

Essay #2

Alice E. Flanagan

Longwood University

SOCL 401-02: Sociological Theory

Dr. Pederson

10/21/2022

Defining Functionalism

Structural functionalism is also commonly referred to as functionalism and are used interchangeably. Structural functionalism places an emphasis on larger social structures, communities, social institutions, the interrelationships in communities and organizations, and the implications in society. There are a few basic principles of structural functionalism that could be understood in three terms: social stability, collective functioning, and social evolution. Social structures of society pertain to various components such as the social institutions, social norms, and values; they are all interconnected yet also dependent on each other to function. “Each component of the structure has a specified role and altogether these social patterns contribute to the balanced and stable functioning of society” (Gangwar, 2021). Socialization is seen as important because individuals need to be regulated for the benefit of everyone. All structural functionalists argue that rapid social change is seen as something that arises when there is an event of social conflict between different units of society. Since all the systems work in an interconnectivity, it can be problematic if there is drastic change that the result would be disrupting the equilibrium and instability. There are multiple interconnections that influence functionalism in society, which are: education, economy, family, media, useful purpose, and religion, that are able to influence an individual in their community. Social institutions are generally seen as positive functions, such as creating value consensus, social integration, and preventing anomie.

Sociologists as Functionalists

Durkheim as a Functionalist

Emile Durkheim was a French sociologist and considered one of the founding fathers of structural functionalism. Durkheim saw society as a whole but inside has many interrelated parts

that are part of a whole. The sociologist saw that there are two different societies, which were primitive society and contemporary society. Primitive society is operated as mechanical solidarity. Durkheim introduced in his book, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1883), that there are two different types of society which are mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Pope (1975) defines solidarity as “the greater or lesser multiplicity of the points of attachment and the variable intensity of the forces which hold the individual” (pg. 363). According to Dillon (2019), “The structural and cultural sameness that characterizes the beliefs and social relationships in traditional societies produces what Durkheim calls mechanical solidarity” (pg. 89). People in a mechanical solidarity community have similar occupations, family histories, experiences and beliefs, and overlapping social relationships, these alignments make it easy to create social cohesion. Mechanical solidarity divided their clans and tribes based on kin, which they often have similar beliefs and traditions. Contemporary society operates as a collective organic solidarity, but it is through institutions and social systems.

Organic solidarity is a type of social cohesion that is based on the mutual trust of individuals in advanced societies. Emile Durkheim views organic solidarity as “each organ has its own special characteristics and autonomy, yet the greater the unity of the organism, the more marked the individualization of the parts” (Dillon, 2019, p. 93). People in organic solidarity have different occupations that rely on each other to ensure stability in the society.

Durkheim furthered his study by stating society is not a collection of individuals, but it is a collectivity with features and characteristics of their own, by doing this he called it social facts. Durkheim argued that sociology includes social relationships, social patterns, forms of social organization, and the collective forces independently regulate the individual, group, and institutional behavior. Therefore Durkheim has the argument that society has their own reality,

which is referred to as *sui generis* reality. *Sui generis* translates to “of the group in and of itself” in Latin. A criticism that Emile Durkheim had is that social facts should not be equated with “statical facts.” According to Durkheim, social facts contribute to shaping social behavior, including social policies, cultural expectations, and choices that are made by individuals, families, and institutions.

Harriet Martineau as Functionalist

Harriet Martineau’s observations were morals in society as a functionalist. Martineau’s sociology subject included the study of human emotions and values. The Sociologist heavily emphasized the need for an attitude of empathy and understanding toward those who were observing. She had published a methodological essay in 1838 called *How to Observe Morals and Manners*. Harriet Martineau placed emphasis on how the power of observation must be trained, and habits of method in arranging the materials presented to the eye must be acquired. “Morals and manners” is the general term Martineau uses to describe the subject matter of sociology (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2007, p. 31). Martineau would define morals by “a society’s collective ideas prescribed and proscribed behavior” (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2007, p. 31). Manners are the patterns of action and association in the society. The sociologist would argue that manners are inseparable from morals or terminate to have meaning when separated. Martineau would commonly use terms for understanding society that were “virtues,” “principles,” “institutions,” and “common mind.” This theory has advanced by using the terms, “norms,” “values,” “institutions,” and “culture.” Martineau does not treat morals as the controlling overlayer that factors actions or manners. Instead Harriet Martineau views manners as revolving around collective ideas in a difficult way, which is to motivate them, contradicting them, and reworking them. Martineau believes in a principle of progress towards a

good society, which she measures in terms of the amount and distribution of happiness, which is equivalent to the degree to which all people function as moral agents. Regarding the paradigm, According to Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2007, Martineau has expressed in her work that there has always been:

- (1) a concern with the meanings that actions have for actors, (2) a sense that the place to begin to do sociology in the field, (3) a definition of the subject matter of sociology as the diversity of human life, (4) a commitment to the idea that gender matters, and (5) an understanding that critique of society in terms of its *multiple* oppressive practices is the moral responsibility of the sociologist (pg. 39).

Auguste Comte as Functionalist

Auguste Comte was the first person to establish the term sociology, in print, in 1838. Sociology was initially referred to as social physics, but came up with sociology as a combined term of both Latin and Greek parts. Comte's belief, on structural functionalism, is that the science of society was not only possible but necessary to social progress. Auguste Comte was hopeful that sociology would be developing quickly because it could copy a lot of the existing scientific observational methods. Like Harriet Martineau, Auguste Comte also conducted observational studies. Comte was hopeful that sociologists would use scientific methods to obtain knowledge about the social world. The definition of "sociology would be *the* science of humanity, *the* science of society. It would outline systematic theory of the human order" (Dillon, 2019, p. 17). Comte placed his sociological focus on observable data across every aspect of society. Like Durkheim, Comte also has the belief that parts of society all work together collaboratively as one whole. There was criticism in Comte's view of structural functionalism. Since Comte was the first to come up with this social-science, there was no previous mention or

studies about sociology. This social-science phenomena is not observed about how science was viewed before and was new to society. Before sociology became as widely known, there was biology, physics, and chemistry. Scientists were able to see and study bacteria grow in an experiment, but there was no social cohesion. “Consequently, in order to study social phenomena you have to first operationalize them” (Dillon, 2019, p. 17).

Talcott Parsons as Functionalist.

Parsons’ functionalist theory focused on the structure of society is molded by the function and their social roles that individuals adopt are shaped by how those roles are supported by the society as a whole. Talcott Parsons interpreted all social units, whether groups, institutions or whole societies as self-contained social systems or social action systems; each would be studied and observed in its own right. “Like Durkheim, who underscored the functions of specific social structures, Parsons is regarded as a structural-functionalist, because he focused on analyzing the structure of the social system and its subsystems” (Dillon, 2019, p. 154). Society was seen as an action system for Parson, which led to “the outcome of this complex series of studies was *The Structure of Social Action*, published in 1937” (Parsons, 1970). Parsons created four subsystems that are the core of institutional structures for modern societies that were established to accomplish the economic, political, societal integration, and cultural socialization functions that are necessary for societies to remain themselves and adapt to change. These four functions are: adaptation to the environment; goal attainment; integration into the societal community by articulating and enforcing society’s collective norms; and pattern or lacency maintenance. An example of adaptation is having food and shelter as an environmental element that meets the physical needs in society. Goal attainment is the procedures for setting these goals are institutionalized, in the form of political systems. Integration branches off into the legal

subsystem and is defined as the adjustment of conflict. Pattern maintenance is the maintenance of basic patterns of values that are within an institutionalized society. The Sociologist saw the four functions as problems that society must be able to solve in order to function as a whole for survival. Parsons believed that functionalists view change in the system of evolution and the change it causes to society. Another theory Parsons had about sociological matters should be elaborated with scientific facts, commonly known as positivism. Criticisms of Parsons' structural functionalism was the inability to deal with the social changes in contemporary society.. Parsons had hyperfixation on how the structure of the institution should look, which critics argued that he failed to look at the social changes.

References

- Dillon, M. (2019). *Introduction to sociological theory : theorists, concepts, and their applicability to the twenty-first century*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Gangwar, S. (2021, May 25). *Structural Functionalism: Definition, Theories and Criticism*. Sociology Group: Sociology and Other Social Sciences.
<https://www.sociologygroup.com/structural-functionalism-meaning-theories/>
- Lengermann, P. M., & Niebrugge-Brantley, J. (2007). *The women founders : sociology and social theory, 1830-1930 : a text/reader*. Waveland Press.
- Parsons, T. (1970). *On Building Social System Theory: A Personal History on JSTOR*.
Www.jstor.org; The MIT Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20023975>
- Pope, W. (1975). Durkheim as a Functionalist. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 16(3), 361–379.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4105747>