

SOCI 322

PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

Session 4 – Structural Functionalism (Cont'd)

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Session Overview

Introduction

This section continues to examine structural functionalism. The focus is on Talcott Parsons' contribution. Parson was the one who developed functionalism and most of functionalist concepts such as, the structure of society, functional imperative or functional prerequisites, equilibrium, social integration, etc. are developed by him



Goals and Objectives

By the end of the session you should be able to explain:

- Why structural functionalism is a consensus theory or perspective
- Key concepts such as functional prerequisites, equilibrium, social integration,
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- Talcott Parsons four aspect of the concept of functional imperatives
- Link the four functional imperatives to social institutions
- Explain key functionalist concepts: social integration, equilibrium, disequilibrium, adaptation, goal attainment, integration, latency or pattern maintenance, society as social system, pattern variables, manifest functions, latent functions, dysfunctions,
- Identify the criticism and strengths of functionalism
- Explain Robert Merton's contribution to functionalism and explanation of deviant behaviour as a response

Reading List

- Calhoun, Craig, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Seven Pfaff, and Idermohan Virk (2002). *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Cuff E. C., W. W. Sharrock & D. W. Francis (1990), *Perspectives in Sociology*. 3rd Edition. London: Unwin Hyman
- Edles, Laura Desfor and Scott Appelrouth (2010). *Sociological Theory in the contemporary era: Text and readings*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Sage
- Farganis, James. (2011). *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism*. 6th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
- Turner, Jonathan H. (1998). *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 6th Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Ritzer, George (2008). *Sociological Theory*. 8th Edition or any newer or earlier editions. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Wallace, Ruth A. and Alison Wolf (1995) *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Continuing the Classical Tradition*. 4th Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Session Topics

I have divided the session into the following section

Topic One: Basic assumption of Functionalism

Topic Two: Why structural functionalism is consensus approach

Topic Three: Parson the AGIL Scheme

Basic assumption of Functionalism

- The functionalist perspective in sociology is an approach that views society as made up of structures or parts that are interdependent and performing functions for its survival.
- Functionalists' aim goal is to explain what holds society together and make them stable and orderly.
- They see society as a social structure or social system with various parts that “**function**” or have “**positive effects**” or “**consequences**” for the whole society
- When society is orderly, it is said to be in equilibrium but if there is conflict, tension or disturbances in society, the society is said to be experiencing disequilibrium.
- However, functionalists argue that society will re-adjust itself and comes back to a state of equilibrium
- Functionalists have a penchant for seeing any parts or activities in society as having function to perform for society; otherwise they would not exist in the first place: so most things are functional even deviance, criminality, conflict, poverty, etc. have some positive things about them

Topic Two Structural Functionalism: The Consensus Approach

- Structural Functionalism is a theory that asks the question: how is social order, harmony and social integration possible in human society?
- The answer is that in every society there is a broad agreement on what people are expected to do and want; there is a normative character to behaviours and actions, there is thus a strongly shared agreement as to what behaviours or actions are morally acceptable in society. This means that there is a strong normative order in society.
- This socially shared agreement is the hallmark of the **consensus approach** to analyzing society which is so much cherished by Parsons and functionalists.

Functionalism: Talcott Parsons

- Parsons is interested in how society or the social system functions to survive and achieve social integration and consensus.
- According to functionalists, society is a social system made of parts or units. But it is not only society that is a social system but also its various units or components can be conceived of as social systems. For example, the functioning of the family, the school, the university, the work organization, the community, the church, etc. depict the workings of social systems.
- A social system is something that is surrounded by a boundary, enabling us to distinguish an inside from the outside or environment.
- If social units and societies are social systems, then we can ask what the conditions are which keep the units and social systems together in the face of their environments and what conditions are for their survival? For society, we can ask about the ways in which the features of society contribute to sustaining its organization and how the various parts of society serve the requirements of the whole.

Functionalism: Talcott Parsons (cont'd)

Parsons and the idea of Functional Imperatives

- Parsons is interested in how society or the social system functions to survive and achieve social integration and consensus.
- Parson says society is a social system made of parts or units. But is not only society that is a social system but also its various units or components can be conceived of as social systems. For example, the functioning of the family, the school, the university, the work organization, the community, the church, etc. depict the workings of a social system. By social system we are meaning something that is surrounded by a boundary, enabling us to distinguish an inside from the outside or environment.
- If social units and societies are social systems, then we can ask what the conditions are which keep the units and social systems together in the face of their environments and what conditions are for their survival? For society, we can ask about the ways in which the features of society contribute to sustaining its organization and how the various parts of society serve the requirements of the whole.

Topic Three: Parson & The AGIL Scheme

- Parsons says two main conditions that must be met for any social system to survive. Firstly, it must relate effectively to its environment and secondly, it must maintain its own internal integrity.
- Parsons further breaks down these two vital conditions into four **functional imperatives** which the system must satisfy. These **functional imperatives** are:
 - **Adaptation (A)**
 - **Goal Attainment (G)**
 - **Integration (I)**
 - **Latency (L) or Pattern Maintenance or Tension Management**—what has become Parsons' **AGIL scheme** for analyzing the social system

Parson: The AGIL Scheme (cont'd)

- **Adaptation means** any social system or (social unit) must be able to relate effectively with or mobilize resources from its environment for collective action. Adaptation also means that the social system must cope with situational dangers and contingencies
- For example, Ghanaian society needs to draw resources such as timber, minerals, food from the physical environments so are formal organizations, e.g, Ghana Commercial Bank, must relate effectively to its environment in order to survive. This means it must effectively extract resources from the environment: recruit competent people with the right technical skills, exploit the state of the art ICTs and also strategize to compete effectively with other organizations in the banking industries. If we take the Ghanaian society as a social system, the institution necessary for societal adaptation is the national economy. It is through the economic institution that the Ghanaian society pursues its goals of adaptation.
- **Goal Attainment** means the social system must define and achieve its primary goals. It has to managed to attain its basic goals. E. g. the university two main goals to realize: to teach students and to do research to advance knowledge and professional careers of faculties. The system must be properly managed that these two basic objectives are attained all the time. For society, the key institution evolved for this task is politics. The political institution is then responsible for goal attainment of society. Thus in Ghana for example, the state and governmental institutions are responsible for goal attainment.

Parson: The AGIL Scheme(cont'd)

Integration

- Society and social units, such as families, schools, universities, work organizations, churches, etc. involve relations among individuals and among sub-units such as departments within organizations and social groups in society. In relations among individuals and groups in society there are possibilities of strain and conflict, so there must ways of regulating coordinating and adjusting relationships among parts and preventing difficulties and conflict situations getting out of hand. So at the level of society we have institutions such as family, religion, sports, festivals, media, churches, etc., all working to ensure and sustain integration in the social system, otherwise they break apart and cannot exist.
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- **Latency or Pattern Maintenance** means there must be loyalty of members of a society or social units to uphold the purposes of their social systems, to maintain their patterns. People should be motivated to abide by cultural patterns: norms, values or traditions that define social units or societies that in turn create and sustain individuals, their motivation and their relationships within the social units or societies. Individuals in organizations, institutions and society must be motivated to be committed to roles and interest of the system. At the level of society, institutions such as marriage, family are devoted to pattern maintenance.
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- For **society as a social system**, the functional imperative of adaptation is satisfied by the economic institution whose primary function is to produce and distribute the material resources (food, clothing, etc.) that people need to carry out their social responsibilities.

Session Summary

In this session you have learnt

- Basic assumption of Functionalism
- Why structural functionalism is consensus approach
- Parson the AGIL Scheme that is about the functional imperative or functional prerequisites
- Which are Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration and Latency also known as Pattern Maintenance