

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Theory and Methods

Unit M1: Functionalism

Introduction

The main purpose of these Notes is to provide a basic overview of different sociological perspectives. Each set of notes is organised around three basic themes:

1. **A brief overview of the perspective.**
2. **An outline of the “basic principles” on which each perspective is based.**
3. **A brief evaluation of the perspective.**

These Notes are, therefore, intended to serve as a general introduction to different perspectives, although they may also be used as revision notes.

Structural Functionalism: Overview

The Functionalist perspective is a variant of **Structuralist sociology** and, as such, we can initially characterise it as a form of Macro sociological theorising.

In basic terms, the main theoretical question addressed by sociologists working within the Functionalist perspective is that of:

How do social systems ("societies") hold together?

Like many other sociologists working within other perspectives, Functionalists have initially concentrated upon two ideas that are closely related to the above:

1. How is order maintained in any society?
2. What are the main sources of stability in any society?

As you might imagine - given that the theoretical emphasis seems to be placed on rather **grand questions** about the nature of "**society**" - Functionalist sociologists are **not** particularly concerned with the examination of **individual ideas, meanings and interpretations**.

What they do tend to **emphasise**, however, is the idea that the basis of **social order** is to be found in **shared values / consensus** (hence this perspective sometimes being referred-to as "**Consensus Structuralism**").

When looking at varieties of Functionalist sociology, it is clear that all begin with an elaboration of two major concepts:

1. Social System:

"Society" is seen as an organised structure (or framework) of inter-related parts (called "**Institutions**").

2. Social Structure:

This refers to the specific framework around which any society is based (in effect, social structure refers to the specific ways in which various **institutions** are related to one another on a functional basis).

To develop these ideas, I've noted that the concept of "**social institution**" is central to this perspective and an institution can be loosely defined as:

A broad pattern of shared, stable, social relationships.

In this sense, an institution involves large-scale, organised, behaviour patterns that persist over time. Examples in our society include:

**Family,
Work,
Education,
Religion.**

When Functionalists study "society", therefore, they look initially at **institutional arrangements and relationships**, since these are seen as the **basic building-blocks** of any society. The way in which institutions **relate** to one another **determines** the **structure** and basic character of any society.

Institutional arrangements are also significant in relation to the concept of culture, which can be defined as a:

Broad pattern of values and beliefs that both characterise a particular way of life and which are transmitted from generation to generation,

This is because people are born into an existing system of institutional arrangements.

In order to learn how to behave in society, therefore, arrangements have to be made for people to fit-into **existing patterns of behaviour** (patterns that are established - and held relatively stable and constant over time - by institutionalised patterns of behaviour. This process is **socialisation**:

Values and beliefs are transmitted to individuals (and **internalised** - that is, they become an essential part of an individual's social make-up), through a variety of socialising **agencies** (the family, peer group, mass media and so forth).

These agencies may be institutions in their own right (the family for example) or part of an institutional set-up (the police, for example, are part of a legal institution).

Through the socialising process the basic values of any society are internalised by individuals and, for this to occur, Functionalists (such as Talcott **Parsons**, G.P.**Murdock** and William **Goode**) argue that any society is founded, maintained and reproduced through a **broad value consensus** (in this respect, broad levels of agreement over fundamental values, for example).

From the above it is perhaps easy to see why Functionalist writers are not particularly interested in the behaviour of individual social actors and the meanings and interpretations they place on various forms of behaviour:

1. Firstly, **society** is seen as a set of **inter-related** and **mutually-dependent social structures** that exist **prior** to any individual - the individual **learns** how to behave within society and, in this respect, behaves in ways that are effectively "pre-defined" by these social structures.
2. Secondly, because people are, by definition, **socialised** into a set of **existing cultural values** (and they live their lives according such values), it follows that all human activity / choice effectively takes place in the **context** of this institutionally-determined cultural order.

In effect, we can note the following:

The socialisation process - through which cultural values are transmitted to the individual - places limits upon people's horizons, perception of potential courses of action and so forth.

People deviate from social norms, for example, not because they are irrational, "naturally bad" or whatever. Deviation occurs because people are placed under various kinds of social pressure that effectively limit their potential choices of action.

Basic Principles...

1. It is useful to employ an **organismic analogy** to an understanding of the Functionalist perspective.

Societies are analogous to living organisms (for example, a human being). Each part of the human body is linked, in some way, to all other parts. Individual organs combine to create something that is "greater than the sum total of their individual parts".

In social terms, "organs" equate to social institutions (patterns of shared, stable, behaviour) and the focus of analysis is upon the relationship between various institutions in society. This represents a macro approach to the theorising and study of the social world.

2. All parts of a society have:

- a. A **purpose** (or function).
- b. Certain **needs**.

For example, the purpose of the work institution is to create wealth and in order to do this it needs people with a certain level of educational knowledge.

In this respect, each institution in society faces certain problems that have to be solved if it is to both exist and function properly. Talcott Parsons identifies these as:

a. Goal Attainment

This involves the need to set goals for human behaviour and also to determine the means through which they can be achieved (the means of keeping an institution moving towards its allotted goals).

b. Adaptation

This involves procuring the means to achieve valued goals. This may, for example, involve the ability to create / provide the physical necessities of institutional life.

c. Integration

People have to be made to feel a part of any institution. They need to be made to feel that they belong and one way of achieving this is to give them something that they can hold in common (values, beliefs, etc.). The ability of an institution to integrate people successfully is vital for its continuation, internal harmony and so forth.

d. Latency (or Pattern Maintenance)

This involves the development of social control mechanisms that serve to manage tensions, motivate people, resolve interpersonal conflicts and the like within an institution.

Parsons calls the above "**functional imperatives**". That is, "structural commands" that have to be met if an institution - or indeed a society - is to continue to exist.

3. The above leads to the concept of **functional interdependence** between institutions in society. The purpose of each institution can only be properly understood by examining the relationship it has to all other institutions in society.

4. **Society** is seen as a form of **living organism** that exists **independently** of individuals. Society exists "**out there**" in the structure of people's social relationships rather than "in here" (inside the mind of individual social actors).

5. People **experience society** in terms of **structural pressures** and **constraints** on their behaviour (for example, the pressure to go to school or to work, the pressure to form a family and have children and so forth). In this respect, society is like a "hidden hand" that pushes and coerces people in their daily lives - making us do things that we may not particularly want to do but which we have to do if we are to survive or to continue with our responsibilities to other people.

This concept was originally used by Adam Smith ("The Wealth of Nations") to explain the way in which economic markets work. The relationships into which we enter place rules, routines and responsibilities on us and our recognition of these things acts like a hidden hand controlling our behaviour.

6. "Individual choice" is not a useful concept for Functionalists because people are seen to react to social stimulation (pressure). that is, they respond to various structural pressures and we learn our responses through the socialisation process.

7. **Social order** is based upon and maintained by a **value consensus** - a basic agreement about values. These basic values derive from the "functional imperatives" noted above (generated by the way in which institutions have purpose and needs).

8. **Durkheim** ("The Rules of Sociological Method", 1895) emphasises two concepts:

a. **Social Solidarity** - the feeling that we belong to a common society (that we have certain basic values in common with people). Solidarity is based upon such things as common culture, socialisation, basic values and norms, etc.

b. **Collective Conscience** - the "external expression" of the collective will of people living in a society. This represents the social forces that help bind people together (to integrate them into the collective behaviour that is society). It can be likened to the "will" of society.

9. In **methodological** terms, Functionalism has historical links to **positivism**, although **Durkheim** refers to **realist methodological** concepts (unobservable phenomena such as "levels of social integration" in relation to suicide).

If people's behaviour is a **response** to social **stimulation**, this is like the natural world (where objects react in a non-conscious way to external forces - a light bulb cannot decide not to shine, for example). Therefore, it is possible to study human beings in much the same way since their "consciousness" is not a significant variable in the overall scientific equation. Thus it is possible to study the social world:

- a. Objectively (that is, with out reference to the sociologist's personal values) and
- b. Scientifically (that is, in terms of social facts rather than opinions).

Functionalist sociology, therefore, tends to advocate the concept of **value-freedom** in relation to the study of social life.

Some General Points of Criticism...

1. The error of **reification** (that is, treating something that is not alive / not human as if it were alive / human).

For example, Emile Durkheim talks about societies having "personalities" ("The Rules of Sociological Method", 1895).

Can we talk about social institutions having "needs" and "purposes" in the way that human beings can be considered to have such things?

2. Does everything in society have a function?

The usual justification for this belief is expressed in the idea that:

"We know something is functional to society because it exists; it exists because it is functional".

The technical term for this justification is a **tautology** (a statement that contains its own proof). In non-technical terms we can think of it as a circular argument.

This is a good example of the way a writer's perspective influences the way in which they see the social world. If Functionalists believe that everything that exists in society does so because it has some kind of functional purpose, then their work will be directed towards trying to explain what that purpose might be.

3. Robert Merton, writing in the mid-20th century, attempted to modify this rather extreme view by arguing that it was possible for something to be dysfunctional (that is, potentially harmful to society).

Durkheim also recognised the possible dysfunctional aspects of some forms of social life (although he did not use the term "dysfunction"). When he wrote about crime being functional to society he also noted that "too high a level of crime" might not be functional because it could create a situation of anomie (confusion about the norms that applied to peoples' lives).

4. Functionalists have a problem explaining **social change** (or, more correctly, rapid social change - revolutions, for example). This is because of the emphasis their perspective puts on:

a. Value consensus created through the socialisation process.

b. Functional dependence and necessity (why, for example, should anything change if it is already functional to society?).

5. Evolutionary (slow) change tends to be explained in terms of **structural differentiation** (Parsons).

As institutions evolve / are created they produce different needs. For example:

As industrialisation occurs the institution of work needs a better-educated workforce to cope with new skills. Hence, to compensate for this anomic situation an education system evolves. The purpose of this new institution is to meet the new social need and, in so doing, society adjusts itself to limit the potentially disruptive effects of anomie.

6. Is there an over-emphasis upon the "**beneficial**" aspects of various institutional arrangement in society? That is, do Functionalists tend to see only the benefits that various institutional relationships bring to "society"? Can, for example, institutions be oppressive and exploitative?

Marxists would argue that Capitalist institutions (such as the way in which work is socially organised) may be beneficial to a small section of society (a ruling class) rather than to society as a whole.

Radical feminists have also argued that the family group is an oppressive and exploitative group, this time in favour of men.

In addition, the emphasis that tends to be placed upon identifying the functions an institution performs (and the supposed benefits it brings to society as a whole) leads to an implicit support for the political and economic status quo - in crude terms, a tendency to try to justify "things as they are" as the best of all possible social arrangements.