FUNCTIONALISM

Type of sociology: Origins and definitions of sociology
Field of study: Sociological perspectives and principles

Functionalism is a major theory in sociology for analyzing and understanding certain social relationships. This perspective attempts to explain why and how certain social structures work in society by ascertaining their function.

Principal terms

ANOMIE: a condition of confusion that exists in both the individual and society because of weak or absent social norms
CONFLICT THEORY: a social theory that focuses on tension and strain as a natural state within the social system
DYSFUNCTION: a negative consequence which may lead to disruption or breakdown of the social system
LATENT FUNCTION: an unrecognized or unintended consequence
MACROSCIOLOGY: the level of sociological analysis that is concerned with large-scale social issues, institutions, and processes
MANIFEST FUNCTION: the intended or obvious consequences
MICROSCIOLOGY: the level of sociological analysis concerned with small-scale group dynamics

Overview

The sociological agenda throughout much of the twentieth century has been empirically rooted, and this approach has generated an abundance of research facts and figures. Empirical information remains useless, however, unless its meaning is discerned; this is the purpose of a theory. It organizes a set of concepts in a meaningful way by explaining the relationship among them. Theories thus make the “facts” of social life understandable by explaining cause and effect relationships.

Functional theory is one of the central sociological perspectives that is concerned with explaining large-scale social structures and relationships. In other works, it is one of the principal approaches of macrosociology. Functionalists attempt to explain why certain conditions exist in society by trying to ascertain their purpose—their function. This type of approach is used extensively, even dominantly, in all the social sciences as well as in many of the natural sciences, biology in particular. In sociology, the functionalist approach—examining how things work to meet people’s needs and to promote social consensus—is contrasted primarily with conflict theory, which emphasizes the struggle and strain among different groups within society.

Sociologists use the functionalist perspective (sometimes called structural functionalism) to explain why social institutions such as the family take on a certain form or structure within a given society. It is assumed that for something to exist it must have
a purpose within the social system. The premise underlying this assumption is that if
the social institution served to purpose in its existing state it would either change to
accommodate new social conditions or would simply cease to exist.

This question of why certain institutions or patterns of relationships exist in society
was formulated by the French social philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who
has been called the founder of sociology. Comte developed the basic organic analogy
that was extended and popularized by the British sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-
1903), who drew parallels to the theories of the naturalist Charles Darwin (1809-1882).
Darwin theorized that, over time, biological species adapt and change to survive as
environmental conditions change. Spencer related Darwin’s thesis to societies.
Spencer’s theory states that all the parts of the social system, like the parts of the human
body, have a fit or function and connect to the whole; if one part of the system changes,
the change will influence other parts of the system to change. Thus, as the family
begins to change because of social changes in the environment (for example, the shift
from an agrarian society to an industrial society), so too must the other social
institutions (political, educational, and religious) change, leading to a realignment of
all the social institutions so that they all “fit” the new social order.

The functionalist school of sociology has from its inception been concerned with
how society adapts and changes. The classic evolutionary view sees changes occurring
slowly, allowing for adaptation and realignment of the various interrelated social
institutions. A society which changes too rapidly is likely to experience structural
misalignment in which parts of the system do not fit snugly together, leading to
confusion or anomie for the society’s members. Theoretically at least, the component
parts of the system will eventually mesh, and the expected harmonious interconnection
of social institutions will again be achieved.

This classic evolutionary adaptation of social systems has never posed a problem
for functionalists, since such change tends to occur without disrupting the existing
social system. More cataclysmic, conflictive forms of change, however, have chal-
lenged functionalist explanations because they tend to lead to social disharmony. This
problem was addressed in various forms by sociologists from Max Weber (1864-1920)
and Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) to Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) and Robert K.
Merton (b. 1910).

The concept of viewing even disruptive change as functional may be used as a
simplistic though straightforward summation of latter-twentieth century functional-
ism. Change, whether internal (such as recessions or depressions) or external (war),
causes strain, throwing the existing system into a state of disequilibrium. Prolonged
strain cannot be endured without the society suffering considerable damage. The
destructive impact of prolonged stress on the human body, both physical and mental,
has been well documented, and functionalists extend the same premise to society. They
see society moving to restore balance or harmony (the “natural” social condition). The
restored system, however, may be markedly different from the old. In other words,
social change is a natural evolutionary process, and while it may sometimes be painful,
it helps the system adapt and adjust to new social conditions; it is therefore functional.
For Parsons, social strain was natural; strain is the painful adjustment which results from society's continued growth, inevitably making each successive social stage more complex than earlier ones. This increased complexity causes tension. Merton took into consideration the idea that not everything which happens in society leads to equilibrium; indeed, Merton points out that certain changes, while beneficial for some, may be dysfunctional for others. Nevertheless, he maintains that these dysfunctions may be beneficial if one distinguishes between manifest functions, which are stated or intended, and latent functions, which are unintended or hidden. Competition provides an excellent example of Merton's thesis. Economic competition is often lopsided, with clear winners and losers, but competition also leads to benefits for the consumer, who gets improved products at reduced cost (latent function). In the process the winner, by building the "better mousetrap," reaps rewards in enhanced profits (manifest function). Yet from the competitive loser's vantage point, competition is seen as dysfunctional, since they did not benefit.

**Applications**

Functionalism primarily deals with large social units and attempts to understand how these units are interrelated. Functionalists work from a premise that these units strive to maintain a balance: order, equilibrium, homeostasis. As such, the social institution is connected to society and adapts to changes in the social environment. Two examples may be utilized to illustrate this connection. The first traces the normal evolutionary processes of adaption in the social institution of sports; the second examines the more disruptive but functional place of revolutions.

In the preindustrial, agrarian society of the early nineteenth century, sports fit the social environment: fishing, hunting, boating, cockfighting, foot racing, and other activities rooted to the land and water dominated. As the social environment began to change in the mid-nineteenth century, people moved from rural areas and adopted an urban, industrial way of life. Cities had a larger population base from which to draw, so arena and stadium sporting events replaced local sporting activities, giving rise to soccer, football, baseball, and boxing. Spectator sports replaced participatory sports, because industrialization required specialization and people no longer had either the time or talent to devote to sports; however, they did have more disposable income and could pay to see sporting events that had formerly been participatory and free.

As the twentieth century progressed, technological changes prompted adaption in sports. Radio and then television made stadium crowds unnecessary, either to generate income or to reach sports fans. Broadcasting made sports a mass event, no longer confined to particular cities and soon reaching tens of millions of listeners and viewers. Football, as well as most major sports, has been altered by the media; for example, time outs have increased to allow time for television advertising. The game time has thus been substantially extended. Other sports that have traditionally garnered only a small audience, such as tennis and golf, have received more coverage and risen in prestige, and more amateurs have become interested in the games. In addition, sporting forms which have previously not existed have been developed for television. One
example in the late 1980's was a program called *American Gladiators*, in which athletes competed in a staged series of tests of strength and endurance in an atmosphere that was part carnival, part game show.

Sports, then, has changed; it has evolved as social conditions (notably urbanization and technology) have changed, and changes in sports have largely taken place without major disruption in other interrelated parts of the social system. The racial integration of sports has proceeded at a pace that reflects racial integration in other social institutions, such as education, politics, and the military, all of which took their first major strides toward integration during the 1950's. Similarly, the entrance of women into sports, as well as the increased attention paid to women's sports in the 1980's and 1990's, paralleled the general social movement of women as they entered the American workforce and political arena in increasing numbers during this period.

Changes in macropolitics are sometimes less harmonious. Revolutions are extraordinarily disruptive. They typically result in major upheavals and radical changes in all existing institutional arrangements. The American Revolution occurred in 1776; the French in 1789; the Russian in 1917. Germany underwent major political shifts between 1880 and 1910, though not marked by the same degree of violence. In other words, many of the major Western powers experienced radical political reform over a relatively short historical period, moving from monarchy systems to predominantly parliamentary forms of government. Such political "facts" require interpretation. Classic organic functionalism cannot explain this widespread social upheaval because the evolutionary process was not allowed to take its "natural" course. More contemporary forms of functionalism (Parsons, Merton) help in understanding the functional aspect of disruptive change.

The old monarchy systems were rooted in the feudal period, and they were once beneficial. Under the feudal system, the nobility protected the outlying agrarian populace from marauding bands. The peasant paid for this protection by providing the nobility with food and other services. Over time, the monarchy system decayed and became corrupt, providing fewer services for the populace. Ultimately, this resulted in forced change. The revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that swept Western Europe and North America were the result of corrupt, unresponsive systems of government (those of George III, Louis XVI, and Czar Nicholas in England, France, and Russia, respectively). Disruptive as these periods of strife were, they were necessary (functional) in moving the society from an agrarian monarchy system of government to an industrial and parliamentary one.

The industrial age requires adaptation and change, and entrenched parties in power (such as monarchies) are notoriously resistant to change. Parliamentary systems are thus more functional in the modern age. Great Britain, were the parliamentary system first arose in the aftermath of the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century, was the first nation to industrialize and became an early economic world leader. More recently, Japan’s powerful monarchy was replaced by a parliamentary system after World War II, and Japan has since taken its place among the world’s economic giants. Those countries which have lagged industrially have been totalitarian, most notably
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functional analysis to assess the role of the functional perspective for the second half of the twentieth century.
Sorokin, Pitirim. *The Sociology of Revolution*. New York: Howard Fertig, 1967. Sorokin acknowledges the economic conflict thesis but goes beyond this to show how social institutions are interrelated and to argue that revolution is a necessary and recurring step in maintaining societal equilibrium.
Turner, Jonathan. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 5th ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1991. The best and most detailed analysis in overview format of the difficult theories of Talcott Parsons (chapter 3) and Robert Merton (chapter 4). Turner also assesses the functionalist aspect of other perspectives: neofunctionalism (chapter 5), general systems functionalism (chapter 6), ecological functionalism (chapter 7), and biological functionalism (chapter 8).
White, Harrison, and Cynthia White. *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. The Whites examine the rise of Impressionism as a dominant art form during the nineteenth century. Though not specifically labeled as a functionalist analysis, their work clearly shows the interconnectedness of social institutions and how the shift from one school (the Royal Academy) was beneficial for the artists and art patrons.

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Cross-References

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