Hello, and welcome to Sociological Studies. In this lesson, we're going to be talking about the structural-functional approach in more detail. So let's just start by defining the structural-functional approach.

The structural-functional approach is a theoretical approach that sees society as a complex and interconnected system, whose individual parts work in concert to promote stability and harmony in the system as a whole. Again, let's return to the metaphor of our bodies to help make this clear. Each organ in our bodies has a function to promote the overall well-being of our health. You can't take away one organ and expect to still be healthy. Heart needs to pump the blood. Your brain needs to do the thinking. Your liver and kidneys do the purifying, things like that. If one of them goes away, the whole system fails.

That's how structural-functionalists will look at society in the same way. Each part of society has a function that contributes to the maintenance of society as a whole. So these parts of society then are called structures. Each structure has a function.

We can define a social structure as any stable pattern of social behavior. Think routine, and that can be big or small, for instance, getting married. That's a stable pattern of social behavior. That's a structure. Or it can also be, Americans like to watch football on Sundays. That's a stable pattern of social behavior. We do that. That's also a structure. So again, it's helpful to think of these things as routines.

And finally, a social function is an act that contributes to the maintenance of a structure. So you can think about acts that might contribute to the maintenance of a marriage, being nice to your partner, not cheating on them, being faithful, things like that. These are functions that keep the structure going.

If you look on the board here behind me, I've sort of laid out how society can be mapped in this way. We have society in the middle, it's web-like. We have all of these different interconnections. We have the economy, capitalism, marriage and family, religion, law, courts, punishment. We have culture. We have education and finally, politics and government. They all work together.

Our education system socializes us and teaches how to be members of the society, to obey laws, that participate in society and politics, that get jobs and contribute to the economy. Some sociologists have even said that religion is essential for capitalism to function. Religion helped develop the work habits and ethics that promote capitalism. So religion connects to the economy. It connects to the family. It connects to our culture.

Even things you might think that are bad things, like deviants and crime, contribute to the overall maintenance of the system, as well. I mean, think about all those public displays of punishment. That's a reminder to the rest of us
that you have to obey by the rules, and the system will keep functioning. Otherwise, if you don’t, things will come apart.

So it's really helpful in this approach to think of society as web-like. That's the image I want you to take away of the structural-functional approach. Society is one big web made up of individual structures that each have a function to keep the entire system going.

So what sociologists working within this perspective will do, the first task is to identify the various structures and then from there begin to investigate each of their functions. As you can see then, this is a macro level view of society. Structural-functionalists are working with a macro orientation. We're not down on a level of individual interactions here. We're up on the level of social structures. We're talking about how aggregated patterns of behavior combine to make social structures, which then have functions for society. So again this is a macro orientation.

French sociologist Emile Durkheim was a prominent figure who was working within this tradition. Durkheim lived from 1858 to 1917. He was hugely influential in sociology. He was regarded by many as one of the big theorists in sociology.

So Durkheim gave us this idea of a social fact, which we’ll define as a phenomenon arising from collective consensus, or our norms, our values, and our mores. So for instance, our laws. We collectively, as a society, decided that we value people who are honest. We don't like thieves.

So suppose you are poor. You need to feed your family. You go to the store. You try to steal some bread. Maybe that's morally permissible in your eyes, but the collective has decided that no, you can't do that. So these social facts make themselves felt in your life when you try to go around them, they push back on you. So that's what was happening in this case when you were stealing.

In addition to social facts, Durkheim wrote a great book called *On Suicide*. What Durkheim did in *Suicide* is he looked at suicide rates for countries in Europe, and he broke them down by sub-groups, which is the rate of suicide for men, the rate of suicide for women. He broke it down by religion, the rate of suicide for Protestants, the rate of suicide for Catholics. For the married and the unmarried.

And he found, actually, that the more socially integrated you were, the stronger your ties, the more stability you had in your life, the less likely you were to commit suicide. So what Durkheim did in this study then was to take the most ostensibly individual act of suicide and give it a collective basis. So really it's all about stability, social ties, strength, and harmony of the society. When those things are happening, people aren't killing themselves, according to Durkheim.
As always, thank you for joining me today as we talked about the structural-functional approach and sociologist Emile Durkheim and his ideas on suicide and social facts. I hope you have a great rest of the day. Thank you.