of political systems – centralized and uncentralized models were distinguished. While centralized political system had identifiable centralized authority, including administrative and judicial structures, the uncentralized arrangements of hunting and gathering societies or some segmentary lineage groups lacked them.

Contemporary modern societies operate political systems like democracy, totalitarianism, monarchy, parliamentary system etc.In democracy, participation of the masses, equality, justice, accountability, free and fair election are emphasized. This is unlike in monarchy where a family rules for generations. Totalitarianism on its part is a restrictive political form that estranges the people from governance.

**Functions of Political Institution**

1. It is responsible for day to day administration and maintenance of law and order in society.
2. It makes, interprets and enforces rules and regulations/laws in her area of authority.
3. It protects lives and properties of members of the society from internal and external threats.
4. It maintains relations on behalf of members of a society, with other social groups for mutual benefit of the two groups.
5. It is a veritable tool for harvest of public opinion and decision making in society.

**The Religious Institution**

Religion refers to the way people behave in seeking answers to the ultimate questions posed in life. Durkheim (1947) sees it as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. Religion is found throughout the world. It is characterized in each case by unique set of elements, beliefs, practices, emotions, rituals and organization.

All forms of religion whether Jewish, Christian, Moslem and traditional African type provide explanations to why we exist, why we succeed or fail and why we die etc. They also attend to sacred and profane (ordinary) issues, situations and events.

**Functions of Religion in Society**

1. Religion serves integrative roles in society by offering people the meaning and purpose for their lives. It promotes solidarity and social cohesion.
2. It is instrumental for achievement of social control of members of the society. This is because religious injunctions bear much relationship to secular laws which prohibit theft, rape, stealing, murder etc.
3. Religion defines the spiritual world and gives meaning to why man exists and his ultimate fate thereafter.
4. Religion performs the latent function of serving as meeting points for unattached members and expanding social contacts /associations of attached members.
5. Religion is a veritable source of social support, control of stress and for psychological stability. Births, deaths, marriages, calamities or disasters are normally responded to with religious rituals. Such rituals enable individuals understand, accept and cope with realities of such events.
6. Religion could also promote social change. This depends on which values, norms and aspirations that are being propagated by religious groups. The protestant ethics was identified by Weber (1956) to have propelled the spirit capitalism.

**The Educational Institution**

Education is a formal process in which some people consciously teach while others adopt the social role of learner (Scheafer and Lamm 1997). It can also be described as the channel of transmitting new ideas, values, moral, skills, knowledge and norms cherished by society. In this context, education has strong links with socialization.

Education is also viewed as a social institution because it comprises that segment of the basic social structure which meets the educational needs of society (Igbo, 2003). This suggests that educational institution contains within it a set of values, norms, sanctions, procedures and beliefs which guide the functioning of the educational sector in society.

**Functions of Education in Society**

1. Education fulfills socialization and cultural transmission functions. It serves as a bridge that link younger and older generations.
2. Formal education is a very useful instrument for social and indeed, national integration. In plural societies like Nigeria, teaching of history, geography and shared cultural beliefs could foster sense of oneness among her heterogeneous peoples.
3. Education serves as a tool for manpower development and for screening and selection of individuals for positions in society.
4. The educational system is a custodian of children. It protects them during work hours thus enabling parents to commit their energies to other profitable ventures.
5. Education serves society as a forum for citizenship training of future leaders.
6. Educational institutions are the engine houses for innovation in society. They develop new knowledge and skills that benefit society.

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