Unit 5

Concept and Theories of Structure

Contents

Learning Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to

- explain the concept of social structure
- compare the theoretical contribution of Radcliffe-Brown and Evans Pritchard
- critically discuss Irvi-strauss's concept of structure.

5.1 Introduction

The term 'structure' (Latin *structura* from *struere*, to construct) was first applied to 'construction'. Later, during the classical period, it was used in the scientific field of biology. To grasp the meaning of this oft-used concept in sociology and social anthropology (and now, in other social sciences), let us begin with the analogy of a house.

Irrespective of the type of community to which a house belongs, it is divided into rooms, with each room set apart for conducting a particular set of activities. For instance, one room may be used for cooking foods and keeping raw ingredients and utensils for cooking, and it may be called the kitchen. Another room may be used for housing the idols and pictures of sacred deities and ancestors, and stacking sacred books and objects (such as lamps, incense sticks, peacock feathers, etc), and it may be called the place of worship, while another room may be used for spreading the bed, keeping clothes, money and jewelry, storing grains, as happens in rural communities, and it may called the bedroom. In this way, depending upon the purpose(s), the other rooms of the house may be set aside, given some sort of specialisation and name. Terms like 'study room', 'store', 'guest room', 'toilet', 'bathroom', 'pantry', 'anteroom', 'children's room', etc, all indicate the purpose for which a particular portion of the land is marked, and thus designated. Where the tract of land is less, many of these 'rooms' may not be there, but rather different corners of the same room may be associated with different tasks and activities, so one of its sides may be used for cooking, while another, for keeping deities.

Different rooms of a house are all interconnected. Passages, alleyways, and corridors link different rooms, thus facilitating mobility from one part to the other. Entry to rooms is through doors and their connection with the outside world is through doors, windows and ventilators. When all of them are shut,

the room becomes a well-demarcated and closed unit, bearing little interaction with the external world, and when open, it is constantly interacting with the other parts of the house. Each room has its own boundary, its distinctiveness, which separates it from other rooms. At the same time, it is not an 'isolated entity', for it is defined (as a bed room or study room) as a distinct entity in relation to the other rooms, which are also defined distinctly. In other words, the 'wholeness of the room', looking from one point of view, by stationing oneself in the room, is juxtaposed to 'its being a part of the house', when one looks at it by situating oneself outside it.

Pursuing this analogy further, a village or a neighbourhood may be described as an aggregate of houses, where each village or neighbourhood maintains its 'wholeness', at the same time, it is a part of the larger units. Each village or neighbourhood maintains its boundary, its identity, and also, has several connections (quite like the passages, alleyways, and corridors) with other villages or neighbourhoods. The relevant concepts that emerge from this analogy are of the 'whole', the 'interconnections', the 'boundary-maintaining mechanisms', the 'aggregation', and the 'vantage point of the observer'.

Like a house (or a village or a neighbourhood), a society may be conceptualised (or imagined) as consisted of parts. One needs to begin with this analogy, because society does not have the kind of concreteness one finds in a house, village, or neighbourhood. In fact, the method of analogy is useful for trying to know the unknown through the known. One knows what a house is, what it looks like, and by extending its model, one tries to formulate a tentative idea of society. However, it should not be forgotten that analogy is not homology: the idea that society is like a house does not imply that society is a house. Thus, after drawing similarities between a society and a house, one should also look at the differences between them, for such an exercise will direct us to the uniqueness of society – the distinct properties of society.

In their attempts to formulate the idea of society, different scholars have adopted different analogies. Herbert Spencer (1873) is one of the first ones to use the analogy of building, with which we have also begun. But of all the analogies that were used in the formative stage of sociology to comprehend the idea of society, the most frequently used analogy has been of the organism: Society is like an organism (Rex 1961). In addition to the analogy of building, Spencer also develops the organic analogy, believing that this analogy will be greatly valid if we are able to show not only that society is like an organism but also that 'organism is like society' (see Barnes, H.E. 1948; Harris 1968). Why organic analogy is used more than other analogies – such as of the solar system, and later, of atomic and chemical systems – is because an organism is far more concrete than other systems, and is easy to understand, comprehend, and explain. This analogy was basic to the understanding of the concept of social structure, a term used for the first time by Spencer.

In this unit, we will explore the meaning of the term structure and then go on to examining the contributions of Radcliffe-Brown, Evans Pritchard and Levi-Strauss to the understanding of social structure.

5.2 Organic Analogy and Structure

The principal unit of an organism is a cell, which combines with others of its kind to form a tissue. An aggregate of tissues is an organ, and an aggregate

of organs is an organism. Thus, an organism can be broken down into organs, an organ into tissues, a tissue into cells, and from the latter, one of them can be taken up for study. In a similar fashion, the basic unit of society is a 'socialised individual', one who has internalized the norms and values, and the ways of meaningful social behaviour. A collectivity of individuals is a group, and several of them combine together to form a community. An aggregate of communities is called society. As in the case of organism, a society can be broken down into communities, which in turn can be divided into groups, and groups into individuals.

Organic analogy is quite useful as a starting point, but it should not be regarded as an end in itself, for it breaks down at many levels. For instance, a single cell can survive; there are organisms made up of single cells. But no individual can survive alone; the most elemental unit of human society is a dyad, i.e., a group of two individuals. Aristotle had said long time back: 'One who lives alone is either a beast or god.' Organic analogy helps us to understand the concepts of society and its structure, but it should not blind us to the specificities of society, not found in other systems of natural and biological world.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1999) gives three meanings of the term structure: 1) the way in which something is organised, built, or put together (e.g., the structure of the human body); 2) a particular system, pattern, procedure, or institution (e.g., class structure, salary structure); and 3) a thing made up of several parts put together in a particular way (e.g., a single-storey structure). When a sociologist speaks of structure, he has all the three meanings in his mind. By structure, he means an 'interconnectedness' of parts, i.e., the parts of a society are not isolated entities, but are brought together in a set of relationships to which the term structure may be used.

Everything has a structure. Unless it is there, the entity will not be able to carry out any tasks; it will not be able to work. When its structure breaks down, or is jeopardized, it stops working, becomes inert, thereby affecting the activities of the other systems because they are all interconnected. Why the parts are connected in particular manner is because of the logical and rational relationship between them. For those who regard structure as an important analytical concept, the world is an organized entity; it comprises interconnected parts, where each part is to be studied in relationship with other parts. To sum up: 'Structure refers to the way in which the parts of an entity are interconnected so that the entity emerges as an integrated whole, which for the purpose of analysis can be broken down into individual parts.'

No dispute exists in sociology with respect to the idea that structure means an 'interconnectedness of parts', but it exists as to the identity of these parts – whether these parts are individuals, or groups, or roles, or institutions, or messages. In other words, the question is: Which of these parts should receive our primary attention? Second, a difference of opinion exists whether the structure is an empirical entity, something that can be seen and observed, or is an abstraction, arrived at from the regularity and consistency of human behaviour. Around these two ideas are built different theories of social structure. Robert Merton (1975) is quite right in saying that the notion of social structure is 'polyphyletic and polymorphous', i.e., it has many meanings and ideas.

5.3 Social Structure is a Reality: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's Contribution

As said earlier, Spencer coined the term social structure, but did not offer a theoretical perspective on it, except for advancing the analogy between societies and organisms, which influenced later scholars in developing the concepts of structure and function. For instance, Émile Durkheim (1938 [1895]), although a staunch critic of Spencer, was greatly attracted to organic analogy, and said that the idea of function in social sciences was based on analogy between the living organism and society. He used the term 'social morphology', by which he meant what we mean by the term 'social structure'.

Durkheim's sociology exercised an indelible impact on the British social anthropologist, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, who was a student of the diffusionist W.H.R. Rivers, and had carried out his first-hand fieldwork with the Andaman Islanders from 1906 to 1908. The findings of this field study were first submitted in the form of an M.A. dissertation in 1910. Subsequently, it was reworked for a book published in 1922 titled *The Andaman Islanders*, which is regarded as one of the first important books leading to the foundation of the functional approach. Besides his contribution to what he called the 'structural-functional approach', one of his important contributions was to the understanding of the concept of social structure. As said previously, there are scholars prior to Radcliffe-Brown who had used the term social structure, but it was Radcliffe-Brown (1952) who not only defined this concept but also initiated a debate on it. Throughout his teaching, he emphasised the importance of the *study of social structure*. This submission of Radcliffe-Brown was closely linked to his notion of social anthropology, which he was quite willing to call after Durkheim, 'comparative sociology'.

a) **A Natural Science of Society**

For Radcliffe-Brown (1948), social anthropology is the 'theoretical natural science of human society'. That is to say, social phenomena are investigated by methods similar to those used in natural and biological sciences. Each of the sciences has a subject matter that can be investigated through our senses. Thus, the subject matter is empirical, which can be subjected to observation. Radcliffe-Brown pursues the analogy of the natural science: all natural sciences systematically investigate the 'structure of the universe as it is revealed to us through our senses'. Each branch of science deals with a 'certain class or kind of structures' — for instance, atomic physics deals with the structure of atoms, chemistry with the structure of molecules, anatomy and physiology with the structure of organisms. Then, it moves further with the aim to 'discover the characteristics of all structures of that kind'. Each science endeavours to understand *a* structure with which it is concerned, and then, all the structures of that type are compared to discover their common characteristics. All sciences move from particular to general, from understanding *a* structure to understanding *the* structure.

If social anthropology is a natural science of society, then its subject matter must be amenable to observation and empirical enquiry. Social structure is what social anthropologists study; it is the province of their enquiry. It is observable; it has a concrete reality. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) writes: 'Social structures are just as real as are individual organisms.' It is clear that Radcliffe-Brown's concept of social structure is tied to his natural science conception of social anthropology.

b) **The Content of Social Structure**

When we speak of structure, we have in mind, as said earlier, some sort of an ordered arrangement of parts or components. A piece of musical composition has a structure, and its parts are notes. Similarly, a sentence has a structure: its parts are words, so does a building, the parts of which are bricks and mortar. The basic part of social structure is the person. Here, Radcliffe-Brown (1952) makes an important distinction between an 'individual' and a 'person'. As an individual, 'he is a biological organism', comprising a large number of molecules organised in a complex way, which keeps on carrying out a multitude of physiological and psychological functions till the time he is alive. This aspect of human beings — the 'individual' aspect — is an object of study for biological and psychological sciences.

As a 'person', the human being is a 'complex of social relationships'. It is the unit of study for sociologists and social anthropologists. As a person, he is a citizen of a country, a member of a family, a supporter of a political party, a follower of a religious cult, a worker in a factory, a resident of a neighbourhood, and so on. Each of these positions the person occupies denotes a social relationship, because each position is related to another position. A person is a member of a family in relation to other members and the set of interrelationships of the members of a family constitutes its structure. Each person occupies, therefore, a 'place in a social structure'. Radcliffe-Brown uses the term 'social personality' for the 'position' a human being occupies in a social structure. It however does not imply that the position remains the same throughout the life of an individual, for it changes over time. New positions are added; old are deleted. We study persons in terms of social structure and we study social structures in terms of persons who are the unit of what it is composed.

Society is not a 'haphazard conjunction of persons', rather an organised system where norms and values control the relationships between persons. A person knows how he is expected to behave according to these norms and values, and is 'justified in expecting that other persons should do the same.' Radcliffe-Brown includes the following two aspects within the social structure:

1) All social relations of person to person, i.e., interpersonal relations. For example, the kinship structure of any society consists a number of dyadic relations, such as father and son, mother and daughter, mother's brother and sister's son, etc.
2) The differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role. For instance, the relation between men and women, chief and commoners, employers and employees, etc, are aspects of social structure, for they determine social relations between people.

In both cases, we are in fact concerned with relations between persons, which norms and values of that society condition.

Bringing these together, Radcliffe-Brown says that social structure is that concrete reality that comprises the 'set of actually existing relations at a given moment of time, which link together certain human beings.' We can conduct direct observation on social structure – we can see the 'actually existing relations', describe and classify them, and understand the relations of persons with others. Social structure is observable, empirical, and fully amenable to study by methods of natural and biological sciences.

c) Structural Type

When a social anthropologist carries out his fieldwork in a particular, territorially defined, society, what he actually investigates is its social structure, i.e., 'an actually existing concrete reality, to be directly observed.' But from what he observes, he abstracts a general picture of that society. In this context, Radcliffe-Brown makes a distinction between 'social structure' and 'structural type or form'. This distinction is also related with Radcliffe-Brown's conception of science, and of social anthropology as a 'natural science of society'. He says that as distinguished from history (or biography), science is not concerned with the particular or unique. It is concerned, rather, with the general, with propositions that apply to the entire phenomenon. We are concerned with, he says, 'the form of the structure'.

Say, in the study of an Australian tribe, an anthropologist is concerned with the relationship between the mother's brother and sister's son. He observes several instances of this relationship in their actual context, from which he abstracts its 'general or normal' form, which is largely invariant. If social structure is bound by factors of time and space, varying from one context to another, structural type is general and invariant.

Social structure continues over time, a kind of continuity that Radcliffe-Brown calls 'dynamic continuity'. It is like the 'organic structure of a living body'. As a living body constantly renews itself by replacing its cells and energy level, in the same way, the actual 'social life renews the social structure.' Relations between people change over time. New members are recruited in a society because of birth or immigration. While the social structure changes over time, there remains an underlying continuity and relative constancy, which designates its structural form.

Reflection and Action 5.1

What does Radlliffe-Brown mean by dynamic continuity?

This certainly does not imply that the structural form is static — it also changes, sometimes gradually, sometimes with suddenness, as happens in cases of revolution. But even then, some kind of a continuity of structure is maintained. Our job as sociologists and social anthropologists is to discover the structural form of society. It is to move from particular to general, or in the language of Radcliffe-Brown, from 'ideographic' to 'nomothetic'. While the former designates a specific social structure, the latter is the structural form. While the former requires an intensive study of a single society, the latter is an abstraction of the form of that society. Also, the study of a single society needs to be compared with similar studies of other societies. This process, systematically carried out, can lead us to the discovery of general laws that apply to human society as a whole.

For Radcliffe-Brown, the various steps of reaching the general laws are:

1) Intensive study of a social structure using the standard anthropological procedures.
2) Abstraction from this its structural type.
3) Comparing the structural type of a social structure with the structural types of other social structures, by rigorously using the comparative method.

4) Arriving at the laws of society, the invariant propositions that explain human behaviour in diverse social situations.

For Radcliffe-Brown, there is only *one* method of social anthropology, i.e., the comparative method, for it helps us to move from the particular to the general. Social structure is what we study, but what we arrive at is the structural type.

d) **Society and Social Structure**

Radcliffe-Brown's attempt was praiseworthy, for it was the first rigorous attempt to define the concept of social structure, rather than just taking its meaning for granted. However, it led to many questions and confusions. If social structure is a collectivity of interpersonal relations, real and observable, then what is society? Do we study society and find its structure? In his letter to Claude Lévi-Strauss, Radcliffe-Brown gave the following example: 'When I pick up a particular sea-shell on the beach, I recognize it as having a particular structure' (see Kuper, ed., 1977). The question that immediately comes in our mind is: What do I study? The seashell or its structure? Pursuing the example further, Radcliffe-Brown says: 'I may find other shells of the same species which have a similar structure, so that I can say there is a form of structure characteristic of the species.' Here, do I describe the structure of each of these shells and then subject their structures to comparison? Or, do I assume that since they all happen to be seashells, they will have a similar structure?

Further, Radcliffe-Brown writes: 'By examining a number of different species, I may be able to recognize a certain general structural form or principle, that of a helix, which could be expressed by means of logarithmic equation.' Do I compare different species of seashells to arrive at their general structural form? Or, do I compare the structural forms of each of the species of seashells to reach at a structural form that is common to all? These questions clearly show that while there is no confusion between the categories of particular and general, confusion prevails with respect to the distinction between 'society' and 'social structure', 'social life' and 'social structure', and the 'structural form' of a social structure and the 'structural form' of social structures. One more observation: what Radcliffe-Brown understands by the term 'structural type' is what many understand by the term 'social structure'. And, what Radcliffe-Brown calls 'social structure' is what many would call 'society'.

5.4 Social Structure Refers to Relations Between Groups: The Contribution of E.E. Evans-Pritchard

Radcliffe-Brown's paper on social structure, originally the Presidential Address to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1940, referred to Evans-Pritchard's idea of social structure. While Radcliffe-Brown did not disagree with Evans-Pritchard's use of social structure, he found it more useful to include under the term social structure a good deal more than what Evans-Pritchard had included. Evans-Pritchard delineated his concept of social structure in the last section of the last chapter of his book, *The Nuer* (1940).

Evans-Pritchard carried out a piece of intensive fieldwork with the Nuer of

the Sudan. In his first monograph on them, he tried to describe Nuer society on a more abstract plane of analysis than was usual at that time because of a lack of a proper theory. Evans-Pritchard looked for such a theory in his work on the Nuer, although many of his ideas that exercised impact on sociology and social anthropology developed later.

In his monograph on the Nuer, he first gives an account of the importance of cattle for the life of the people he had studied. The ecological system in which they find themselves conditions their territorial distribution and transhumance. The Nuer concepts of time and space arise largely from their patterns of livelihood. Then, Evans-Pritchard examines the territorial sections which form their political system, in the absence of a centralised political authority. The Nuer are a good example of a stateless (or, acephalous) society. Their discussion has given rise to the concept of segmentary political system, where social order is largely a function of the opposition and balance of different sections of society.

Evans-Pritchard's description of the elements of Nuer society and their interrelationship guided him to the concept of social structure. Instead of beginning with the idea of person, as did Radcliffe-Brown, he began with viewing social structure in terms of groups. To quote him (1940: 262):

By social structure we mean relations between groups which have a high degree of consistency and constancy.

Structure is an 'organised combination of groups'. Individuals come and go, they are recruited and eliminated over time, but the groups remain the same, for 'generation after generation of people pass through them' (1940: 262). The processes of life and death condition individuals, but the structure of society endures. It is clear that for Evans-Pritchard, social structure deals with units which are largely invariant, i.e., groups. What Radcliffe-Brown means by 'structural form' is what Evans-Pritchard means by 'social structure'. The groups considered for describing social structure may be called 'structural groups' – the examples of which among the Nuer are territorial groups, lineages and age-sets.

Evans-Pritchard does not consider the family as a 'structural group'. It is because he thinks that the family does not have the kind of consistency and constancy which other groups have. A family disappears at the death of its members and a new family comes into existence. However, it does not imply that the family is less important, for it is 'essential for the preservation of the structure' (1940: 262). New members are born into family, which maintain the system and its continuity. This formulation of structure, Evans-Pritchard clarifies, does not imply that the groups — consistent and constant — that constitute the structure are static. Territorial, lineage and age-set systems do change, but slowly, and 'there is always the same kind of interrelationship between their segments.'

Reflecting on the example of the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard says that the tribe is not a haphazard congregation of residential units. Every local group is segmented, and these segments are fused in relation to other groups. Because of this, each unit can only be defined in terms of the whole system. One may conceptualise a society as a 'system of groups' in which relations exist between 'groups of persons', and these relations are structural relations. Thus, structure is a 'relation between groups'. These relations can be spoken

of in terms of a system. Evans-Pritchard considers kinship relations as a kinship system; or, one may speak of political relations as a political system.

This brings us to the issue of defining a group. For Evans-Pritchard, a group is a congregation of people who consider themselves as a distinct unit in relation to the other units. The members of a group have a discernible sense of identity and they are defined so by other groups. Among the members of a group exist reciprocal obligations. They are expected to fuse together whenever they encounter an issue pertaining to their group or one of its members. The 'vengeance groups' are formed on this basis. Their aim is to avenge the death of one of their members. In a case of homicide, the members of the group of the slain become one as opposed to the members of the group of the slayer, thus emerge two 'structurally equivalent and mutually opposed groups'. In this sense, the segments of a tribe, a lineage, and an age-set are all examples of groups. However, a man's kindred does not constitute a group, and so do the members of a neighbouring tribe or the strangers.

To sum up: for Evans-Pritchard, the parts of social structure, among which structural relations are to be described, are groups that endure over time. Social structure is not an empirical entity for him. From the study of the social relations of people, we move on to an understanding of their groups. When we describe the relations between groups, we are already on our way of describing their social structure. Therefore, social structure is an anthropologist's abstraction from the existing reality. It should be kept in mind here that for Evans-Pritchard (1951), social anthropology is not a branch of natural science, as it is for Radcliffe-Brown, but it is a kind of historiography. Its kinship is with history, and not natural and biological sciences.

5.5 Social Structure is a Model: Contributions of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Leach

Perhaps the most provocative and debatable contribution to the concept of social structure was that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French structuralist, who is famous for his ingenious cross-cultural analysis of myths and kinship systems. If for functionalism, society is a 'kind of living creature', consisting of parts, which can be 'dissected and distinguished', for structuralism, it is the analogy from language that helps us in conceptualizing society. From the study of a given piece of language, the linguist tries to arrive at its grammar, the underlying rules which make an expression meaningful, although the speakers of that language may not know about it. Similarly, the structuralist from a given piece of social behaviour tries to infer its underlying structure. In structuralism, the shift is from observable behaviour to structure, from organic analogy to language (Barnard 2000).

Further, structuralism submits that the set of relations between different parts can be transformed into 'something' that appears to be different from what it was earlier. It is the idea of transformation — of one into another — that lies at the core of structuralism, rather than the quality of relations. Edmund Leach (1968: 486) has given a good example to illustrate this. A piece of music can be transformed in a variety of ways. It is written down, played on a piano, recorded on a phonographic record, transmitted over the radio, and finally played back to the audience. In each case, the piece of music passes through a 'whole series of transformations'. It appears as 'printed notes, as a pattern of finger movements, as sound waves, as modulations of

the grooves on a piece of bakelite, as electromagnetic vibrations, and so on.' But what is common to all these manifestations of music, one different from the other, and each conditioned by its own rules, is their structure. In a similar fashion, while different societies vary, what remains invariant (and common) to them is their structure. Lévi-Strauss (1963) aptly showed this in one of his studies where he compared the totemic society of the Australian Aborigines with Indian caste system, and found that both of them had the same structure. If for Radcliffe-Brown, structure is observable, for Lévi-Strauss, it is an abstract concept. If for Radcliffe-Brown, what persists is the 'structure' of a particular society, at a particular point of time and place, for Lévi-Strauss, what persists is the 'structure of the entire human society' (Barnes, R.H. 2001).

In his celebrated essay of 1953 in A.L. Kroeber's *Anthropology Today*, titled 'Social Structure', Lévi-Strauss says that social structure is not a field of study; it is not a 'province of enquiry'. We do not study social structure, but it is an explanatory method and can be used in any kind of social studies. In opposition to Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss says that the term 'social structure' has nothing to do with empirical reality. It refers to the models that are built up from empirical reality. He writes: '…the object of social-structure studies is to understand social relations with the help of models' (1953: 532). Social structure is a model; it is a method of study.

Here, Lévi-Strauss distinguishes the concept of social structure from that of social relations. The latter are the 'raw data of social experience' – they are the relations between people, empirical and observable. It is from social relations that models comprising the social structure are built. Although the models are built from raw, empirical reality, they cannot be reduced to it. The ensemble of social relations in a given society can be described, but social structure is an anthropologist's construction, built for the purpose of analysis.

Reflection and Action 5.2

How does Levi-Strauss distinguish between the concept of social structure and social relations?

Lévi-Strauss makes three distinctions: first, between observation and experimentation on models; second, the conscious and unconscious character of the models; and third, between mechanical and statistical models. The observation of social relations and the construction of models after these facts need to be distinguished from 'experiments' on models. By experimentation, Lévi-Strauss means the 'controlled comparison' of models of the same or of a different kind, with an intention to identify the model that accounts best for the observed facts. In a structural analysis, the first step is to observe the facts without any bias, then to describe them in relationship to themselves and in relation to the whole. From this, models are constructed, and in the final analysis, the best model is chosen. This distinction is with reference to the anthropologist who studies society.

By comparison, the distinction between conscious and unconscious models is made with reference to the society under study. Conscious models, also known as 'homemade models' and 'norms', are the "insider's models": they are those according to which the society views itself. Underneath these

models are 'deeper structures', the unconscious models, which the society does not perceive directly or consciously. Anthropologists principally work with the models that they construct from the deeper lying phenomena, rather than with conscious models. It is because, Lévi-Strauss says, the aim of conscious models is to 'perpetuate the phenomena' and not to 'explain' it. But, from this, we should not infer that conscious models could be dismissed, for in some cases, they are far more accurate than those that anthropologists build. Even when conscious models are inaccurate, they guide us to deeper structures.

Let us now come to the last distinction. The classic formulation of mechanical models is that they are those models which lie on the same scale as the phenomenon is. And, when they — the model and the phenomenon — lie on a different scale, they are called statistical models. Unfortunately, as critics have noted, Lévi-Strauss does not explain the meaning of the 'same scale'. But from the example he has given, it seems that he is concerned with the quantitative differences between 'what people say' and 'what they do'. To make it clear, Lévi-Strauss gives the example of the laws of marriage. When there is no difference between marriage rules and social groupings — the two are placed on the same scale — the model formed will be mechanical. And when several factors affect the type of marriage and people have no option but to deviate from the rule, the model formed will be statistical.

Box 5.2: Edmund Leach on Social Structure

The British anthropologist, Edmund Leach (1954, 1961), also made a significant contribution to the idea of social structure as a model, although there are many significant differences between the approaches of Lévi-Strauss and Leach to structuralism. For instance, whereas Lévi-Strauss is interested in unearthing the 'universal structures' – structures applicable to all human societies at all point of time — Leach applies the method of structuralism to understand the local (or regional) structures. Because of this, some term Leach's approach 'neo-structural' (Kuper 1996 [1973]).

Leach has formulated a conception of social structure that is "essentially the same as Lévi-Strauss's" (Nutini 1970: 76). Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach divides the 'social universe' into different epistemological categories: the raw data of social experience (i.e., social relations) and the models that are built from it. Models are not empirical; they are the 'logical constructions' in the mind of the anthropologist. Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach also arrives at the distinction between the mechanical and statistical models, i.e., models built respectively on 'what people say' and 'what people do', but he calls mechanical models 'jural rules' and statistical models 'statistical norms'. The meaning Leach gives to 'jural rules' and 'statistical norms' is essentially the same which Lévi-Strauss gives to mechanical and statistical models.

But two important differences stand out. First, for Lévi-Strauss, both mechanical and statistical models are of roughly equal analytical value and they complement each other. For Leach, jural rules and statistical norms should be treated as separate frames of reference. In an analysis, the statistical norms should have priority over the jural rules. We should begin our study with the actual behaviour of people, the deviations that occur and the conformity they achieve. Second, Leach points out that mechanical models or jural rules are qualitative rules of behaviour. Sanctions support

them and they have the power of coercion. Statistical models or norms are only 'statistical averages of individual behaviour'. They do not have any coercive power.

5.6 Conclusion

The concept of social structure has been a 'pleasant puzzle', to remember the words of A.L. Kroeber (1948), to which, at one time, almost every anthropologist and sociologist tried to make a contribution, either by drawing attention to the part (or parts) of society that seemed important to the author, or by lending support to an already existing idea or theory of social structure. As noted in the beginning, the debate concerning social structure has centered around two issues: (1) Among which parts of society are there structural relations? And, (2) is social structure 'real' or a 'model' which the investigator constructs? Of the two major opinions on social structure, Lévi-Strauss's is closely connected to his method of structuralism – social structure is a 'model' devised for undertaking the study of social behaviour (relations and experiences). For Radcliffe-Brown, social structure is an 'empirical' entity, constituting the subject matter of social anthropology and sociology. In his letter to Lévi-Strauss, Radcliffe-Brown expressed his disagreement with the former's concept of social structure and the confusion clouding the idea of social structure as a 'model'. Radcliffe-Brown also thought that what meant by the term 'structural type' was what Lévi-Strauss's term 'model' implied (see Kuper, ed, 1977).

A concept of social structure that the Australian anthropologist, S.F. Nadel, proposes tries to combine the views of both Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss. In his posthumously published *The Theory of Social Structure* (1957), Nadel disagrees with Radcliffe-Brown's idea that social structure is an observable entity, but an abstraction from it. At the same time, he rejects Lévi-Strauss's view that social structure has nothing to do with empirical reality. From Radcliffe-Brown, he borrows the idea that each person occupies a position in the social structure, but from an empirical level of inter-personal interaction, he moves to a level of abstraction where the person becomes the actor who plays a role with respect to the others. This abstraction, however, does not imply that it loses touch with reality. Nadel (1957: 150) writes:

I consider social structure, of whatever degree of refinement, to be still the social reality itself, or an aspect of it, not the logic behind it…

For Nadel, the components of social structure are roles and the pattern (or design) of interconnected roles constitutes the social structure of a society. His definition of social structure is as follows (1957: 12):

We arrive at the structure of a society through abstracting from the concrete population and its behaviour the pattern or network (or 'system') of relationships obtaining 'between actors in their capacity of playing roles relative to one another'.

Besides Nadel, some other sociologists have also emphasised the importance of roles in defining social structure. Parsons (1961), for example, says that the structure of a social system is defined with respect to the 'institutionalized patterns of normative culture'. Norms vary according to, first, the position of actors in interactive situations, and second, the type of activity. Norms define roles, with the corresponding rules of behaviour, and they also

constitute the institutions. The aim of social structure is to regulate human behaviour. In his conception of social structure, Peter Blau (1977) also speaks of the 'social positions among which a population is distributed.' Some of these concepts of social structure have been put to test in empirical situation. For instance, Blau and Schwartz (1984) applied Blau's ideas to understand real life.

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Unit 6

Structure and Function

Contents

Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the premises of functionalism
- discuss the relevance of the concept of function in understanding society
- compare and contrast the theoretical approach of Radcliffe-brown, Malinowski and parsons.

6.1 Introduction

Functionalism is the name of an approach in social anthropology and sociology according to which a society is a whole of interconnected parts, where each part contributes to the maintenance of the whole. The task of sociology is to find out the contribution of each part of society and how society works together as an ordered arrangement of parts. Literally, the word 'function' (from Latin, *fungi*, *functio*, to effect, perform, execute) means 'to perform' or 'to serve' (a purpose). In the field of architecture, it implies that a form should be adapted to usage and material. In areas such as politics and management, it means 'getting things to work'. The word is used in mathematics (in the sense of 'A is a function of B'); it is used in everyday conversation, where it may mean 'job' or 'purpose' (for instance, 'What is your function in the office'?). In fact, what I am asking in the latter question is 'what do you do in your office', and for the act of doing I am using the word 'function'. This word is also used for celebrations and festal occasions, such as 'inaugural function', 'marriage function', etc. In other words, 'function' is a multi-meaning and multi-usage term. Levy, Jr. (1968: 22) writes: 'Perhaps the major difficulty associated with the general concept of function has been the use of a single term to cover several distinctly different referents.'

As a distinct approach, as a way of looking at and analysing society, functionalism emerged first in social anthropology in early twentieth century, and later in sociology, beginning in the 1930s. However, its roots are as ancient as the concept of organic analogy, used in the philosophy of Antiquity by Plato (B.C. 428/7-345/7) and Aristotle (B.C. 384-322). The concept of 'purpose' or 'end' goes back to Aristotle's reference to the *telos* (purpose) of things as their *final cause*. The idea of a latent *telos* is also found in Adam Smith's metaphor of the 'invisible hand' as the automatic mechanism that maximises wealth, individual welfare, and economic efficiency through the increase in labour. It is from *telos* that the word 'teleology' has come, which means that 'everything is determined by a purpose' and the scholars should find out what that purpose is.

Some writers regard Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century scholar, writing after the French Revolution, as the 'father of sociology', because in his writings, one finds a coexistence of two ideas — one from which a scientific study of society emerged, and the other which contributed substantially to the growth of Marxian theory (Giddens 1973). The first idea is that 'scientific methods' should be used for the study of society, and the second is that each society contains in it the germs of its contradiction, because of which it changes over time. Saint-Simon also recognises revolution as an important process of change.

It is the first thought of studying a society scientifically that Auguste Comte (1789-1857), the collaborator of Saint-Simon and the person who has coined the term 'sociology', fully develops under the rubric of what he calls 'positivism' or 'positive philosophy'. In this view, the methods for the study of society come from natural and biological sciences. The aim of the study is to discover the 'laws of evolution' as well as the 'laws of functioning' of society, i.e., 'how has the society evolved with the passage of time and what are the various stages through which it has passed' and 'how does the society function (or work) at a particular point of time.' The knowledge thus generated, Comte thinks, will help us to bring about desirable changes in society, in carrying out the tasks of social reconstruction and amelioration. Comte's aim is to make sociology a 'science of society', quite like the natural and biological sciences, and assign it a place in the hierarchy of sciences. For Comte, being the most general and most specific subject, sociology occupies the summit of the hierarchy of sciences: it is the 'queen of sciences'.

In this unit we expose the concept of function in sociological writings. We begin with the basic premises of functionalism and them look into the theoretical contributions of Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, and Parsons.

6.2 From Positivism to Functionalism

The thesis of functionalism lies in the philosophy of positivism. Comte also makes use of the analogy of society as an organism. Organic analogy has aided the viewing of society as a system of interrelated parts, a view basic to the functional approach. The immediate forerunner of functionalism in sociology is Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), who is a sharp critic of Comte as well as influenced by his ideas, for which he has earned in the words of Alvin Gouldner (1973) the distinction of being 'uneasy Comtean'.

Like Comte, Durkheim is keenly interested in defining the subject matter of sociology as distinct from that of philosophy or biology. For him, sociology is a comparative and an objective study of 'social facts', which are the 'ways of thinking, acting and feeling' that have the 'noteworthy property' of existing outside the 'individual consciousness'. Social facts do not originate in the individual but in the collectivity, in the 'collective mind' (*l' âme collective*). Because they exist outside the individual, they can be studied in the same way as one studies the material objects. Social facts are *comme des choses*, i.e., they are 'things', perceived objectively and outside the individual. This however does not mean that they are as tangible as are the 'material things'. Instead, for their study one uses the same frame of mind which one uses for the study of natural and biological objects that constitute the subject matter of natural and biological sciences. Like Comte, Durkheim also believes that the methods of natural and biological sciences can be used

for the study of social facts. But, these methods are not to be used as they are, rather their suitable application to the science of social facts should be thoughtfully and critically investigated. Durkheim's book titled *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895) was basically concerned with these issues.

Box 6.1: Sociological Explanations

From the study of social facts, sociologists offer what Durkheim calls 'sociological explanations'. Each sociological explanation is consisted of two parts: to quote Durkheim (1895: 123) here: '…to explain a social phenomenon the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills must be investigated separately.' The first component of the sociological explanation is the 'causal-historical explanation': to delineate the cause(s) which produce a phenomenon by examining historical sources rather than indulging in what Radcliffe-Brown calls 'conjectural history'. The second component is 'functional', i.e., the contribution that a part makes to society 'in the establishment of…general harmony' (Durkheim 1895: 125).

Durkheim's definition of function has tremendously influenced the writings of later functionalists, both in social anthropology and sociology. For him, function is the 'contribution' a part makes to the whole for its 'maintenance and well being'. Thus, function is a 'positive contribution': it is inherently good for society (the whole), for it ensures its continuity and healthy maintenance. By making its contribution, each part fulfills one of the needs or needs (*besoin*) of society. Once needs have been fulfilled, society will be able to survive and endure. Durkheim applies this framework of social function in all his studies.

For instance, in his doctoral work, which was on the division of labour, Durkheim (1893) rejects Darwin's idea that once the size of a human population increases, there will be a struggle for existence and those who happen to be fit will survive, while the rest will be eliminated. Instead of lending support to the theory of competition, conflict and elimination, Durkheim shows that as human population increases, society becomes more and more differentiated with the division of labour moving towards the specialisation of jobs. Rather than competing with others for survival, human beings are able to depend on one another, for each specialises in a particular work. Specialisation makes each one of the beings important for society.

Durkheim also rejects the explanations of the division of labour that economists and psychologists had advanced – such as 'the division of labour increases economic efficiency and productivity', or 'it induces happiness', or its opposite, 'it makes people bored with their jobs'. He is critical of the utilitarian (i.e., economic) and individualistic (i.e., psychological) explanations, because according to him none of them actually explains the real function of the division of labour, the contribution it makes to society. For him, the function of the division of labour is sociological: it contributes to social solidarity. Modern industrial society is integrated because of the interdependence that comes into existence with the specialisation of jobs. In his study of Australian totemism, he shows that the function of religion is to produce solidarity in society, 'to bind people in a moral community called church' (Durkheim 1915).

Durkheim is particularly interested in showing that the function of social facts is moral. Social institutions work to produce the goal of integration.

With this perspective, he is able to account for the phenomena that to many may appear 'unhealthy' for society. For example, he regards crime as a 'normal' and 'healthy' feature of all societies, because it reinforces collective sentiments and works towards the evolution of morality and law. He argues that the existence of criminal behaviour constitutes an index of the flexibility of society. A normal rate of crime indicates that the society lacks the total authority to 'suppress' all 'divergences' of the individual. Crime shows the existence of social conditions that enable individuals to express them as 'individuals'. However, if crime exceeds the normal limits, then it becomes unhealthy (or 'pathological'), jeopardizing the normal functioning of society. As is clear, Durkheim distinguishes between the 'normal' and the 'pathological' forms of social facts. What is general in a society is normal and what is not is pathological. The former performs the function of integrating society, whereas the latter, thwarts the process of integration. Therefore, it needs to be brought under control with the help of concerted collective action. Durkheim is also in favour of undertaking the attempts towards social amelioration, but they should follow a rigorous sociological study of the phenomenon.

6.3 The Premises of Functionalism

Durkheim is not a 'functionalist' in the sense in which this term has come to be used for the approach that the British social anthropologists, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), have espoused. Durkheim does not use the term 'functionalism', although he defines the concept of social function, as we noted previously, and the second part of his sociological explanation deals with the functional explanation. One comes across in Durkheim's works a fine coexistence of the diachronic (genetic, evolutionary, and historical) and the synchronic (society 'here and now') approaches to the study of society, but it is quite clear that the study of the contemporary society occupies a preferred place in his writings. For instance, in his celebrated study of religion, he begins with a consideration of Australian totemism as the most elementary form of religious life, but he does not start speculating it as the earliest form and then, as his predecessors had done, offering theories to explain it. He is rather more concerned with the structure and function of totemism and how its study can help us in understanding the place of religion in complex societies. This emphasis on the study of synchronous (or 'present') societies exerted a tremendous impact on later scholars.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the continuation of the old evolutionary approach and also, its gradual decline. It also witnessed the rise of functionalism. Adam Kuper (1973) thinks that 1922 was the 'year of wonder' (*annus mirabilis*) of functionalism, for in this year were published two monographs that substantiated the functional approach. One was by Radcliffe-Brown titled *The Andaman Islanders*, and the other, by Malinowski, titled *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. The impact of anthropological functionalism was felt in other disciplines, particularly sociology. Although there were scholars — such as Kingsley Davis (1959) — who saw nothing new in functional approach because they thought that sociologists had always been doing what functionalists wanted them to do, there were others (such as Talcott Parsons) who were clearly impressed with the writings of functional anthropologists. As a result of the writings of these people, functionalism emerged as an extremely important approach, holding its sway till the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In its history of about 150 years, first in the

positivism of Comte, then in the 'sociologistic positivism' of Durkheim, and then, in the works of the twentieth-century functionalists, functionalism has come to comprise a number of variants and foci. Pointed differences exist between different functionalists — in fact, some of them happen to be archrivals, like Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski. Notwithstanding their differences, it seems that all functionalists share the following five propositions:

1) Society (or culture) is a system like any other system, such as solar system, mechanical system, atomic system, chemical system, or organic system.
2) As a system, society (or culture) consists of parts (like, institutions, groups, roles, associations, organisations), which are interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent.
3) Each part performs its own function — it makes its own contribution to the whole society (or culture) — and also, it functions in relationship with other parts.
4) A change in one part brings about a change in other parts, or at least influences the functioning of other parts, because all the parts are closely connected.
5) The entire society or culture — for which we can use the term 'whole' is greater than the mere summation of parts. It cannot be reduced to any part, or no part can explain the whole. A society (or culture) has its own identity, its own 'consciousness', or in Durkheim's words, 'collective consciousness'.

6.4 Functionalism in Social Anthropology: Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski

The first approach in social anthropology for the analysis of society was evolutionary, which though present earlier, in the writings of Comte and Spencer, was almost firmly established after the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). During the second half of the nineteenth century, almost every anthropologist was concerned with two issues. First, how was the institution (or, cultural practice, trait) established in the first place? What has been its origin? Second, what are the various stages through which it has passed to reach its contemporary state? Both the questions were important and relevant, but in the absence of authentic data, the early (or, 'classical') evolutionists extravagantly indulged in speculations and conjectures, imagining the causes (or, the factors) that gave rise to institutions and the stages of their evolution. Most of the evolutionists — barring a few possible exceptions, such as Lewis H. Morgan and Edward B. Tylor — had not themselves collected any data on which they based their generalisations. They almost completely relied upon the information that travelers, missionaries, colonial officers, and soldiers, who were in touch with non-Western societies, provided, knowing full well that much of these data might be biased, exaggerated, incomplete, and incorrect. Because they themselves did not carry out any fieldwork, they earned the notorious title of 'arm-chair anthropologists'.

Both the founders of the British functional approach (Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski) were vehemently critical of the nineteenth-century evolutionism. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) said that it was based on 'conjectural history', a term we used earlier, and not 'authentic history'. It was 'pseudo-historical', thus

devoid of a scientific value. For Malinowski (1944), classical evolutionism was a 'limbo of conjectural reconstructions'. With the works of these scholars came a shift from:

1) Arm-chair anthropology to fieldwork-based studies;
2) The study of the origin and stages of evolution of society and its institutions (diachronic studies) to society 'here and now' (synchronic studies);
3) The study of the entire societies and cultures (macro approach) to the study of particular societies, especially the small-scale societies (micro approach); and
4) An understanding of society confined to a theoretical level to putting the knowledge of society 'here and now' to practical use, to bring about desired changes in society. Rather than remaining just an 'academic study of the oddities of society' — different and bizarre customs and practices — the knowledge we have acquired should be used for improving upon the conditions of people, for improving upon the relations of local people with the outside world. Incidentally, Malinowski called this concern of anthropology 'practical anthropology'.

The scholars who later came to be known as 'functionalists' sought to shift the focus of their study from 'what society was' to 'what society is', and this study should be carried out not by speculative methods, but by living with people in their natural habitats and learning from them, from the field.

It was not against the processes of evolution and diffusion that the functionalists leveled their criticism, for they knew that they were important processes of change. In fact, both Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski thought that after they were through most of their important fieldwork-based studies, they would take up the study of the processes of evolution and diffusion. What they were against was a study of the past through 'imaginative history' rather than one based on facts. If authentic documents were available about societies, they must readily be used for some insights into change. But the functionalists noted that these documents were not available about 'primitive and pre-literate' societies, therefore we would not have any knowledge of the development of social institutions among them. Instead of speculating how they have evolved, we should study 'what they are', using the scientific methods of observation, comparison, and arriving at generalisations.

a) **Structural-functional Approach of Radcliffe-Brown**

Abandoning the search for origins and the pasts of institutions, and the ways in which cultural traits have diffused from one part of the world to the other, Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 180) defines each society as a 'functionally interrelated system' in which 'general laws or functions operate'. He accepts that Durkheim offered the first systematic formulation of the concept of function and that this concept is based on an 'analogy between social life and organic life'. However, with reference to Durkheim's use of the term 'need' for the conditions that must be satisfied for a system to continue, Radcliffe-Brown thinks that this term would direct us towards a postulation of 'universal human or societal needs'. As a consequence, the theory according to which events and developments are meant to fulfill a purpose and happen because of that will trap us. Known as the theory of teleology, as we said earlier, Radcliffe-Brown suspects that functionalism might become teleological. He thus substitutes for the word 'need' the term 'necessary

conditions of existence.' He believes that the question of which conditions are necessary for survival is an empirical one, and the study of a society will tell us about this. Radcliffe-Brown recognizes the 'diversity of conditions necessary for the survival of different systems.' Once we have recognized this, we shall avoid asserting that each item of a culture must have a function and that 'items in different cultures must have the same function' (Turner 1987: 48).

Radcliffe-Brown dislikes the use of the word 'functionalism', which Malinowski propagated with enthusiasm. His objection is that '-isms' (like functional*ism*) are ideologies, schools of thought, philosophies, and realms of opinions. Science does not have either of them. What it has are the methods of study, opting for those methods that are regarded as the best for study. A scientist does not have any passionate relationship with any methods. For him, they are all of equal importance and worth, but their operational value lies in carrying out a satisfactory study of a phenomenon according to the canons of scientific research.

Moreover, Radcliffe-Brown also looks at the distinction between an organism and society. For instance, an organism dies, but a society continues to survive over time, although it may be changed and transformed. An organism can be studied even when its parts have stopped working. In other words, the structure of an organism can be studied separately from its function, which is not the case with society. Social structure is observable only when it functions. Structure and function are inalienable concepts in social anthropology; that is why Radcliffe-Brown calls his approach 'structural-functional', rather than 'functional', as many have done. He writes (1952: 180):

The concept of function…involves the notion of a *structure* consisting of a *set of relations* amongst *unit entities*, the *continuity* of the structure being maintained by a *life-process* made up of the activities of the constituent units.

Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functional approach comprises the following assumptions:

1) A necessary condition for survival of a society is a minimal integration of its parts.
2) The concept of function refers to those processes that maintain the necessary integration or solidarity.
3) And, in each society, structural features can be shown to contribute to the maintenance of necessary solidarity.

For Durkheim, the central concept is of solidarity, while for Radcliffe-Brown, it is the 'structural continuity' of society. For example, in an analysis of the lineage system, according to Radcliffe-Brown, one must first assume that some minimal degree of solidarity must exist for it to continue. Then, one must examine the processes associated with the lineage system, assessing their consequences for maintaining social integration. One of the processes the investigator would come across is the role of lineage systems in adjudicating conflicts in societies where they are land-owning groups. They define who has the right to land and through which side of the family it would pass. In these societies, lineage is a 'corporate group'. Descending through these steps, one will explain the integration of the economic system.

Then, one will move to the other systems of society, analyzing at each level the contribution a part will make to the structural continuity of the whole.

Reflection and Action 6.1

What are the assumptions of Radcliffe-Brown's structural functional approach?

Radcliffe-Brown is far from being dogmatic in his assertions. For him, the functional unity (or integration) of a social system is a hypothesis. That we look for integration and structural continuity of society does not imply that it does not change. Radcliffe-Brown believes that the states of 'social health' (eunomia) and 'social illness' (dysnomia) constitute two ends of the continuum, and the actual society seems to lie somewhere in between.

b) **The functionalism of Malinowski**

By comparison to Radcliffe-Brown, it is Malinowski who claims the creation of a separate 'school', the 'Functional School'. The aim of functional analysis for him (1926: 132) is to arrive at the

> explanation of anthropological facts at all levels of development by their function, by the part they play within the integral system of culture.

He (1926: 132-3) assumes that

> in every civilization every custom, material object, ideas and belief fulfills some vital function, has some task to accomplish, represents an indispensable fact within a working whole.

Whereas Radcliffe-Brown begins with society and its necessary conditions of existence (i.e., integration), Malinowski's starting point is the individual, who has a set of 'basic' (or 'biological') needs that must be satisfied for its survival. It is because of the importance that Malinowski gives the individual that the term 'psychological functionalism' is reserved for him, in comparison to Radcliffe-Brown's approach which is called 'sociological functionalism' because in this society is the key concept.

Malinowski's approach distinguishes between three levels: the biological, the social structural, and the symbolic (Turner 1987: 50-1). Each of these levels has a set of needs that must be satisfied for the survival of the individual. It is on his survival that the survival of larger entities (such as groups, communities, societies) is dependent. Malinowski proposes that these three levels constitute a hierarchy. At the bottom is placed the biological system, followed next by the social-structural, and finally, by the symbolic system. The way in which needs at one level are fulfilled will affect the way in which they will be fulfilled at the subsequent levels.

The most basic needs are the biological, but this does not imply any kind of reductionism, because each level constitutes its distinct properties and needs, and from the interrelationship of different levels that culture emerges as an integrated whole. Culture is the kernel of Malinowski's approach. It is 'uniquely human', for it is not found to exist among sub-humans. Comprising all those things — material and non-material – that human beings have made right from the time they separated from their simian ancestors, culture has been the instrument that satisfies the biological needs of human beings. It is a need-serving and need-fulfilling system. Because of this role of culture in satisfying biological needs that Malinowski's functionalism is also known as 'bio-cultural functionalism.'

One more difference between Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski may be noted here. A concept fundamental to Malinowski — the concept of culture — is a mere epiphenomenona (secondary and incidental) for Radcliffe-Brown. He believes that the study of social structure (which for him is an observable entity) encompasses the study of culture; therefore, there is no need to have a separate field to study culture. Further, whilst social structure is concerned all about observations, what anthropologists see and hear about the individual peoples, culture is in the minds of people, not amenable to observation in the same way as social structure is. Radcliffe-Brown wants to make social anthropology a branch of natural science, which would be possible when there is an empirically investigable subject matter.

Reflection and Action 6.2

What are the major differences between the theoretical approaches of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski?

The basis of Malinowski's approach is a theory of 'vital sequences', which have a biological foundation and are incorporated into all societies. These sequences number eleven, each composed of an 'impulse', an associated physiological 'act', and a satisfaction which results from that act (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1

	Impulse	Act	Satisfaction
1.	Drive to breathe; gasping for air.	Intake of oxygen	Elimination of CO_2 in tissues Satiation
2.	Hunger	Ingestion of food	Quenching
3.	Thirst	Absorption of liquid	Detumescence
4.	Sex appetite	Conjugation	Restoration of muscular and nervous energy
5.	Fatigue	Rest	Satisfaction of fatigue
6.	Restlessness	Activity	Awakening with restored energy
7.	Somnolence	Sleep	Removal of tension Abdominal relaxation
8.	Bladder pressure	Micturition	Relaxation
9.	Colon pressure	Defecation	Return to normal state
10.	Fright	Escape from danger	
11.	Pain	Avoidance by effective act	

Permanent Vital Sequences Incorporated in All Culture

For instance, the impulse of somnolence accompanies the act of sleep, resulting in satisfaction by 'awakening with restored energy' (Malinowski 1944: 77; Barnard 2000: 68). Malinowski follows this eleven-fold paradigm with a set of seven biological needs and their respective cultural responses (see Table 6.2).

Table 6.2

Basic Needs	Cultural Responses
1. Metabolism	Commissariat
2. Reproduction	Kinship
3. Bodily comfort	Shelter
4. Safety	Protection
5. Movement	Activities
6. Growth	Training
7. Health	Hygiene

For example, the first need is of food, and the cultural mechanisms are centered on the processes of food getting, for which Malinowski uses the term 'commissariat', which means the convoy that transports food. Similarly, the second need is of reproduction (biological continuity of society) and the cultural response to which is kinship concerned with regulating sex and marriage. From this, Malinowski goes on to four-fold sequences, which he calls the 'instrumental imperatives', and associates each one of them with their respective cultural responses. The four-fold sequence is of economy, social control, education, and political organisation. From here, he shifts to the symbolic system — of religion, magic, beliefs and values — examining its role in culture.

6.5 Functionalism of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) and Robert K. Merton (1910 - 2003)

In 1975, in an important article, Parsons labels his student, Robert Merton and himself 'arch-functionalists'. He also explains here why he has abandoned the term 'structural functionalism', which, at one time, he used for his approach. For him, structure refers to 'any set of relations among parts of a living system'. On empirical grounds, he says, it can be assumed or shown that these relations are stable over a time period. By process, which is the correlative concept with structure, one refers to the 'changes' that occur in the state of the system or its relevant parts. With respect to structure, the key concept is of *stability*, and with respect to process, it is of *change*. Thus, by structure, we refer to a pattern of relationships in a social system, and process refers to the changes occurring in that system. A significant characteristic of 'structural functionalism' has been that it has stressed 'structure' more than 'process'.

In the article mentioned above, Parsons states that the concept of function stands at a 'higher level of theoretical generality'. It is far more analytical than the concept of structure, or even process, although function encompasses the latter. It is because the concept of function is concerned with the 'consequences' of the existence and the nature of structures that can be empirically described. And, it is also concerned with the processes that take place in these systems. Parsons thinks that his original formulation under the rubric of 'structural functionalism' tends to analyze society as if it is static, but the new formulation, where stress is laid on the concept of function than structure, in the name of functionalism, takes much more account of change and evolution. The new formulation sets out to examine the functions of 'processes' and their consequences for 'static' structures.

For example, one may examine in the American context, the function of the process of education of women on 'static' structures like family.

Parsons' functionalism is best known in terms of the 'functional imperatives', the essential conditions required for the enduring existence of a system (Parsons 1951). Also known as the 'AGIL model' (based on the first letters of the four functions that Parsons has devised) or the 'four-function paradigm', it evolved from Parsons' collaborative work with Robert F. Bales in experiments on leadership in small groups (Rocher 1974). These four functions help us to explain how a state of balance (i.e. equilibrium) emerges in a system. One of the important problems in sociology for Parsons is what he has called the 'Hobbesian problem of order' — he calls it so after the famous political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, one of the founders of the theory of 'social contract', who was concerned with the question of how order comes in society. Parsons explores the role of these four functions in giving rise to equilibrium in a system.

Earlier it was noted that the functionalist's model of society as one of 'interdependence and self-equilibrium' is similar to the biological model of an organism. Parsons traces his interest in equilibrium to W.B. Cannon's idea of homeostatic stabilization of physiological processes and to his training in biology at Amherst College where he had studied. Also, the impact of Malinowski on him was unmistakable, especially the idea of the primacy of the biological system. In the case of society, Parsons submits that the institutions (or structures) maintain (or re-establish) equilibrium by fulfilling the 'needs', which must be satisfied if the system has to persist. Institutions (or structures) also solve the recurring problems in a manner similar to the way in which the units of the organism comparable to the institutions (or structures) of societies do in their natural environment. The system ensures that these institutions (or structures) work appropriately on everyday basis, satisfying the needs. For achieving equilibrium, society requires the processes of socialization, the internalization of societal values, and the mechanisms of social control so that deviance is checked.

All 'action systems' — and society is one of them — face four major 'problems' (or have four major 'needs'), namely Adaptation (A), Goal Attainment (G), Integration (I), and Pattern Maintenance, or, as Parsons later renamed it, Latent Pattern Maintenance—Tension Management, or simply, Latency (L). Parsons pictures society (or the social system) as a large square, which he divides into four equal parts. These parts are the four functional problems, represented by the acronym, AGIL (see Diagram 1). The underlying idea is that all systems need to accomplish these four functions in order to survive. The meaning of these four 'functional imperatives' is as follows:

1) Adaptation: By this is meant the problem of securing sufficient resources from the society's *external* environment and distributing them throughout the system. Each society needs certain institutions that perform the function of adaptation to the environment – which is an *external* function. Adaptation provides the *means* — the *instrumental* aspects — to achieve goals. Biological organism performs the function of adaptation in the general system of action. In the context of society, economic institution performs this function.

2) Goal Attainment: This function is concerned with the need of the system to mobilize its resources to attain the goals and to establish priorities among them. It mobilizes motivations of the actors and organises their

efforts. In the general system of action, personality performs this function, while in case of society this task is given to the political institution, because power is essential for implementation and decision-making. Goal attainment is concerned with *ends* — the *consummatory* aspects. Since goals are delineated in relation with the external environment, it is, like adaptation, an *external* function.

3) Integration: It is regarded as the 'heart' of the four-function paradigm (Wallace and Wolf 1980: 36). By integration is meant the need to coordinate, adjust, and regulate relationships among various actors (or, the units of the system, such as the institutions), so that the system is an 'ongoing entity'. According to the general theory of action, the social system performs this function, whereas in society, legal institutions and courts are entrusted with this task. Integration is concerned with *ends*, and the *internal* aspects of the system.

4) Latency (Pattern Maintenance and Tension Management): This function pertains to the issues of providing knowledge and information to the system. In the general theory of action, culture — the repository of knowledge and information — accomplishes this function. Culture does not *act* because it does not have energy. It lays hidden, supplying actors (who are high in energy) with knowledge and information they require for carrying out action. Because culture exists 'behind' the actions of people, it is called 'latent'. Integration takes care of two things: first, it motivates actors to play their roles in the system and maintain the value patterns; and second, to provide mechanisms for managing internal tensions between different parts and actors. The problem that every society faces is of keeping its value system intact and ensuring that the members conform to the rules. It will be possible when societal values are properly transmitted and imbibed. The institutions that carry out this function are family, religion, and education. Latency gives *means* to achieve ends; it is *internal* to the system.

AGIL Model

	Means (Instrumental)	**Ends (Consummatory)**	
External **A**	Adaptation	Goal attainment	**G**
Internal **L**	Latency (pattern maintenance and tension-relieving mechanisms)	Integration	**I**

General Level of Action Theory	
Organism	Personality
Culture	Social System

AGIL Functions in the Social System	
Economy	Polity
Fiduciary System	Societal Community

Fig. 1

With this four-function paradigm in mind, Parsons (1973) jointly carried out (with Gerald Platt) a study of higher education in America, by conducting a survey of members of American colleges and universities. An important conclusion of this study was that American universities and colleges specialise in furthering the rational (or 'scientific') approach to knowledge. The central shared value within the American system of higher education is of cognitive rationality. This value is of paramount significance to contemporary American society. The American system of higher education, therefore, transmits and maintains values central to its society (of which it is a part), thus performing the function of pattern maintenance.

For the purpose of analysis, Parsons identifies sub-systems corresponding to the AGIL model in all systems and their sub-systems (see Diagram 1). As we have seen, at the general level of action theory, the biological organism performs the function of adaptation, the personality system, the function of goal attainment, the social system integrates different units, and the cultural system is concerned with pattern maintenance. Then, the social system is broken down into the four AGIL functions. We noted earlier that economy performs the function of adaptation, whereas, polity (or political institution), the function of goal attainment. For the sub-system that carries out the function of integration, Parsons uses the term 'societal community', which reminds one of Ferdinand Tönnies's ideas of *gemeinschaft* ('community'). 'Societal community' produces solidarity, unity, cohesiveness, and loyalty to norms, values, and institutions. The function of pattern maintenance, Parsons says, is the task of what he calls the 'fiduciary system', which pertains to the nature of a trust or a trusteeship. This system produces and legitimizes moral values, beliefs, and expressive symbols.

Each of the sub-systems of the system can be taken up for analysis by treating it as a 'system', and then, breaking it down into four parts looking for its components that respectively perform the functions of adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. This way of analyzing society is known as the systemic approach.

6.6 Conclusion

Parsons's AGIL model is an ideal type, applicable more to differentiated societies than simple societies. In the latter case, institutions may collapse into one, with the result that the same institution may perform different functions. The example of family may be cited here, which carries out economic, political, and religious functions, in addition to the functions traditionally assigned to it, like socialization of the young. In communist societies, the party may decide the aspects of economy – the processes of production and distribution – and thus, adaptation and goal attainment may appear indistinguishable.

Parsons' theory is popularly known as a 'grand theory' – an all-encompassing, unified theory – which is believed to have a large explanatory power. However, Parsons' student, Robert Merton, is skeptical of such a theory, for it is too general to be of much use (Merton 1957). Instead, he expresses his preference for mid-level (middle-range) theories, which cover certain delimited aspects of social phenomena (such as groups, social mobility, or role conflict). Partially because of this middle-range strategy, Merton's functionalism is quite different from that of Parsons.

For instance, Merton abandons the search for any functional prerequisites that will be valid in all social systems. He also rejects the idea of the earlier functionalists that recurrent social phenomena should be explained in terms of their benefits to society as a whole. For criticism, Merton identifies the three postulates of earlier functionalists given below:

1) Postulate of the functional unity of society. It is an assumption that there is unity in society, which comes about because of the contributions that parts make to the whole.

2) Postulate of the universal functionalism. It is an assumption that all social or cultural forms have positive functions, which are for the maintenance and well being of society.

3) Postulate of indispensability. It is an assumption that the function that a social or cultural form performs is an indispensable precondition for the survival of society.

Merton notes that none of these postulates are empirically justifiable. For instance, there is no reason to suppose that particular institutions are the only ones to fulfill the functions. Empirical research shows that there may be a wide range of what Merton has termed 'functional alternatives' that may be able to perform the same function.

With a critical look, Merton tries to attempt what he calls a 'codification of functional analysis in sociology', a functional paradigm (or perspective) (which is not a grand theory) that takes into consideration the actual dimensions of social reality, of conformity and deviance, understanding and explaining them. Like other functionalists, he views society as a system of interconnected parts, where the functioning of a part has implications for the functioning of other parts and the entire system. Like his predecessors, he is interested in the concepts of equilibrium and integration, and the contribution of customs and institutions to the persistence of societies. His definition of function is also in terms of the 'positive contribution' of a part to the whole: functions are those contributions or consequences that 'make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system.' For the working of society and its institutions, it is important that all share a set of common values and norms, which is another distinguishing property of functionalism.

While agreeing with other functionalists on certain points stated above, Merton has made a distinct contribution to a set of two typologies, namely, the distinction between 'function' and 'dysfunction', and between 'manifest' and 'latent' functions. Most functionalists think that all contributions are inherently good or 'functional' for society, a proposition Merton finds difficult to accept. He thinks there are acts that have 'consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system'. Such acts have harmful consequences, the technical term for which is 'dysfunction'. It is, therefore, expected that the sociologist will always ask the following question: 'For whom are the consequences functional or dysfunctional?' The same institution can be functional in one context and dysfunctional in another. All social institutions are expected to have some mix of functions and dysfunctions. Whether the institution tilts to the pole of function or dysfunction in a continuum will depend upon the net balance between the functional and dysfunctional consequences.

Box 6.2: Manifest and Latent Function

The distinction between manifest and latent functions has its roots in the writings of the founders in sociology. In his study of religion, for example, Durkheim (1915) makes a distinction between 'what people do of which they are aware' and 'what emerges from their collective acts which they had not intended and anticipated.' When people assemble for collective totemic rituals, their explicit aim is to honour their totem, but what these rituals produce is a sense of we-ness, which is an unintended, unrecognised, and unanticipated consequence. Following this, one can say that manifest functions are those consequences people observe or expect, while latent functions are those consequences that are neither recognised nor intended.

Merton was able to advance four types of explanations in terms of the two dichotomies (function and dysfunction; manifest and latent functions). The earlier functionalists put forth only one explanation and that too with respect to latent functions. Merton's conceptual scheme guided empirical research, rather than remaining a theory with several explanatory claims, like the 'grand theory' of Parsons.

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Unit 7

Structure, Function and Neo-Functionalism

Contents

Learning Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to

- explain the major criticism of functionalism that led to they rise of neo-functionalism
- discuss the premises and basic of orientations of neo-functionalism
- critically evaluate the merits and demerits of neo-functionalism.

7.1 Introduction

Without exaggeration, one may say that in the history of social anthropology and sociology, no theory has generated so much of interest, enthusiasm, and response as did functionalism. Known by different names (such as 'functional approach', 'structural-functional approach', 'structural-functionalism', 'Functional School', etc.), functionalism emerged as some kind of a unified methodology and theory in the 1930s. Earlier, right from the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was a body of scattered ideas and propositions. Until the 1960s, its reputation was unassailable, as its adherents were scholars of outstanding merit, who were known (and are still known) for various other contributions besides developing it both in terms of theory and method. For example, the famous American functionalist, Talcott Parsons, is well known for his contribution to family sociology, the school as a social system, role analysis in medical institutions, professions and problems of the blacks, evolutionism, etc. Similarly, Robert Merton's contribution to social structure and anomie, deviance and conformity, dysfunctions of bureaucracy, sociology of science, survey methods, role-set, etc, will always be referred.

During this period from the 1930s to the 1960s, when functional approach was virtually unchallenged in the United States of America and the other parts of the world, some of its criticisms were undoubtedly surfacing. For instance, the British social anthropologist, Sir E.E. Evans-Pritchard, rejected the idea of social anthropology as a science (held by the protagonist of the structural-functional approach, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown) and viewed it rather as a 'comparative history'. Although Evans-Pritchard began as a functionalist, he transformed into a humanist. Sir Edmund R. Leach also started his career in social anthropology as a functionalist, he then moved to the 'processual analysis', i.e., looking at society as a 'process in time', as it is evident from his 1954 book on political systems. Later, under the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss, he became a structuralist, and came to be known as a neostructuralist (Kuper 1973). His 1961 publication of *Rethinking Anthropology* offered a challenge to structural-functionalism. In spite of these criticisms, functionalism continued to survive with glory.

But by the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the criticisms of the functional theory increased manifold. Parsons's attempts to merge theories based on action with those based on structures were unconvincing to many critics. The rehabilitation of Marxian approach in sociology and the successful emergence of the conflict theory was a big blow to functionalism. Several new theories and approaches, each trying to bring in the aspects that functionalism had ignored, became the focal points. It seemed clear to many critics that sociology had entered a post-functional, a post-Parsonian phase in its development.

Gradually, after a brief hiatus, during the 1980s, there was a revival of interest in Parsons's work – some call it a phase of a 'rediscovery' of Parsons. Initially, it had little to do with structural-functionalism, but with Parsons's ability to synthesize the works of the classical thinkers (such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto) to explore a theory of social action in his *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), which he ably used to advance fields like economy and society, family and industrialisation, etc. Following this was a resurgence of interest in Parsons's functionalism, first in Germany and then, America. In 1985, Jeffrey C. Alexander introduced the term 'neofunctionalism' with an aim to reconsider and revise Parsons's theory. Neo-functionalism offered a critique of the fundamental propositions of the original theory of functionalism. It examined the aspects of several other theories – some of which had conflicting relations with functionalism, for example, Marxism – in order to integrate them with neofunctionalism. Because of this, neo-functionalism does not manifest itself in one single theory, rather as several variants put together under the same rubric. Against this background, Alexander (1985) emphasizes that neofunctionalism should be considered to a lesser extent as a theory and more as a 'wide-ranging *intellectual tendency* or *movement*'.

This unit centers around the critical evolution of functionalism and the emergence of neo-functionalism. We will explore the concept of neo-functionalism is n sociological writings and examine its merits and limitation.

7.2 Criticisms of Functionalism

One of the main criticisms of functionalism is that it does not adequately deal with history. In other words, it is inherently *ahistorical* (but not anti-historical). It does not deal with the questions of past and history, although the advocates of functionalism have considered evolution and diffusion as important processes of change. Functionalism in social anthropology in the 1930s emerged as a reaction to the nineteenth century 'pseudo-historical' and 'speculative' evolutionism and diffusionism. It also tried to overcome the ethnocentric biases of the earlier approaches, which regarded the contemporary pre-literate societies, popularly known as 'primitive societies', and certain customs and practices found among them as remnants of past. Edward Tylor unhesitatingly regarded the 'contemporary primitives' as 'social fossils' and 'survivals' of the past, assuming that their study would guide us to an understanding of the cultural traits of the societies of prehistoric times (Harris 1968: 164-5). This would help us in reconstructing the history of humankind.

Closely related with this is another criticism of functionalism: it does not effectively deal with the contemporary processes of social change. Thus, in essence, because it is neither able to study the pasts of societies nor the

contemporary change process, it is more suited to the study of 'contemporary static structures', if there are any. Or, perhaps, it portrays the societies it studies as if they are static, which, in reality, may not be so. The picture of a society that functionalists present is like the picture of a 'frozen river' that tells nothing about its ebb and flow. By analogy, functionalists 'freeze society' in the same manner as a still camera 'freezes' people and locations in its frame.

There are two views on this issue. First, the problem is believed to lie with the theory of functionalism, because when the parts of a society are seen as reinforcing one another as well as the system, when each part fits well with the other parts, then it is difficult to explain how these parts can contribute to change (Cohen 1968). Or, why should the parts change or contribute to change when they are all in a state of harmony? The second opinion is that there is nothing in functionalism which prevents it from dealing with the issues of history and change. For instance, Parsons's 1966 book titled *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* reflects the ability of structural-functionalism to handle the dimensions of change. So does Smelser's work of 1959 on industrial revolution. The problem lies, according to some, not with the theory of functionalism, but its practitioners, who rarely address the issues of change and even when they do, it is in developmental and adaptive terms than in revolutionary (Turner and Maryanski 1979). Whether the problem of functionalism has to do with the theory or its practitioners, 'the fact remains that the main contributions of structural functionalists lie with the study of static, not changing, social structures' (Ritzer 2000: 115).

Another criticism of functionalism is that it is unable to deal effectively with conflict. Functionalists have overemphasized harmonious relationships. They tend to exaggerate consensus, stability, equilibrium, and integration, disregarding the forces of conflict and disorder, and changes emerging from them. For them, conflict is necessarily destructive and occurs outside the framework of society. One may remember here Durkheim who regarded 'anomie' (the state of normlessness) as a 'social sickness'. Both Comte and later, Durkheim were staunchly critical of the Marxist and socialist thoughts, for they believed that the need of that time (when they were writing) was social reconstruction and order. Society had already become quite disintegrated, Comte said, because of the French Revolution and any support rendered to the idea of revolution would further accentuate disorder. Thus Comte's positivism and Durkheim's 'functional explanations' paid scant attention to the issues of conflict.

Box 7.1: Early Twentieth Century Functionalism

The early twentieth-century anthropological functionalism certainly inherited the legacy of the past, the theory of social order, but there was another reason why it consistently ignored the aspects of conflict and change. It received its empirical substantiation not from philosophical premises (as it did in case of Comte) or from secondary data (as was the case with Durkheim), but from first-hand, observation-based studies of simple societies, like that of Andamanese or Trobriand Islanders. The societies the anthropologists studied were largely cut off from the outside world. By comparison to other societies of the world, a higher degree of normative consensus prevailed among them because they were largely homogeneous. They had by and large *one* culture. Social sanctions were undisputed among them, contra-normative

actions were negligible, conformity to rules and tradition was higher and valued, and relatively speaking, the extent and magnitude of change was definitely less. It however did not mean that they were 'changeless', but they were changing slowly, at a snail's speed.

In the words of Robert Redfield (1955), these societies were 'past-oriented' in comparison to modern societies which were 'future-oriented'. The 'past-oriented' societies were proud of their tradition, which for them was sacrosanct; they wanted to keep it intact and therefore, any attempt to assail it was strongly dealt with. The 'future-oriented' societies were not satisfied with their lot; they looked forward to changing their lifestyles, technology, and norms and values. Since the substantiation of anthropological functionalism came from the empirical study of 'past-oriented', technologically simpler, pre-literate, and non-civilized societies, it was obvious that the characteristics of these societies would find their conspicuous presence in the theory.

Because functionalism does not deal with the issues of conflict, disorder, and change, many critics note that it has a conservative bias. In his critical assessment of functionalism, Gouldner (1970) says that for Parsons, one of the leading functionalists, a 'partly filled glass' is 'half full' rather than 'half empty'. The point here is that for those the 'glass is half full' are emphasising the positive aspects of a situation in comparison to those who lay emphasis on the negative side, seeing the 'glass as half empty'. The conservative bias in functionalism is not only because of what it ignores (history, change, conflict, disorder) but also what it emphasises (society 'here and now', norms and values, consensus, order). Functionalists are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the normative order of society.

The individual in functionalism is devoid of dynamism and creativity. He is simply a product of society and its forces constrain him at every juncture. The opposite view is that it is the individual who in fact initiates change in society. Individuals as much use the system as the system uses them. Those who subscribe to the interactional approach argue that functionalism has failed to conceptualise adequately the complex nature of actors and the process of interaction. One of the reasons of why functionalism ignored the role of the individual in society was that it was solely interested in explaining the survival of society. It was interested in the 'collectivity' and not the 'individual', and even when it was interested in the individual, as was the case with Malinowski, it was only till the point of the satisfaction of its biological needs. It was not to look at and analyze the attitudes and sentiments of the individual, and the role these psychic dimensions play in initiating social changes.

The functionalists's search for order led them to lend justification to the existing norms and values, ideological and hierarchical structures, institutions, and rules of power distribution prevalent in a society. They did not realize, as Marxists had done, that the normative system in a society was a creation of the ruling elite, and there may be several opposing forces to it. By looking for order, they in fact were justifying the system, the established order, and thus were helping in the maintenance of the status quo. Functionalism was charged for supporting the dominant elite and the system as it was.

In addition to these, there were some important methodological and logical criticisms of functionalism. The belief of functionalism that there is a 'single theory' that could be used in all situations was an illusion. Many scholars found that it was difficult to apply functionalism to complex societies, which were not only fast changing but were also conflict-ridden. The ideas of relativism – i.e., things are meaningful in their respective cultural contexts — to which functionalists gave support, made a comparative analysis difficult. If 'things' can only be understood in the context of the social system of which they are a part, then how can we compare it with similar 'things' in other systems? If polyandry, for example, makes sense in the context of the community of the Todas, how can we compare it to polyandry in Jaunsar-Bawar? Some scholars have tried to deal with this matter of the lack of comparability in functionalism. Walter Goldschmidt (1966) has argued in favour of an approach he has called 'comparative functionalism'. According to this approach, there is a universality of functions to which institutions are a response. All cultures require the same functions; however the institutions that fulfill these functions vary from one society to another.

One of the important criticisms of functionalism is that it is inherently teleological, i.e., explanations are given in terms of 'purposes' or 'goals'. With respect to this, Turner and Maryanski (1979) submit that teleology *per se* is not a problem. As a matter of fact, social theory should take into account the 'teleological relationship between society and its component parts' (Ritzer 2000). The problem comes when teleology is stretched to unacceptable limits, when it is believed that only the given and specific part of society can fulfill the needs. Teleology becomes illegitimate when it fails to take into consideration the idea that a variety of alternative structures can fulfill the same needs. Why certain structures come up and why certain structures become irreplaceable needs to be explained. The later functionalists — such as Parsons and Merton — were aware of this problem and in their own ways tried to overcome it. Merton, for example, proposed the concept of functional alternatives. In his analysis of the family system, Parsons was able to show that in the contemporary industrial society, nuclear family performed the functions of primary socialisation and the stabilization of adult personality and no other institution could carry them out. These functions were non-transferable to any other institutions.

Functionalism has also been criticised for making explicit what is implicit in the premise; the technical term used for this kind of reasoning is 'tautology'. For example, if religion exists, it must be functional, otherwise, it will cease to exist, and its function must be to contribute to social solidarity, because without it, society will not be able to survive. Many critics have pointed out that functionalism suffers from 'globular or circular reasoning'. Needs are postulated on the basis of the existing institutions, that are, in turn, used to explain their existence. For instance, society as a 'social fact' explains the division of labour, and in turn, division of labour contributes to the maintenance of solidarity in society. What is happening here is that the whole is being defined in terms of its parts and then, parts are being defined in terms of the whole. Because one is being defined in terms of the other, in fact, none of them – neither the whole nor its parts – is actually being defined. As we noted earlier, here also there is a debate whether tautology is inherent in the theory or has come into existence because of the deeds of its practitioners.

Reflection and Action 7.1

Discuss the major criticisms of functionalism that led to thee emergence of neo-functionalism.

7.3 The Thesis of Neo-functionalism

A revival of interest in Parsons's work, first in Germany and then, the United States of America, led to the emergence of neo-functionalism. The basic aim has been to merge certain aspects of functionalism, those which have withstood the test of time, with other paradigms that have better developed critical perspectives. The aim has been to build a 'hybrid' that combines the strong points of the other perspectives so that one can deal with the so-called opposite issues (such as, consensus and conflict, equilibrium and change, collectivity and individual) in a balanced manner.

a) **Revival in Germany**

Those associated with neo-functionalism in Germany are Niklas Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas, who initially collaborated on a theory of social engineering in modern society, but later worked separately. Although formally trained in law, Luhmann has been a student of sociology and in 1960, spent a year at Harvard where he had a chance to be in contact with Parsons. He developed a sociological approach that combined certain aspects from Parsons' structural functionalism with general systems theory. He also introduced in it concepts from cognitive biology and cybernetics (Ritzer 2000: 185). However, he disagreed with Parsons about the options available to individuals as concrete human beings. Parsons placed emphasis on value consensus, also believing that because the social system penetrates the personality system, the options available to the individual for social relationships and behaviour are limited. But that is, Luhmann thinks, not simply correct. He moves the individual out of the social system into the 'society' — what may be termed the 'societal environment' — which is far more complex and less restrictive. It accords people more freedom, especially freedom for carrying out 'irrational and immoral behaviour' (Abrahamson 2001: 148).

Abrahamson (2001: 148) says that if Luhmann moved *from* Parsons, and then discovered the problems with the concept of value consensus, Habermas *moved* toward Parsons. Habermas's early writings were strongly critical of Parsons, but later, he accorded a place to cultural, social, and personality systems in his theory. His conceptualisation of the relationship between these systems was quite consistent with Parsons's views. He also gave place to Parsons's concept of 'self-regulating system', which comes into existence when societies become complex as a consequence of which structural systems are separated from 'lifeworld', i.e., the inter-subjective realm for experiencing and communicating about culture, society, and personality.

b) **Revival in the United States of America**

The main spokespersons of neofunctionalism in America are Jeffrey Alexander and Paul Colomy. In one of their joint publications of 1985, they define neofunctionalism as 'a self-critical strand of functional theory that seeks to broaden functionalism's intellectual scope while retaining its theoretical core' (p. 118). Under the rubric of 'neo-functionalism', they have made an effort to extend structural functionalism by overcoming its difficulties. Structural functionalism envisions a single, all embracing conceptual scheme that is

supposed to be applicable for all societies at all points of time. By comparison, neofunctionalism is a 'loosely organised package' built around a general logic. It possesses a number of autonomous 'proliferations' and 'variations', which work at different levels and in different empirical contexts (Alexander and Colomy, eds., 1990).

The goal of neo-functionalists is to create a more synthetic theory. There is no doubt that Parsons was an unparalleled synthesizer of grand theory and structural functionalism has a strong synthetic core from the beginning. In his variety of structural functionalism, Parsons tried to integrate a wide range of theoretical inputs. He was also interested in drawing an interrelationship between different systems that constitute the social world — such as, cultural, social, and personality systems. So, Alexander and Colomy say, the beginning of structural functionalism was quite promising, but gradually, Parsons's approach became overly narrow and deterministic. He started viewing the cultural system as determining the other systems. Also, his overwhelming preoccupation with the 'problem of order' led to insufficient attention being paid to conflict and strain.

Alexander and Colomy think that the deficiencies of structural functionalism are not irreversible. Its synthetic orientation can be recaptured. The concepts of conflict and subjective meaning can be introduced. One can regard the integration of the system and the interpenetration of its various subsystems as a 'tendency', to be investigated rather than as a 'given' or 'assumed' fact.

Box 7.2: Neo-Functionalism: Problems that need to be Surmounted

In neo-functionalism, the problems that need to be surmounted are:

1) Anti-individualism — the individual in structural functionalism is passive and lacks creativity, and is simply a product of the social forces, which he neither checks nor controls;
2) Antagonism to change — structural functionalism is a theory of social order rather than of change;
3) Conservatism — structural functionalism has worked toward offering a justification of the system and its practices, often justifying inequality, exploitation, and oppression.
4) Idealism — structural functionalism speaks in terms of an ideal society, where everything is in order and stability.
5) Anti-empiricist bias — structural functionalism is more concerned with abstract social systems instead of real societies.

Neo-functionalism can be seen as an 'effort' or 'tendency' to overcome these problems. Alexander was skeptical of calling this a developed theory and more an orientation sensitive to the criticisms of structural functionalism.

The basic orientations of neofunctionalism may be outlined. Neofunctionalism operates with a descriptive model of society. For it, society comprises elements that are constantly in interaction with other elements, and together they form a pattern. Because of this pattern, society is differentiated from its environment, with which it has its ceaseless interaction. Parts of a system are symbiotically connected – one contributing to the other. However, there is no overarching force that determines their interaction. Neofunctionalism rejects any monocausal determinism; it is open-ended and pluralistic.

Neo-functionalism allocates equal attention to action and order. According to Alexander (1982: 65), these concepts constitute the 'true presuppositions of sociological debate.' Structural functionalism has a tendency to focus almost exclusively on the macro-level sources of order in social structures and culture. It gives little attention to micro-level actions — actions that take place at the local level. In its analysis, neo-functionalism includes rational as well as expressive actions. It is far from viewing that human actions are only rational, gain-multiplying, profit-oriented, and 'scientific'. One of the main functions of culture is that it allows people to express themselves, sometimes aesthetically.

Like structural functionalism, neo-functionalism retains interest in integration, but it is not an accomplished fact. Rather, it is a social possibility. It recognises that deviance is a ubiquitous social reality, and to check it, each system must have the instruments of social control, forcing the deviants to subscribe to rules lest punishments to their actions become cumulatively stringent. Social control tries to restore some sort of stability in the system. Neo-functionalism is concerned with equilibrium, but it is broader than the concern of structural functionalism. Neo-functionalism does not believe that any system can ever be in a state of 'static equilibrium'; it is always moving and partial. Moreover, the concept of equilibrium is to be regarded as a reference point for functional analysis. It does not describe the lives of individuals in actual social systems, which is perennially in action. It brings us once again to the point about neofunctionalism mentioned earlier – it is concerned equally with order and action.

Of all the functionalists, it was Parsons's structural functionalism that exercised the maximum impact on later scholars, some of whom later became famous as neo-functionalists. The latter accept the traditional Parsonian emphasis on culture, social, and personality systems, which are vital to any society. These systems interpenetrate one another, because of which they produce tension, which is one of the important sources of change and control. Further, change occurs when cultural, social, and personality systems are differentiated over time. This change does not occur because of conformity and harmony, but because of the rise of individualism and institutional strains.

Reflection and Action 7.2

What are the major similarities and differences between structural functionalism and neo-functionalism?

Neo-functionalism submits that in order to enrich our understanding of the processes of order and action in society, we should think of borrowing from other theories and perspectives in sociology and other social sciences. Alexander and Colomy have tried synthesizing structural functionalism with other theoretical traditions. To overcome the idealist bias in structural functionalism, neo-functionalism encourages materialist approaches. To counter the structural functional tendency to emphasize order has led neo-functionalists to explore the theories of culture. Insights from approaches such as exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, and phenomenology are being drawn to compensate for macro-level biases of the traditional functional approach.

The future of neo-functionalism has been cast into doubt by the fact that Alexander in his book *Neofunctionalism and After* (1998) has stated that he

has outgrown a neo-functionalist orientation in his career. He says that one of his important goals was to show the importance of Parsons' theory. Parsons had built a theoretical scheme that was potentially capable of overcoming the contradictions inherent in classical sociology, but neither he nor any of his collaborators and students was able to take full advantage of the theory. Alexander saw his aim as that of developing the theoretical strands that lay incipient in Parsons's work. Since he thinks that he has succeeded in this venture, his project of neo-functionalism is over. It will however, Alexander says, keep on influencing his later thoughts, and his present work on civil societies.

7.4 Merits and Demerits of Neo-functionalism: Conclusion

Although some of the traits of what has come to be called 'neo-functionalism' are found in the German interest in Parsons's works, this theoretical 'tendency' is principally associated with an American sociologist, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and later, his younger collaborator, Paul Colomy. A restricted use of the term 'neo-functionalism' is also found in ecological studies where it basically means assigning primary importance to techno-environmental forces in an analysis of the processes of cultural adaptation (Bettinger 1996).

Alexander does not seem to be happy with the use of the term 'neo-functionalism'. He also thinks that 'functionalism' was not really an appropriate term to describe Parsons's approach. Parsons himself tried to discard the term 'structural functionalism' for his approach, but he knew that it would continue to be used for his sociology. Some of his associates preferred to call his theory 'action theory'. Alexander (1985) also thinks that notwithstanding the inappropriateness of the term 'functionalism', Parsons's sociology will be known in future by this name. Thus, not much will be gained by discarding the term; rather one should cling to it, and redefine it. Instead of being a unified theory, neofunctionalism is a 'tendency', characterised by the following propositions (Alexander 1985: 10):

1) An open and pluralistic description of society as a whole.
2) An even-handed apportionment when it comes to action vs. structure (or action vs. order).
3) Integration is viewed as a possibility; deviance and social control are considered realities.
4) Discernment between personality, culture, and society.
5) Differentiation is viewed as the central driving force producing social change.
6) The development of concepts and theory is considered to be independent of all the levels involved in sociologic analysis.

There have been marked variations in the responses to the efforts of Alexander and others to revive functionalism. Some have found Alexander's account of the functional tradition as extremely vague. They also question the purported continuity between functionalism and neo-functionalism, because 'neo-functionalism seems to include everything functionalism has been criticized as lacking' (Fauske 2000:245). There are limits to the length to which any theoretical perspective can go in accommodating incompatible notions and yet retain its name and lineage. For some critics, the changes introduced in structural functionalism are more cosmetic than real. Neo-functionalism is

still imbued with the features that distinguish functionalism. For instance, the view that societies can be studied objectively continues to predominate. Individuals are still regarded as 'reactors to the system' rather than 'dynamic and creative actors'. Conflict is recognised but remains at a secondary place in the theory (Abrahamson 2001). And, revolution is certainly not considered. So, isn't neofunctionalism old wine in new bottles?

Alexander suggests that sociology should be based on a post-positivistic understanding of science, which means that we can understand the world around us as much through theoretical explanations as through empirical enquiry. This view opposes positivism because it reduces theory to empirical data; in other words, for it, there cannot be a theory divorced from empirical facts. Positivism makes a sharp distinction between empirical observations and non-empirical propositions. The latter constitute the realm of philosophy and metaphysics, thus deserving no place in empirical science.

Post-positivism submits that a theory can be discussed, examined, verified, and elaborated with reference to other theories rather than empirical research. In other words, the referent for a theory might be another theory rather than an ensemble of facts. Theories are viewed as if they represent the 'empirical observations'. Alexander is critical of empirically-based inferences in social sciences. One of the fundamental differences between social sciences and natural sciences is that theoretical perspectives always permeate every work that social scientists do. Sociological theory, therefore, can be scientifically significant irrespective of its ability and capacity to explain empirical observations.

In future, Alexander thinks, there will be a 'grand theory', built on the premises of post-positivism. This theory will be multidimensional with respect to various polarities in classical sociological theory, such as micro-macro, order-conflict, equilibrium-stability, structure-agency, etc. But even after its 'hybridization', drawing upon different theoretical perspectives, neo-functionalism will not be a 'distinct paradigm', much less a grand theory. In other words, skepticism prevails about the future of neofunctionalism.

7.5 Further Reading

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