

THE FUNCTIONALISTS' APPROACH TO SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION: A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critique of the functionalists' approach to sociological explanation. Functionalism claims to provide hypothesis and explanations about possible connections in society. Functionalist approach enables us to clarify the simple idea that in every particular society, the different activities are inter-connected. Functionalism therefore, sees society as a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. But then, in spite of all its talks, functionalism seems to have failed its general theory. Using the critical, analytic and evaluative method, this paper attempts to show that the functionalists' approach to sociological explanation is not a sufficient method or model of sociological explanation. The paper therefore, concludes that the functionalists' approach to sociological explanation is not really a special method of explanation in sociology as the functionalists claim.

Keywords: Functionalism, Functionalists, Sociology, Explanation, Model.

Introduction

Right from time, man has always occupied himself with the function of trying to explain the occurrences in his world. In fact, Philosophy itself started when man wonders about the universe and the things therein. The early philosophers did not just wonder alone, they tried to ask questions and searched for answers to be able to explain the natural and even the supernatural phenomena. Today, man continues to seek explanation or tries to proffer explanations for complex and non-complex realities in the universe.

A group of social scientists called the Functionalists took up the challenges of explanatory discourse. They attach importance to the observations of ongoing behaviours and daily activities in society in their explanation. Thus, the chief importance of functionalism for modern sociology and social anthropology is the provision of hypothesis and explanations about possible connections in society. In this paper therefore, I shall critically examine the functionalists' explanatory approach, showing their positive as well as their negative aspects.

Background to Functionalism

The functionalist tradition dates back to the introduction in the last century of a biological analogy for society. This analogy was pressed by two of the founders of sociology August Comte and Herbert Spencer. What is suggested to both and in particular to Spencer, was that just as the organs and organ-activities in the body are understood by the function which they

serve in maintaining the welfare of the whole, so the various components in a society and the alterations in those components can be understood by their purpose in promoting the well-being of society over all (Graham: 1981).

The term functionalism was first put forward as the name of a special method and approach by Bronislaw Malinowski in the article "Anthropology" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* 13th ed. Functional analysis is said to be explanation of facts by the parts they play within the integral system of culture, by the manner in which they are related to each other within the system, and by the manner in which they are related to each other within the system, and by the manner in which the system is related to the physical surrounding. The functional view insists therefore, upon the principle that in every type of civilization, every custom, material object, idea and belief fulfils some vital function, has some task to accomplish, represents an indispensable part within a working whole (Graham, 1981).

The importance of functional understanding was emphasized by Emile Durkheim, the outstanding French sociologist. Durkheim offered accounts of phenomena such as the elementary forms of religion, and the division of labour in advanced society. He argued that they contributed to the integration of the society as a whole. However, Durkheim's functionalism did not immediately effect or influence sociology, but it influenced two anthropologists, namely A.R. Radcliffe Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. They were responsible for establishing a functionalist mode of analysis as the norm in anthropological theory. Radcliffe-Brown was interested in seeing the function of a particular social usage as the contribution it makes to the total social life, which is unified as a social system. He regarded a social system as a set of interconnected features of social life, while he defined a social structure as an arrangement of persons in institutionally controlled and defined relations.

The functionalist school was empirically interested in the interrelations or roles, and the interrelations of institutions, they were more interested in the consequences than in the causes of an institution, particularly in the consequences for a social system considered as a whole (Homans, 1973). Their approach to the study of human social behavior is part of the attempt by social scientists particularly anthropologist to put the study of social life on a scientific footing. Emile Durkheim was the pioneer of the "functional school". He is regarded as one of the outstanding sociological thinkers of the nineteenth century. He has links with the organic school and with those who regard sociology as the synthesis of the social sciences. The organic school drew comparisons of society with the human organism. They use the term "organs of society" and "the differentiation of its parts (Wright, 1970).

Accordingly, functionalism sees society as a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. For example, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society: Family provides a context for reproducing, nurturing, and socializing children; education offers a way to transmit a society's skills, knowledge, and culture to its youth; politics provides a means of governing members of society; economics provides for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services; and religion provides moral guidance and an outlet for worship of a higher power. The functionalist perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of society by focusing on how each part influences and is influenced by other parts. For

example, the increase in single parent and dual-earner families has contributed to the number of children who are failing in school because parents have become less available to supervise their children's homework. As a result of changes in technology, colleges are offering more technical programs, and many adults are returning to school to learn new skills that are required in the workplace. The increasing number of women in the workforce has contributed to the formulation of policies against sexual harassment and job discrimination. Functionalists use the terms functional and dysfunctional to describe the effects of social elements on society. Elements of society are functional if they contribute to social stability and dysfunctional if they disrupt social stability. Some aspects of society can be both functional and dysfunctional. For example, crime is dysfunctional in that it is associated with physical violence, loss of property, and fear. But according to Durkheim and other functionalists, crime is also functional for society because it leads to heightened awareness of shared moral bonds and increased social cohesion. Sociologists have identified two types of functions: manifest and latent (Merton 1968). Manifest functions are consequences that are intended and commonly recognized. Latent functions are consequences that are unintended and often hidden. For example, the manifest function of education is to transmit knowledge and skills to society's youth. But public elementary schools also serve as babysitters for employed parents, and colleges offer a place for young adults to meet potential mates. The baby-sitting and mate-selection functions are not the intended or commonly recognized functions of education; hence they are latent functions.

Within functionalist theory, the different parts of society are primarily composed of social institutions, each of which is designed to fill different needs, and each of which has particular consequences for the form and shape of society. The parts all depend on each other. The core institutions defined by sociology and which are important to understanding for this theory include family, government, economy, media, education, and religion. According to functionalism, an institution only exists because it serves a vital role in the functioning of society. If it no longer serves a role, an institution will die away. When new needs evolve or emerge, new institutions will be created to meet them.

The Functionalists Explanatory Model

Functionalism postulates some indispensability. However, functionalism is an important mode of anthropological and sociological investigation. It has offered a powerful challenge to evolutionary and diffusionist doctrines and theories of societies, their cultures and their institutions. The chief importance of functionalism for modern sociology and anthropology is the provision of hypothesis and explanations about possible connections in society, as between witchcraft and social control, between bride wealth and the stability of marriage (Oyeshile, 1998).

We can therefore say that functionalism in the social science is based on an analogy between social life and organic life. According to Allan Ryan the enthusiasm for functionalism in social sciences has been fueled by the perception that in many social group both large and small, there are regularities of behaviours which do not seem accounted for by what individuals do or intended, yet this regularities seem to serve some purposes in maintaining the activities of the group as a whole, and tempt us to explain their persistence in terms of their contribution to these goals (Allan, 1970).

The term “functional analysis” in the work of sociologists is a special connotation analogous to the use of the notion of “function” in describing biological systems or such artifacts as are self-organizing systems, for example, a heat engine with a thermostat. Such a system can be considered as a unitary whole. It is differentiated into elements, and the function of the elements can be said to be the part they play in maintaining the system in a persisting state or in maintaining the efficiency of the system for the purpose for which it has been set up (Emmet, 1976).

The term function can be defined in the present context as “the contribution which a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part. It is in this sense of them term that an organism is conceived as functioning of its structure, that is, a set of relations between its constituent parts. Thus if we consider any recurrent part of the life process, example, respiration, digestion, etc., its function is the part which it plays and the contribution which it makes to the life of organism as a whole. The basis for the application of functional analysis to the study of organism then is the existence of an integrated system which displays a functional unity which provides the necessary condition of its existence.

The basic component in a functional explanation of any kind, whether in biology or sociology, is the ascription of a function to the element under consideration. Thus, for the functionalists, if the element is **X** and the relevant system is **S**, then the function of **X** in **S** is **F**, or whatever. This can be shown as follows: that the system **S** has a certain capacity or goal such that the **F-ing** of **X** is an essential component in the realization of that capacity or goal. Thus ascribing to the kidney the function of removing waste products from the blood, the functionalist say: the body **S**, has the goal of surviving and that the kidney, **X**, clean the waste products from the blood, i.e., **F**, is an essential component in the realization of that goal. Again, in ascribing to the fuse wire he function of melting under a heavy electrical load, they say: the electrical installation, **S**, has the capacity to cut itself off when the load is dangerous and that the fuse wire, **X**, melts under a heavy load, i.e., **Fs**, is an essential component in the realization of that capacity. The functionalist go further suggesting that the function ascribed explains both why the item **X** performs the activity **S**: if not why it came to be there in the first place, at least why it remains a permanent feature of the system (Graham, 1981).

The attempt to use the concept of function in social science is based on the assumption that there are necessary conditions of existence for human beings just as there are for animal organism. The life of a society is thus conceived as the functioning of its structure. The function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life in the functioning of the total social system. This implies that a social system like biological organism has a certain kind of unity which we may speak of as a functional unity. A functional approach in sociology can therefore be taken not as the assumption that every cultural item has a function, but as directive to watch for “functions,” particularly in the unintended consequences of a form of social action (Encyclopedia).

Positive Aspects of Functionalism

Functionalism is said to have the following positive aspects:

1. The most straightforward case where functional explanation is appropriate is that in which the members of the society are in intentional control of the component that

produces the beneficial effects and maintain the component out of a desire for those effects.

2. Where functional explanation is appropriate in social science is one in which there is intentional selection of a pattern that produces a certain social benefit.
3. Functional explanation will work in the social area where mechanism of social selection operates at the level of institutions.
4. Functionalist approach enables us to clarify the simple idea that in every particular society, the different activities are inter-connected.
5. Also, functional approach enables us to make sense of certain alien practices that we are likely to dismiss.

However, this variety of functional explanation is clearly economical and attractive, but unfortunately, there is little room for it in most areas covered by social scientists, since we do not generally find such clear notions of fitness, survival and propagation. In most cases where functional explanations have been defended in social science, there is no mechanism discernible which would underpin the causal link between the fulfillment of the function described and the maintenance of the factor which ensures that fulfillment.

Evaluation

Functionalism has been critiqued by many sociologists for its neglect of the often negative implications of social order. Some critics, like Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, claim that the perspective justifies the status quo and the process of cultural hegemony which maintains it. Functionalism does not encourage people to take an active role in changing their social environment, even when doing so may benefit them. Instead, functionalism sees agitating for social change as undesirable because the various parts of society will compensate in a seemingly natural way for any problems that may arise.

Thus, from our discussion so far, we can rightly say that functionalism has some loop holes in its claims. Some of these loop holes among others are that functionalism has failed not in its empirical interests but, curiously in what it most prided itself on, its general theory. According to George Homans (1973), with all their talk about theory, functionalists never succeeded in making clear what a theory was. Thus with all its talk about theory, the functionalist school did not take the job of theory serious enough. It did not ask itself what a theory was, and it never produced a functional theory that was in fact an explanation. The functionalists failed in this aspect.

As mentioned earlier, the functionalists were much interested in the interrelations of institutions, and it was one of the glories of the school to have pointed out many interrelations. But the job of science does not end with pointing out interrelations; it must try to explain why they are what they are. Another problem with the functionalists is that when they seriously try to explain certain kind of social phenomenon, they use non-functional explanation without recognizing that they do so. Besides, as pointed out by Sogolo, the main error of the functional approach to sociological explanation lies in an insufficient exploration of the notion of "unconscious intention or motivation (Sogolo, 1979).

It is argued that the analogy between social life and organic life on which functionalism is based is not sufficiently close to provide a basis for valid explanations of social phenomena. Some of the difficulties with analogy include:

1. Societies change their structures while organisms do not.
2. It is impossible to determine the health or sickness of society in the way this can be done for organisms.
3. It is difficult to determine the function of a social activity or institution with the same precision as the functions of organs are determined in biology by the examination of numerous instances.

The difficulties above suggest that:

- a. The rate of explanation offered by the functional approach is limited. For instance, it cannot explain the importance of social change.
- b. We cannot in fact decide in many cases the contribution which a social activity makes to the maintenance of social system except in evaluative terms.
- c. We cannot easily assign a specific function to a particular social activity. Indeed there may exist in human societies, functionless appendages.

Apart from these difficulties, two other objections have been raised. One of them is the objection that it treats society as a conscious or purposive agent which it is not. The argument in support of this position is that since functional analysis is applicable only to those systems which are goal-directed, and since to talk of a system as being goal-directed is to imply that it is capable of intending to do things, functionalists are involved in conceiving of society as a kind of intelligent purpose.

The second objection is that the functionalist approach is holistic. This is because it holds that there is in society, besides the individual minds of its members, a kind of collective intelligence belonging to the society itself which directs its internal organization in furtherance of a preconceived goal; that is, the goal of survival (Oyeshile, 1998).

Conclusion

At this point, we note that since the interest of sociologists is largely directed to detecting the unintended and unanticipated consequences of actions, functional analysis is therefore not a special method in sociology, but just sociological method. It would appear that functional statements can be explanations where they can be interpreted teleologically in terms of purpose; that is, where to say an element in a system has a function is to say that it is because it has been so designed with reference to purpose for which the system has been set up. Where this reference to purpose cannot be made, functional statements would be a form of causal statement in which the interest is directed not to the cause of a phenomenon itself, but to its effects considered as causes within a wider context.

Therefore, in line with Ernest Nagel (1961), functional statements are most appropriately used in describing self-maintaining or self-regulating systems. According to Nagel, the relationship between the elements in a functional system needs to be thus precisely specified, and that very few functional analyses in sociology satisfy these requirements. Thus, the features of functionalism should rather be known for the fact that it is only applicable to systems

concerned as integrated whole, such a system must be self-regulatory and such a system must be goal-directed.

Finally, we feel that the functionalists' approach to sociological explanation is an insufficient method or model of sociological explanation. It is therefore, not a special method of explanation in sociology as the functionalists claim.

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