

# **STRUCTURAL – FUNCTIONALISM: ITS RELEVANCE TO MEDICAL PROFESSION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*There is agreement among philosophers of science that scientific explanation of phenomena consists in deducing propositions from other more general propositions. Explanations are attained when observations about empirical phenomena can be logically deduced from these propositions which can also be called laws. More specifically, the society is viewed in different ways by different sociologists and these differing views of society are all ways of examining the same phenomena (e.g.) conflict view, functionalist, interactionist view etc. As an attempt to understand more fully the explanation provided by the structural functionalists, this study will examine the relevance of the theory to the medical system. In contemporary sociology, functionalism presents the most important single attempt to construct a scientific system of explanation that is peculiarly sociological. In particular, structural functionalism will be examined as found in the writing of T. Parsons, R. Merton and other scholars. The remainders of this study will consider the objections and criticisms leveled against the theory.*

## **Introduction**

Structural –functionalism in sociology appears as a recent attempt to integrate sociological knowledge into a form of theory. In this perspective, with Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton and Kingsley Davis as the most prominent spoke men, it tries to answer the question of how social phenomenon can be treated as dynamically interdependent variables, simply put each group or institution fulfills certain functions and persists because it is functional. (Horton & Hunt, 1984)

According to Isajiw (2000) it can be said that functional analysis studies structural items of the social system in an attempt to show how they contribute towards integration or inversely dis- integration of the system by either fulfilling or failing to fulfill some needs or sets of needs of the system and in an attempt to show how these contributions bear on the existence of the item in the system. Similar logic involved in T. Parson discussion of the modern medical profession, he studies the established normative patterns of doctor – patient relationship by asking what would be the consequences of the system of such relationship of some imagined deviation from this established pattern. Thus system-maintaining consequences are related to the established norm pattern of functional specificity, affective neutrality and group orientation and performance while system disruptive consequences are related to the opposite of the established pattern (Handel 1993). This perspective shows the society as a system of organized network of co-operating groups operating in a fairly orderly manner according to a set rules and values shared by most members. In other words, the structural functionalists see society as an interrelated system in which each group plays a part and each practice helps the system to operate (Schaefer & Lamn 1995).

### **The concept of function**

The concept of function has been used in quite a variety of meanings. R. Merton tries to list a number of such usages and those most common in scholarly literature are summarized in different categories:- Function in the sense of activity or task performance of an object or entity; function in the sense of relation of interdependence with activities of their entities; function in the sense of ends such as maintenance of a system etc.

Haralambos & Holborn (2000) assert that with the establishment of the fact that there exist social structures which make up a system; a need arises for an examination of the relationship between the different parts of the structure and the relationship to the society as a whole. This examination reveals function as the effect the structure has on other parts of the social structure and on the society. The concept of function is usually used to refer to the contribution a structure, unit or an institution makes to the maintenance and survival of the social system.

### **The concept of structure**

The theory of structural –functionalism establishes the existence of a social structure within a system and different aspect of social structure and social organization lend to be functionally related to one another, so that what happens in one part of society affects and is shaped by what happens in others. This means that relationships between members of society are organized in terms of rules (Henslin,2006). Values provide general guidelines for behaviour in terms of roles and norms. The structure of the society is seen as the sum total of social relationships governed by norms (e.g.) educational system, health, political system etc. thus an institution is seen as a structure made up of interconnected roles.

**Talcott Parson Structural Functionalism**

Talcott Parson (1902 – 1979) at first was thought of as an action theorist when he published his work “The structure of social action” but through his later work he became best known as a structural functionalist and was the primary exponent of this theory. Parson's major propositions on his structural – functional perspective came in the early 1950s in his work “The social system”; here he tended to concentrate on the structures of society and their relationship to each other. He summarized how order or equilibrium was maintained among the various elements were considered to be mutually supportive and tending toward a dynamic equilibrium. His basic view on inter-systemic relations was essentially the same as his view of intra-systemic relations. (e.g.) the various social structures performed a variety of functions for each other. Parsons also came up with 4 functional imperatives that are necessary for the survival of all systems:- AGIL.

- Adaptation – A system must adapt to its environment.
- Goal attainment – Be able to define its goals and set strategies to meet them.
- Integration – Component parts must interrelate mutually.
- Latency. (Ritzer,1996)

He went ahead to apply these functional imperatives to the social system viewing it as a system of interaction. He was interested primarily on its structural components such as collectivities must be structured so that they operate compatibly with others.

**Robert Merton's functionalism**

Merton (1957) began by criticizing some of the positions of Parsons. He then sought to develop a more adequate model of the analysis of the theory. His own postulation was of the functional unity of society. That all standardized social and cultural beliefs and practices are functional for society as a whole as well as for individuals in society, implying that the various parts of the social system must show a high level of integration. He also contended that not all the standardized parts of society have positive functions and also not all structures are indispensable parts of the working whole as postulated by Parsons.

Merton focused his analysis on groups, organizations, societies and cultures and went on further to develop the idea of a dysfunction. Here, he emphasized that just as structures or institutions could contribute to the maintenance of other parts of the social system, they also could have negative consequences for them.

**Method embedded in the theory: the model of organism**

The sort of model which has been widely employed in structural – functionalism is that derived from the analogy between societies and organisms. Whenever the term ‘structure’ and ‘function’ is found in sociology one may be sure the writer has in mind some conception of society as an organism. Here the structural – functionalist conveniently use the organic type of model as an analogy between social life and organic life. An organism is an agglomeration of cells and interstitial fluids arranged in relation to one another as an integrated living whole (Handel, 1993). The system of relations by which these units are related is the organic structure. The organism is not itself the structure, it is the collection of units arranged in a structure. According to Wolinsky (1988) the process by which the structural continuity of the organism is maintained is called life and the life process consist of the activities and interaction of the constituent cells of organs of the organism. Every structure has its own function which becomes the part it plays in the contribution to the life of the organism as a whole (e.g.) the stomach secretes gastric juice as part of its activities and the function is to change food into simpler forms to be distributed by the blood to all tissues. This is to say that the function of a recurrent physiological process is a correspondence between it and the need of the organisms. (Rex,1961).

Likewise, applying this analogy to social life and system, one recognizes the existence of social system or structure with human beings as the essential units connected by sets of social relation into an integrated whole. The community is maintained by the process of social life which consists of the activities and interaction of individual human beings and of organizations, groups into which they are united.

**Relevance of structural-functionalism to medicine**

Structural – functionalists draw an analogy between a society and an organism. A biological organism is a functioning whole conceived as consisting of several organs or subsystems each with specialized functions (e.g.) circulatory. Skeletal, muscular system, each has a distinctive function from another and the functions are their own normal contribution to the health and survival of the organism as a whole. One can say that a part of the body or organ such as the heart perform the circulatory function to benefit the whole organism; the brain controlling all other activities of the body; digestive system helping to break down food into simpler absorbable form; excretory system which helps in the removal of waste product from the organism etc. it is seen here that all parts or subsystem of the body carry out their functions which are beneficial, necessary and indispensable for the life and survival of the organism. Likewise, by analogy, the medical or health care system is conceived to be a functioning whole made up of subsystem which must contribute to its survival stability and harmony (Weitz, 2007).

A system exists when regularities of relationship can be discerned among a set of parts and processes. Handel (1993) therefore all relationship among parts of the system can be

considered in terms of whether they promote or impede the stability or orderly development of the system.

The health care delivery system is considered to have other subsystem such as the medical system, nursing care system, the laboratory, health records, pharmacy etc. Each of these sub - systems have functions which are crucial to the sustenance of the general system the internal working of each and their relationship to one another matters and determine their collective effect toward attainment of set goals – the provision of quality health care services to the sick and the general public. The medical system consists of doctors who see patient, diagnose their problems. One can say that a part of the body or organ such as the heart performs the circulatory function to benefit the whole organism: the brain – controlling all other activities of the body; digestive system helping to break down food into simpler absorbable form; excretory system which helps in the removal of waste product from the organism etc. it is seen here that all parts or subsystem of the body carry out their functions which are beneficial, necessary and indispensable for the life and survival of the organism.

### **Criticism**

The precise nature of the explanation provided by structural –functionalism has been a much debated issue. Criticisms that are prominent include one position that hold that functionalism is a valid method of explanation but not distinct method since all sciences by studying the relations of parts to the whole follow the same procedure as functionalism. Hence it is viewed as only a myth which will be dispelled with time. Isajiw (2000)

George Homans argue that although functionalism is a method of research, it is not a method of explanation because it has failed to fulfill requirement of a scientific theory by not producing a system of proposition which can specify what change in properties of a phenomenon will take place if there is change in other properties of the phenomenon.

Structural – functionalists are criticized on the basis that they are unable to deal effectively with the process of social change. According to Haralambos & Holborn (2000) the theory in which all the elements of the society are seen as reinforcing one another as well as the system as a whole fail to show how these elements can also contribute to change. Another criticism lies in the fact that the theory is unable to deal effectively with conflict. They tended to overemphasize harmonious relationship therefore see conflict and disorder as destructive and occurring outside the framework of society. Carl Hempel also argues that functionalism is rather weak and inadequate method. In addition, that it is vague and ambiguous: this is traceable to their dealing with abstract social system instead of real society (Ritzer 1998).

Another expressed criticism is that the theorists have a conservative bias, this is attributable to what it ignores (changes, history) and focus only on normative order of society. The conservative orientation is passiveness of individual action where people are seen as

constrained by cultural and social forces. According to the critics human beings are as much engaged in using social system as in being used by them. (Eisentadt, 1976)

## **Conclusion**

The structural – functionalist perspective see the society as an organized network of cooperating groups or as an interrelated system in which each group plays a part and each function or practice helps the system to operate. The theory use the organism analogy to explain that society exists in structures which have functions that are interrelated and interdependent on each other for the survival of society. Being an applied model to health (Medicare) structural functionalism focuses on the maintenance of health in all individuals that the health or survival of the social organism depends centrally on how smoothly its parts are knitted and functioned. (i.e.) the parts are interdependent and there must be a high degree of integration and coordination of each structure and the other. Theories like structural –functionalism could not be without criticism owing to the fact that it does not deal adequately with history, conflict and change, highly conservative.

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