

## **STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE IN SOCIOLOGY**

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### **(CONFLICT THEORY ALTERNATIVE)**

*Structural Functionalism is a broad perspective in sociology and anthropology which interprets society as structure with interrelated parts. Functionalism addresses the society as a whole in terms of function of its constituent elements such as norms, customs, traditions, institutions etc. Social structures are stressed and placed at the center of analysis and social functions are deduced from these structures.*

*Functionalism is the oldest and dominant conceptual perspective in society. Functionalism has its roots in the organicism (Comte) of early 19th century. Organicism of Comte (and later that of Spencer and Durkheim) influenced the functional anthropologists Malinowski and Redcliffe Brown. Durkheim's timeless analysis and Weber's emphasis on social taxonomies (ideal types) began to shape modern/contemporary structural perspective.*

### **2A. HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

*Legacy of the early functionalist's work*

1. Social world was viewed in systemic terms. The system had needs and requisites to be met to assure survival
2. Systems have normal and pathological states. Systems need system equilibrium and homeostasis.
3. As a system, the world is composed of mutually interrelated parts. Study of the parts focused on how they fulfilled the requisites of the systemic wholes and how they are maintained equilibrium.
4. Causal analysis became vague - lapsing into tautologies and illegitimate teleologies and illegitimate teleologies.

### **2B. KEY ARGUMENTS**

#### **2B1. Whole part and Systemic interrelationship**

Systems Theory is a framework of investigating any group of objects that work together to produce some result. This could be a single organism, any organization or society.

A system is composed of regularly interacting and interrelating group of activities. It is a dynamic equilibrium model. There are often properties of the whole which cannot be found in the properties of the elements.

- In some cases behavior of the whole cannot be explained in terms of behavior of the parts. e.g. properties of these letters which when considered together can give rise to meaning which does not exist in letters by themselves.
- Pattern of integration and interrelation of elements/parts determines behavior of the system. e.g. integration of 'n' and 'o' may create 'on' or 'no'.
- All phenomena can be viewed as a web of relationships among elements/system.

- A system can act as an element. e.g. 'an individual' acts as a system as integration of its organs and it can act as an elements of a group or society.

## **2B2 Consensus, Stability, order versus conflict, instability and change**

(Consensus and Conflict Perspective)

### *Consensus Perspective*

Consensus perspective sees equilibrium in the society only when there is absence of conflict. Widespread/general agreement among members of the particular society brings stability and order. This perspective focuses on maintenance and continuation of social order in society. (Interpretive Sociology and structural functionalism)

Structuralists proposed structural reading of Marxism in the following way (macro perspective of society):

- society consists of a hierarchy of structures distinct from one another.
- Conflict is naturally prevalent within social structures. People are the product of structural conflict.
- Conflict emerges by itself because of incompatible relationships - therefore change will come.
- Just like internal organs of a normal biological organism, society maintains its stability, order and progress only when social organs, structure and institutions coordinate and cooperate with each other (are in equilibrium) - NOT conflict with each other.
- Society cannot operate for any length of time on the basis of force. Society is held together by the consensus of its members.

### *Conflict Perspective*

This perspective emphasizes conflict in the society. It deals with the incompatible aspects of the society. (Radical Humanism and Radical Structuralism)

- Change emerges from the crisis between human beings and their society.
- Human beings have capacity to think and act against situations that are not satisfactory to their existence.
- Means of conflict between two classes of people can bring change in society.

## **2B3. Functional Prerequisites/Imperatives**

Analysis of the things (functions) that a social system needs in order to survive:

- *What needs to be avoided?*  
These factors threaten the existence of society, so, need to be avoided.
  - Extinction or dispersion of population
  - Highly apathetic population
  - War of "all against all"

- *What needs to be adapted?*  
Society should adapt the following characteristics:

- society must have adequate methods of dealing with environment (ecology + social system)
- society must have adequate method for sexual recruitment (couple must product something above 2 children)
- must have sufficient number of people with diverse interest and skills
- must have sufficient differential roles and assignment of people to those role (social stratification)
- Adequate communication system
- Common/shared value pattern (at individual and group level)
- Share articulated set of goals
- Requires some method of regulating the means to achieve these goals (normative regulation of goals)
- Society must regulate affective expressions (unnecessary emotions) - but some are quite necessary, e.g. love, family loyalty)
- Socialization of new member
- Effective control over disruptive forms of behavior

*Four Types of Functional Prerequisites (Merton)*

1. The Functional Pattern Maintenance
  - maintaining the stability of pattern
    - character of normative person
    - state of institutionalization
  - structural category of values
  - motivational commitment/tension management (socialization mechanism)
2. The Function of Goal Attainment
  - a. Goals are defined for equilibrium > a direction setting
  - b. concern should not be on commitment of social values BUT should be on what is necessary for system to function
3. The Function of Adaptation
  - a. Goal attainment is more important than adaptation
  - b. facilities in place for achieving goal
4. The Function of integration
  - a. Systems are differentiated and divided into independent units
  - b. Focus on most of a system's distinctive properties/process
  - c. Common value system

**2B4. Functional Unity, Universality and Indispensability and Merton's Reformulation**

*Functional Unity, Universality and Indispensability*

The following three prevailing postulates in Functional Analysis (Malinowski & Redcliffe Brown) are debatable and are considered unnecessary to the functional orientation.

- Standardized social activities or cultural items are functional for *entire* social or cultural system
- *All* such Social and cultural items fulfill sociological functions
- These items are consequently *indispensable*

1. Postulate of Functional Unity of Society

Redcliffe Brown: "*We may define this as a condition in which all parts of social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony.*" (without producing persistent conflicts which can neither be resolved nor neglected)

In such situation, social activities/cultural items are functional for entire social system.

[Critic: If the one unqualified assumption is questionable, isn't this twin assumption doubly questionable?]

2. Postulate of Universal Functionalism

All standardized social or cultural forms have vital functions. Malinowski: "*The functional view of culture insists therefore upon the principle that in every type of civilization, every custom/object/idea/belief fulfills some vital function.*"

Malinowski gives example: mechanically useless buttons on the sleeves of European suit serves the 'function' of preserving/maintaining tradition.

3. Postulate of Indispensability

Malinowski: "*Every part fulfills some vital function of the system and has some task to accomplish and hence it represents an indispensable part within a working whole.*"

The above postulate is ambiguous in the sense that it is not clear whether the function is indispensable or the item is indispensable. Davis & Moore try to clarify that *it is institution that is indispensable* but soon they too seem confusing by stating that *it is the function of the institution which it is taken typically to perform - is indispensable*

Critic: If it is function that is indispensable - what about the concept of *functional alternative* and *functional equivalent/substitute*?

**2B5. Manifest and Latent Functions and Dysfunction (Merton)**

Structural Functional Approach focuses on any structure's social function. These functions are the consequences for the operation of society as a whole.

Social functions have 3 components:

1. Manifest functions

The recognized and intended consequences of any social pattern are its manifest functions. [conscious motivation/motives] e.g. Manifest function of Education include preparing for a career by getting good grades, graduation and finding good job etc.

2. Latent functions

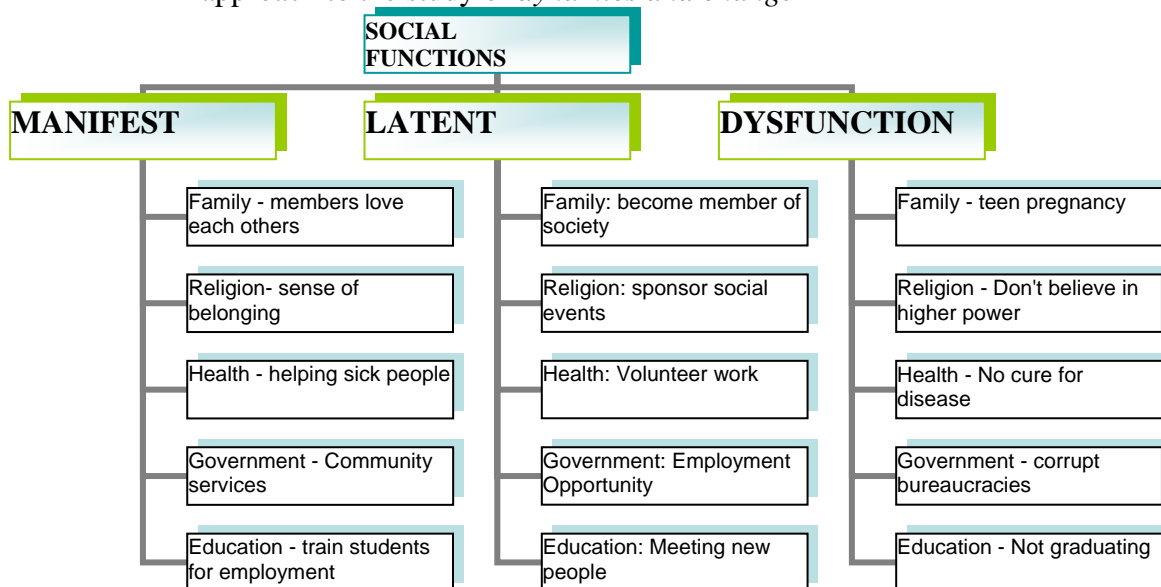
Latent functions are the unrecognized and unintended consequences of any social pattern. [objective consequences/functions] e.g. latent functions of Education include meeting new people, participating in extra curricular activities taking school trips or maybe finding a spouse.

- the concept of latent function extends the observer's attention BEYOND the question of whether or not the behavior attains its avowed purpose
- sociological observers are less likely to examine the collateral/latent functions of the behavior

3. Dysfunction

Social pattern's undesirable consequences for the operation of the society are considered dysfunction. [failure to achieve manifest function] e.g. Dysfunction of education include not getting good grade, not getting a job etc.

- functional analysts tend to focus on the *statics of social structure* and to neglect the study of structural change
- concept of dysfunction implies the concept of strain, stress and tension on the structural level of a social system. So it provides the analytical approach to the study of *dynamics and change*



*Purpose of studying functions*

1. Clarify the analysis of seemingly irrational patterns
2. Direct the attention to theoretically fruitful field of inquiry
3. Significant increment in sociological knowledge
4. Preclude the substitution of naïve moral judgments for sociological analysis
5. Manifest and latent functions are indispensable elements in theoretic repertoire (collection) of social engineering. Without their study it becomes only social rituals.

## **2B6. Protocol of Functional Analysis**

### *Paradigm for functional analysis (Merton)*

Below are the steps of codifying functional analysis in sociology:

1. Identify the item(s) to which functions are imputed  
(This gives the picture of what should be observed)
2. Study subjective dispositions (motives/purpose)  
(Can we observe motivation as *data*? or should be *derived from* other data?)
3. Study objective consequences (function/dysfunction)  
(An item may have both functional and dysfunctional consequences. Functional analyst has to concentrate on the effects of transformation of previously latent functions into manifest functions) - *manipulated human behavior*
4. Study of units sub-served by the functions  
(An item may be functional for some individual and subgroups whereas dysfunctional for others. Find out the range of units for which the item has designated consequences - psychological function, group function, societal function, cultural function etc.)
5. Functional requirements (needs, prerequisites)  
(What is required to establish the validity of a variable as 'functional requirement')
6. Mechanism through which functions are fulfilled  
[Social (not psychological) mechanism - role segmentation, institution of institutional demand, hierarchic ordering of value, social division of labor, rituals, ceremonies..]
7. Study of functional alternatives (functional equivalents/substitutes)  
[Range of possible variation in the items which can sub-serve a functional requirement]
8. Structural context (or constraints)

[Interdependence of elements of social structure limits the effective possibilities of *functional alternatives*. So, functional analyst has to study how narrowly a given structural context limits the range of variations.]

9. Dynamics and social change (dysfunction)  
[study of the accumulation of stress and strains in a social system.]
10. Problem of validation of functional analysis  
[To what extent is functional analysis limited by the difficulty of locating adequate *samples of social system for comparative study?*]
11. Ideological implications of functional analysis  
[To what extent does ideological tinge of the sociologist effects functional analysis?]

*Protocol of Functional Analysis should include:*

1. Representative differential participation (as per the pattern of social structure)
2. Consideration of alternative modes of behavior (consider not only what occurs but also what is neglected)
3. Emotive/cognitive meaning attached by participants to the pattern
4. Distinction between motivation and objective behavior
5. Regularities of behavior not recognized by participants but are nonetheless associated with central pattern of behavior.

## **2C. VARIANTS**

### **2C1. Societal Functionalism of Emile Durkheim**

*Durkheim's basic assumptions:*

1. Society is to be viewed as an entity in itself that could be distinguished from and was not reducible to its constituent parts.
  2. System parts fulfill the *basic functions*, needs or requisites of the whole.
  3. Social systems have needs that must be fulfilled - if *abnormal* states are to be avoided. (two states: normal and pathological)
  4. Systems have equilibrium points around which normal functioning occurs
- Durkheim was clearly aware of the dangers of teleological analysis (of implying that some future consequences of an event causes that very event to occur). He warned that the cause of phenomenon must be distinguished from the ends it serves.
  - Yet, he often appears to be falling teleological: "*to explain a social fact, it is not enough to show the cause on which it depends; we must also at least show its function in the establishment of social order.*"
  - Durkheim separated sociology from the utilitarianism as well as naïve psychology and anthropology of his days.

## **2C2. Malinowski's Individualistic functionalism**

- Durkheim's functionalism analyzed system parts in terms of how they meet the system/societal needs of integration.
- Malinowski's functionalism removed these restrictions and re-introduced **two important ideas** from Spencer:
  - a. notion of systems levels (hierarchy)
    - i. Biological (health)
    - ii. Socio-structural (integrity)
    - iii. Symbolic (cultural unity)
  - b. concept of multiple system needs at each level
    - i. needs at cultural level/symbolic
      - 1. information to adjust to the environment
      - 2. a sense of control over people's destiny
      - 3. a sense of communal rhythm in their daily activities
    - ii. needs at structural level
      - 1. production and distribution of consumer goods.
      - 2. social control of behaviour and its regulation
      - 3. education of people
      - 4. organization and execution of authority relation
- Universal elements of all institution
  - a. personnel
  - b. charter (goals)
  - c. norms
  - d. material apparatus
  - e. activity
  - f. function

## **2C3. Redcliffe Brown's Structural Functionalism**

Durkheim's proposition that *parts fulfill system needs* had teleological implication. So, in order to avoid it, Redcliffe Brown emphasized to substitute for the term 'needs' - the term 'necessary condition of existence'.

*Redcliffe's assumption for structural analysis*

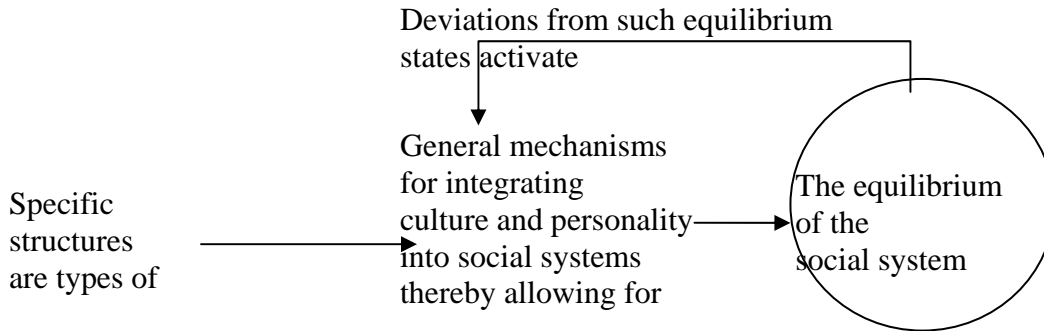
- one necessary condition for survival society is minimal integration of its parts
- the term function refers to those processes that maintain this necessary integration or solidarity
- in each society structural features can be shown to contribute to the maintenance of necessary solidarity

*"Functional unity (integration) of a social system is, of course, hypothesis. So, in order to analyze a system, first assume minimal degree of solidarity in the system. Then parts of the systems would be assessed in terms of their consequences for maintaining the solidarity.*



## 2C4. Parson's Social Systemic Functionalism

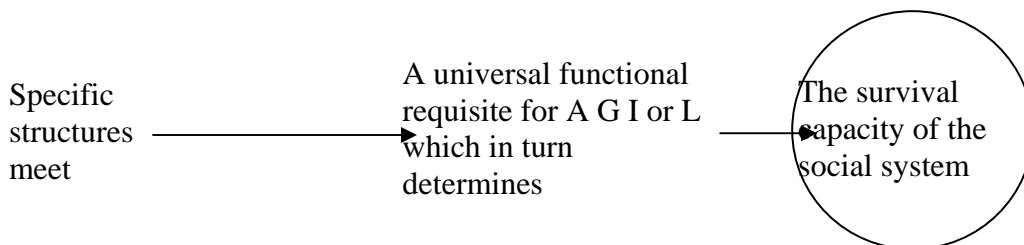
Book: The structure of social action (1937)



System of action are conceptualized to have FOUR survival problems/requisites (AGIL)

1. Adaptation (securing sufficient facilities and distributing them throughout the system)
2. Goal Attainment (prioritizing the system goals and mobilizing system resources for their attainment)
3. Integration (coordinating and maintaining viable interrelationship among system units)
4. Latency (pattern maintenance and tension management)
  - a. ensure actors in social system display appropriate characteristics
  - b. dealing with internal tension and strains of actors in the social systems

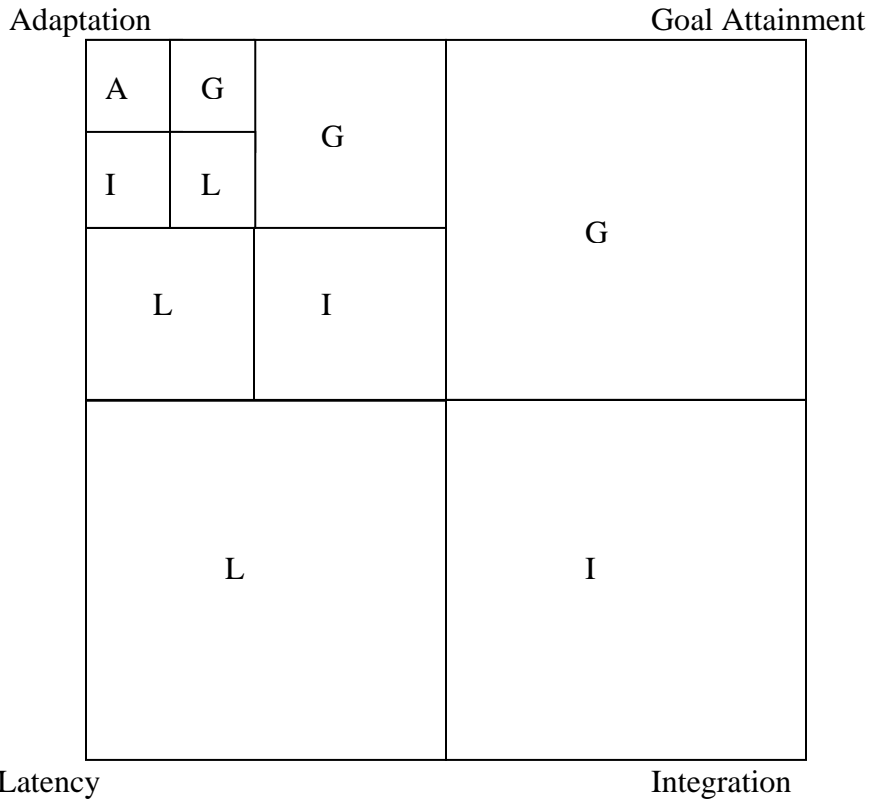
Society has to fulfill the above 4 requisites in order to maintain itself.



Interrelationship among (rather than within) the following four distinct action systems:

- a. culture
- b. social structure
- c. personality
- d. organism

Each element of the *unit act* is a full-fledged action system, each confronting 4 functional problems to resolve - A,G,I,L



(functional imperativist view of Social Systems)

- Each action system as a sub-system of a more inclusive overall one
- interrelationship among 4 subsystems
- Parson's theory allows social change - an orderly process of change - a *moving equilibrium*

## 2D. CRITIQUE

1. In 1960s functionalism was criticized for being unable to account for social change/structural contradiction and conflicts. (so often was called *consensus theory*)
  - o We need to note that Parson's theory came in the context of World War II and at that time equilibrium and social order was crucial rather than social change
2. The fact that functional analysis can be seen by some as *inherently conservative* (e.g. Durkheim) and by others as *inherently radical* (e.g. Parsons). This suggests that it may be inherently neither one nor the other. (Merton)
3. Functionalism is teleological (that it attempts to describe social institutions solely through their EFFECTS and does not explain the CAUSE of those effects).
  - o But Merton explicitly states that it is not teleological....
4. Societies cannot have 'needs' as a human being does. Even if society does have needs, they need not be met.
5. Functionalism contains no sense of agency, that individuals are seen as puppets, acting as their role demands them to do.

- Merton addressed this limitation through his concept of Deviance
- 6. Conflict theorists criticize functionalism as giving too.. much weight on consensus and neglecting independence and conflict.
  - However, Merton introduced an explicit analysis of tension and conflict through his critique of functional unity
- 7. Jeffrey Alexander sees functionalism as a broad school rather than a specific method or system.