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.

6.7 Further Reading

Barnard, Alan. 2000. *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Gouldner, Alvin W. 1973. *For Sociology*. London: Allen Lane

Turner, Jonathan H. 1987. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications

References

Barnard, Alan. 2000. *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davis, Kingsley. 1959. The Myth of Functional Analysis as a Special Method in Sociology and Anthropology. *American Sociological Review*, 24: 757-72.

Durkheim, Émile. 1893. *The Division of Labour in Society*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

_____, 1895. *The Rules of the Sociological Method*. New York: The Free Press.

_____, 1915. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Giddens, Anthony. 1973. *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*. London: Hutchinson.

Gouldner, Alvin W. 1973. *For Sociology*. London: Allen Lane.

Kuper, Adam. 1973. *Anthropologists and Anthropology: The Modern British School*. London: Routledge.

Levy, Jr., Marion J. 1968. Functional Analysis: Structural-Functional Analysis. *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. McMillan Co. and Free Press.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: George Routledge & Sons.

_____, 1926. Anthropology. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. First Supplementary Volume.

_____, 1944. *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Merton, Robert K. 1957. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press (Revised and Enlarged Edition).

Parsons, Talcott. 1951. *The Social System*. New York: The Free Press.

_____, 1975. The Present Status of Structural-Functional Theory in Sociology. In Lewis A. Coser (ed), *The Idea of Social Structure: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Merton*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Parsons, Talcott and Gerald M. Platt. 1973. *The American University*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1922. *The Andaman Islanders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____, 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses*. London: Cohen & West.

Rocher, Guy. 1974. *Talcott Parsons and American Sociology*. London: Nelson.

Turner, Jonathan H. 1987. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

Wallace, Ruth A. and Alison Wolf. 1980. *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.