FUNCTIONALISM

Emile Durkheim (1858 - 1917)

Technically speaking, Durkheim was not a functionalist - this is only true, however, because he was writing at a time before functionalism existed as a distinct school of sociological thought. The concepts he proposed, however, echoed in the writings of later academics operating from the perspective and he can consequently be covered within this topic - in fact, he could be seen to be the founder of what would later become functionalism.

The starting point for Durkheim (and many of his contemporaries) was the Hobbesian Problem of Order (named after the 17th Century philosopher Thomas Hobbes). Put briefly, this questions why a society made up of self-interested individuals does not collapse into “a war of all against all”. Hobbes own solution to his problem was that people realise that all-out war would ultimately lead to the destruction of everyone - consequently, people agree to restrain their instincts out of self-preservation. Durkheim, however, offers a different solution to the problem, and one which provides the key foundation for the development of functionalism. Rather than submitting to the “common-good” of their own volition, he argues that individual actions are constrained (or structured) by social factors - particularly through a commitment to a common morality.

The Study of Social Laws

Durkheim argued that, in order to explain the relationship between the individual and society - and uncover the way in which individual actions are constrained - we should follow a key methodology principle: examining social facts. Patterns in the behaviour of groups of people should be identified, and conclusions drawn about the “social laws” which cause the patterns to occur. According to Durkheim, these social laws share two characteristics:

* They are external to the individual (i.e. they exist independently of them).
* They constrain the individual (i.e. make some things possible and other things impossible).

Within Durkheim’s analysis, a major emphasis is on the role of a shared moral code - a set of beliefs shared throughout any society (this concern is echoed within later sociology, particularly in the emphasis on understanding culture, and the associated norms, values, roles, statuses and rituals). Durkheim’s view on the role of this code is implied in the following quotation:

“When I fulfil my obligations as a brother, husband, or citizen I perform duties which are defined, externally to myself and my acts, in laws and custom. Even if they conform to my own sentiments, and I feel their reality subjectively, such reality is still objective, for I did not create them; I merely inherited them through my education” (Durkheim: 1938)

Solidarity and The Division of Labour

Durkheim’s theories were born out of a general academic unease at the rapid changes experienced by society at the time. For Durkheim, however, these changes were to be celebrated, rather than feared, as they represented a shift in the underlying moral code (or culture) in response to a natural evolution of society from traditional and agricultural to modern and industrial. In his first major work, The Division of Labour in Society, Durkheim aimed to demonstrate that all societies developed from simple, small-scale and agricultural - evolving to become modern, complex and industrial. As this evolution took place, Durkheim argued that the moral code, and source of solidarity (the “glue” which sticks society together), also changed.

Within traditional societies, social order was achieved through mechanical solidarity. Within these societies, which are small and close-knit, people tend to perform similar tasks (for instance, farming to feed their families). Consequently, people tend to have shared problems and interests - meaning that one set of morals is sufficient to maintain social order. Within these societies, the main source of regulation is religion - which provided what Durkheim calls the “conscience collective”

The basis of solidarity in a traditional society is, therefore, the similarities between the people within it. As societies become more complex, however, this becomes less and less effective. However, Durkheim argued that social breakdown was prevented by an increasing division of labour. In a traditional society, the number of occupational roles is limited, but with industrialisation, jobs become increasingly specialised - for instance, some people might grow food, others might process and package it in a factory or sell it in a shop. This chain of interdependence stretches throughout society (from the prime-minister, to bin-men and accountants) - producing a situation in which everybody depends on everybody else for survival. It is through this development (which Durkheim calls Organic
Solidarity) that social cohesion is produced in the modern industrial society.

Like many of his contemporaries, however, Durkheim retained some concerns about the rise of individualism in modern society - as this meant that people began to see themselves as individuals rather than members of social groups. His biggest fear was that this would extend too far, and people would no longer recognise that society was more important than the individial. This, he feared, would lead to a breakdown in moral regulation, producing a state of normlessness or anomie.

Institutions and Functions

Within Durkheim's analysis of the division of labour in society, there is a strong theme of interconnectedness (e.g. that society maintains cohesion because individuals are reliant on each other to perform different roles). This theme also led Durkheim in his later work to develop what has become one of the most familiar concepts in sociology - The Organic Analogy.

By now, you should be familiar with this concept, but to summarise: the organic analogy compares society with a living organism. We could think of each cell as an individual, seemingly independent - but in fact reliant on the overall organism (society) for survival. Within the animal, there are also different organs; the heart, the liver, the brain - each performing a different function to keep the organism alive. Similarly, Durkheim argued that there are different institutions within society - each performing different functions to keep society from breaking down. Should one of the institutions fail to perform its function properly, the entire society would get "ill".

Functional Prerequisites and Subsystems

Parsons also made important contributions to the organic analogy. In order for an animal to survive, certain conditions must be met (for instance, nutrition and warmth must be provided). Parsons argued that, in a similar way, four functional prerequisites must be met in order for a society to survive. In brief, these are:

* Adaptation: The ability of a society to adapt to and use its environment to ensure the survival of its members - for instance, the production of food and shelter (or the means for populations to earn money to access these). In simple societies, this might require only simple organisation; but in complex industrial societies, it involves orchestrating employment and trade (possibly on an international level).

* Goal Maintenance: The ability to set a direction for the society, and organise cooperative relationships so that decisions can be made as to how to attain these goals.

* Integration: Maintaining social cohesion ("gluing society together") by ensuring that people feel that they have "a place" in society. Furthermore, societies need a way of dealing with deviance, which might threaten overall stability. In traditional societies, this is fulfilled by traditional authority figures (such as religious leaders), whilst in "modern" society, it is performed by rational legal authority figures (such as the law).

* Pattern Maintenance (which is also called latency): The ability for society to reproduce itself, ensuring that its culture is transmitted to the next generation.

According to Parsons, all institutions within society meet at least one of these needs - and they are consequently all functional, as they serve to “keep society going”. He argues that societies develop distinct subsystems, each geared towards meeting particular prerequisites, which he names; the economic, political, legal and cultural subsystems.

Talcott Parsons (1902 - 1979)

Parsons could perhaps be credited with taking the concepts first developed by Durkheim and "filling them out" to produce an overall theory which was comprehensive enough to begin a school of thought; in the form of structural-functionalism. It is, for instance, through Parsons that Durkheim's conscious collective was transformed into the more familiar value consensus.

Society as a System

One of the key features of functionalism is the view that societies operate as systems (as originally suggested in Durkheim's organic analogy), with each component (be it an individual or institution) being connected to every other. This implies that sociological analysis should focus on understanding parts of the system in terms of how they contribute to the whole.

To illustrate with an analogy; it is difficult to establish the function of a radiator in isolation (as, on its own, it does very little) - instead we need to consider how it links to the larger central heating system. In exactly the same way, functionalists argue that we can only understand the role of the individual parts of society in terms of their contribution to the society as a whole. This functionalist tenant of examining society as a system is most explicitly made by Parsons, whose major work was entitled The Social System.

NOTE: There is an implicit assumption in this perspective that parts of society perform primarily positive functions. Just as we would not expect to find parts of a central heating system which either perform no function, or impair the overall function of the system, so functionalists would not expect to find parts of societies which do not contribute - or impair - the functioning of society.
Evolution of Societies

One criticism of functionalism is that it spends so much time explaining the source of social stability that it fails to explain why societies change over time. However, building on Durkheim’s concepts, Parsons does - in fact - account for this process.

One important element in Parsons’ explanation is that social systems exist in a state of balance, or equilibrium. This balance is maintained because the four subsystems are interrelated. Consequently, changes in one part of the system tend to produce changes elsewhere - keeping the overall society in balance. Parsons therefore argues that society is a self-regulating system - with social change being a dynamic and functionally necessary response to disturbances within the system.

A second theme in Parsons’ theory of social change is the idea of social evolution (influenced heavily by both Durkheim and Comte) - with societies moving from simple to complex forms over time. A central concept in this process is the idea of structural differentiation - the idea that, over time, social institutions have a tendency to become more specialised - with new institutions developing to perform new functions, or to fulfil existing functions more efficiently.

Finally, Parsons argues that as societies develop - their value systems also develop. Based on a comparative study of industrialised and pre-industrial societies, he identifies two sets of pattern variables (a complicated word for two sets of values which tend to go together). In traditional societies, for instance, there tends to be an emphasis on ascription, particularism and collectivism - which in modern societies, core values include achievement, universalism and individualism.

Robert Merton (1910 - 2003)

Merton is a somewhat unusual figure in this chapter - in many ways, he is actually a critic of functionalism in its Parsonian and Durkheimian traditions. However, in levelling these criticisms, he also offers solutions - producing an important reconceptualisation of the school of thought.

The first of Merton’s criticisms is a rejection of the idea that societies exhibit “functional unity” (the idea that all parts of a society are interconnected so that all parts work together for the benefit of the whole). He argued that such links do not necessarily exist - it could be that individual institutions could have a degree of functional autonomy. Consequently, he advocates a middle-range approach - which studies institutions individually and does not force them to be “functional” if no such functions exist.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Merton rejects the view that all elements of a society function to benefit the whole. He argues that certain actions might actually be dysfunctional (harmful) - and that actions might be functional for some sections of society whilst being dysfunctional for others. Furthermore, he argues that some actions may have no consequences for the system as a whole (eufunctional). By moving away from the universally positive viewpoint of Parsonian functionalism, Merton is therefore able to deal with the existence of strains and conflicts within society - as you will see in the Crime and Deviance module.

Merton has also added two useful concepts to sociology. He argued that any institution has both manifest functions (those which are obvious) and latent functions (those which are hidden). Religion, for instance, has immediate and apparent (or manifest) functions for the individual - to worship the divine. However, it also has latent functions - of which individuals may be oblivious - such as reaffirming value consensus.

Functionalism: Common Principles...

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10. Give an example of structural differentiation in action, relating it to the notion that society operates as a self-regulating system.

11. Why might these changes in values be necessary as society becomes more complex (try to make reference to Durkheim’s notions of Mechanistic and Organic solidarity).

12. Complete the table below, summarising the common themes in functionalism (remember that Parsons is building on principles first outlined by Durkheim).

13. What are the manifest and latent functions of attending a football match?
The New Right (Neo-Functionalism)

The New Right grew out of the work of William Wilson and Charles Murray, and was heavily influenced by functionalist principles - together with the work of Herbert Spencer and the capitalist economist and social theorist Adam Smith. It is really more of a political stance than a sociological perspective - and was of particular influence on the social policies of the 1980s governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

However, it's links with Functionalism merit its discussion here. Within the perspective, it is possible to identify three key features:

**Libertarianism**
A key theme in New Right thought is a opposition to the state interfering in the lives of individuals - and the extension of the free market (i.e. the laws of supply and demand) to improve peoples choices. This theme goes beyond the selling and buying of goods, and also extends to public services - and consequently, New Right governments privatised existing state industries, together introducing market forces into education and healthcare. Theorists argue that, freed from the beaurocracy of local or national government, these services could be delivered more efficiently through the laws of supply and demand.

**Dependency Cultures**
New Right theorists have also been opposed to direct intervention to prevent poverty (for instance, the welfare state) - which Murray sees as producing a dependency culture. In, for instance, giving dole-money to the unemployed, they become dependent on state hand-outs - making them unlikely to make the choice to seek employment and work their own way out of poverty.

**Tradition**
A final theme in New Right thought - and one with the most obvious links to Functionalism - is a conservative preference for traditional values and ways of life. Most notably, advocates of the perspective emphasise the desirability of nuclear family and the “traditional work ethic”. The former of these preferences has seen open hostility towards non-conventional family structures (particularly single-parent families) within New Right theory. The trend away from the nuclear family - and with it the “natural” way of raising children - is seen as the source of a range of social problems, from poor educational achievement to criminality.

In order to maintain traditional values, New Right theorists (somewhat at odds with their emphasis on also libertarianism) advocate harsher measures of social control (for instance, Michael Howards recent assertion that “prisons work”).