SOC 3290 Deviance
Lecture 10: The Functionalist Perspective

Unlike earlier perspectives, the functionalist perspective on deviance views deviance as contributing to, rather than threatening a given order of roles, rules, and regulations. In this sense, social order is said to feed off social deviance: they are functionally interdependent and cannot exist without one another. High status, respected professionals such as Judges need criminals in order to justify their position. So do police, corrections officers, and so on. Offenders, in contrast, wouldn't be offenders - wouldn't be seen, or know themselves to be what they are were it not for others to define themselves against. As such, the argument is that even those aspects of society that appear most unruly contribute to the reproduction of orderly social relations - by securing its lawful boundaries and strengthening its adaptability to changing environmental circumstances.

Nevertheless, functionalism appears to be guided by an abstractly optimistic viewpoint. It envisages society as a goal-directed system that informs its members about how they must behave if the system itself is to be reproduced. In this, it converges with cybernetics, in which energetic social actions, including deviant ones, are interpreted as coded instances of feedback which help a particular social system to stay on course. In this way, society is said to depend on various forms of deviant feedback to remain stable.

Theoretical Images:

The functionalist perspective is unique in that it emphasizes the positive contributions of deviance. Something is defined as functional if it has positive consequences for the organization of society as a whole. If its consequences are negative it is dysfunctional. Deviance is said to be functional because it strengthens the bonds of an existing social order - a view originating in the work of 19th century sociologist Emile Durkheim.

Durkheim was preoccupied with the problems of social modernity, with the normative disintegration generated by the transition from a simple to a complex society . His concern with the moral crisis of his age led him to view the law-like findings of scientific sociology as the solution for the social disruptions of his time. As a "moral scientist," Durkheim attempted to identify the necessary or normal features of any healthy functioning society. He also sought to analyze the conditions under which the normative could be restored in societies endangered by the pathology of disintegration. Durkheim felt that a pathological society was one in which norms were either too strong or too weak. When they were too strong, society would be overly conformist, unable to flexibly adapt to changing environmental circumstances; when too weak, it would be too loosely defined and its members too weakly joined to accomplish the basic tasks needed to assure its survival.

In The Rules of Sociological Method Durkheim argued that a social phenomenon was normal if it was both universal and necessary. By universal he meant that something must be present in all, or the majority of all societies of the same type. By necessary he meant that it

represented a determining condition needed for the continued existence of a society. If both of these criteria were met, something could be deemed normal. Such was the case with crime or deviance - something universally present, the product of certain determining conditions which necessitated its existence. This is the essence of Durkheim's view of deviance as functional - necessary for the existence of a stable social order. It contributes to healthy social order in several ways: (1) setting moral boundaries; (2) strengthening in-group solidarity; (3) allowing for adaptive innovation; and (4) reducing internal societal tensions. We will review each of these in turn.

With regard to setting moral boundaries, Durkheim argues that deviance helps to define the moral boundaries by which society distinguishes between right and wrong. By "making an example" of a deviant, society informs its members of the type of person they cannot become and still live "normally" within its boundaries. In mapping this out for people, it also reminds them of the sanctions that they may face if they stray too far beyond established normative conventions. For Durkheim, this boundary-setting function of deviance had a certain flexibility. Even if a society was extremely conformist, deviance wouldn't disappear - but merely be defined in narrower terms (e.g. in a society of saints, faults which appear trivial to us would create a great scandal).

Next, with regard to the group solidarity function, Durkheim argued that deviance may also bring society (or conformist parts of it) closer together in the face of a common enemy. To wage war against deviant "outsiders" may thus strengthen the social bonds of non-deviant "insiders" - even inhibiting tendencies to criminal acts among that group.

Third, Durkheim argues that deviance enables for innovation to offset overly rigid social boundaries. If, for example, we imagine a society that has become very successful in controlling and creating conformity, it may be the victim of its own success. It may not be as ready or as able to flexibly adapt to an ever-changing external environment - rather remaining locked into outdated traditions that no longer work under new circumstances. But deviance keeps society on its toes - encouraging society to revise its rules and traditions in response to new environmental problems. It may challenge the foundation of old and outdated rules (e.g. Socrates, Christ, Martin Luther King, Ghandi, etc. were all condemned and persecuted as deviants by their societies, but later came to constitute a new basis for conformity). Formerly acceptable social rules they opposed later became illegal. As such, their "deviant" actions paved the way for a subsequent redefinition of normative social boundaries.

Finally, Durkheim argued that deviance may have a tension-reduction function: it acts like a safety valve for strains within society itself. For example, society sometime projects its own problems onto the back of certain deviants - scapegoating them for tensions produced by the organization of society as a whole (e.g. communists in the 1950's). Correspondingly, engaging in a bit of deviance may allow people to get rid of some of the tensions that people build up in their day to day battle to run the "rat race" as expected (e.g. partying hard on weekends, or having a big blow-out at the end of the term).

Aside from Durkheim's identification of these four positive functions of deviance, other functionalist theorists such as Robert Merton make an important distinction between consequences which are recognized and intended and those which are not. The former are referred to as "manifest functions"; the latter as "latent functions." Deviance is usually seen as manifestly dysfunctional - something controlled because society recognizes its disintegrating consequences. Yet, at the same time it may have latent functions - unrecognized and unintended consequences that benefit society. For this reason, certain deviant acts may be manifestly condemned but latently permitted.

Examples here include Merton's study of corruption in municipal politics. Unlawful practices were manifestly dysfunctional to the rule of law, but latently helped to create order by integrating people and meeting the needs of marginal urban subgroups such as immigrants and minorities. Taken together, as an efficient provider of "extralegal" services, it maximized benefits to political "underdogs" and "topdogs" alike in a much more efficient manner than the workings of official bureaucracy.

Similarly, Kingsley Davis argues that prostitution, while manifestly dysfunctional for a society that normatively defines legitimate sexual relationships to be monogamous, sentimentally attached, and reproductive, is never entirely absent from society. While prostitutes and their customers are periodically rounded up and given minor sanctions, they are not once and for all eliminated. Why? Davis contends that prostitution must be serving some important, latent function for society. Davis roots this in what he *assumes* is a higher male need for sexual adventure or experimentation (not all would agree with this today). If we accept his premise, however, certain structural tensions could arise in the monogamous marital dyad. These greater sexual needs would gradually push the male outside the couple, but couldn't as readily go for other "eligible" partners who might push for a love relationship - and love triangles aren't good for marital stability (and, by multiplication and extension, for social stability). Thus, men may meet this need through "non-eligible" partners - who exchange sex for money, not love. This would avoid sentimental attachments, enable the expression of the male sexual need, and all of this would be a useful contribution to social order. Latently, prostitution would protect the emotional bonds which preserved marriages and at the same time would permit men to realize their supposedly greater sexual needs.

Of course, there have been radical changes in sexual attitudes, behaviors and understandings since Davis' work in the 1950's. Some, such as Denfield and Gordon, for example, have contended that the mutually-agreed practices of "swinging" or "mate swapping" that gained attention in the 1960's and 70's had latent functions equivalent to those of prostitution - permitting participants to release sexual fantasies without damaging the sentimental bonds of marriage. According to the suggestive logic of functionalist analysis, both types of deviance may be viewed as latently positive for society as a whole.

Identifying Functional Deviance:

Functionalist theory has no single research strategy, but most functionalist interpretations of deviance are built upon a relatively common set of analytic assumptions. These limit researchers to see nonconformity in a particular way. They begin with the assumption that deviance must be studied in terms of its relationship to society as a whole. Functionalist theories view society as a system of interrelated parts and structures - each of which must be analyzed for the way it contributes to or takes away from the survival of the overall system ("the organic metaphor"). This is a central concern in the writings of sociologist Talcott Parsons, as well as Durkheim and other functionalists.

According to Durkheim, for functional analysis to be properly scientific, it must separate causes from consequences. For deviance, this meant that observations regarding its universal presence were to be analytically distinct from those considering its cause or determining conditions. Yet, in practice this rule wasn't always applied rigorously, resulting in the twin logical problems of tautology (circular reasoning) and false teleology (saying there is a purpose for something without specifying how this happens - or comes about - in the first place).

While very abstract, these issues create very concrete and practical problems for the truth claims of functional analysis. To say, for example, that something must be functional if is universal doesn't tell us anything about the specific reasons that deviance is found in all societies. It is merely an assumption. That is why Durkheim asserted that, to really determine functionality, we have to consider the determining conditions as well. Here, however, he is vague, and seems to slip into false teleology - again linking cause (determining conditions) with assumed functional consequences (or effects). For Durkheim the primary functional effects of deviance are to secure integrated social stability while allowing for flexible, adaptive change. These are what makes deviance normal. But what actually causes deviance? And how do its effects "on occasion" restore energy to its cause. The problem with all this abstraction is that Durkheim provides us with very little concrete information about the actual causes of normal deviance nor about the ways its effects reinforce these causes. We are left, instead, with a series of statements which pair the existence of deviance with its functional contributions - without specifying the intervening mechanisms at play.

Durkheim, moreover, wants us not to equate the functions of deviance with goal-like end states which are said to cause their own realization. Yet by pairing the existence of deviance with its functional contributions, he provides just such an equation. At other points he moves even closer to suggesting that functional needs operate teleologically as goals which set in motion certain processes which guarantee goal fulfilment. Cause is confused with functional consequence - tilting heavily in the direction of false teleology. He tells us virtually nothing about the original causes of deviance or about the process of reciprocal causation in which functional effects feed back upon that which caused them. Despite intentions to the contrary, his analysis remains trapped in a mire of confusing tautologies and unwarranted teleological reasoning. One is almost left with the silly idea that deviance is almost intentionally brought into

being by society to fulfill its purposes as an organic system.

Few other functional theorists fared better than Durkheim in overcoming the problems of tautology and false teleology. Yet, Robert Merton has provided a methodological guide designed to eliminate or at least minimize these problems. He argues that functionalist researchers must avoid all assumptions regarding (1) the harmonious integration of all parts of a social system; (2) the relationship between the existence of a social phenomena and the belief that it must contribute to the maintenance of the social whole; and (3) the idea that genuine societal needs can only be served by the structural unit which appears to positively or functionally contribute to the fulfillment of such needs in the present.

These suggestions pave the way for functionalists to consider the possibility that deviance may be functional for some, dysfunctional for others. He thus directs attention to the “net balance” of positive and negative consequences, providing a useful balance to an otherwise overly sunny viewpoint. This also permits consideration of both manifest and latent functions, as well as alternative means of fulfilling the same social need. Merton’s considerations enable us to make more careful, less logically problematic analyses.

According to Merton, then, a proper functionalist analysis must follow five steps: (1) Provide a specific description of the form of deviance or social control being studied (i.e. their structure or patterns); (2) Indicate the range and type of alternatives excluded by the dominant pattern of deviance or social control (i.e. the structural context out of which they emerged); (3) Assess the meaning of the deviant or social control activity for those involved (i.e. their subjective meanings); (4) Discern the motives for conforming to or deviating from a particular dominant interaction pattern (i.e. social psychological needs served/not served); and (5) Describe patterns not recognized by participants but which appear to have consequences for either the particular individuals involved and/or other patterns or regularities in the wider social context (i.e. potential latent consequences). Merton’s guidelines are today considered to be the most comprehensive guide for this approach to theory building. In principle they avoid the circular and falsely teleological problems encountered by Durkheim and other early functionalists. In practice, however, these problems and assumptions may still crop up (e.g. even in Merton’s functionalist analysis of urban political corruption, despite his use of “weasel words” like “not invariably,” he still assumes systemic needs leading him into the dual traps of tautology and false teleology).

Social Control of Functional Deviance:

The functionalist perspective, rooted in the idea of the positive or functional contributions of deviance, tries to balance its positive and negative consequences in terms of level or degree. Some deviance is good, but it shouldn’t get past a certain level, where it becomes pathological rather than normal.

This problem of excess deviance was of great concern to sociologist Talcott Parsons, who argued that a healthy society was a stable society where the social activities of its members

would be highly coordinated as interrelated parts of an organic system. By such coordination the social system fulfilled its basic needs, which include: (1) adaptation to the external environment; (2) integration of all the system's parts (values, roles, interests and motives); (3) goal attainment; and (4) pattern maintenance-tension reduction (the ongoing recruitment of individuals into the roles needed to keep the system functioning and mechanisms to reduce the systemic strains of conformity). Parsons suggests that basic social institutions arise to fulfill these basic needs, each governed by an internalized set of norms or expectations (e.g. economic institutions, religion, political institutions, education, the family). When tensions become too great in these contexts, however, people may deviate. When this happens, tension-reduction institutions are mobilized to back up these others (e.g. therapy, the CJS).

Parsons' vision of social life as an equilibrium-producing machine is highly mechanistic, likening the exchange between individual parts of the system to the cybernetic exchange between parts of a self-regulating machine. When the level of deviance gets "too high," it is dealt with by the four control mechanisms of socialization, profit, persuasion, and (when all else fails) coercion. Socialization teaches people to internalize the patterned roles necessary for achieving ordered social equilibrium. When this is imperfect, profit (payoffs for conformity) and persuasion (through religion, therapy or advertizing), come into play to encourage conformity. All of these mutually reinforce one another and existing lines of conformity. Yet, if these fail, and people become passively or actively alienated from society ("lost in the machine" either through madness or hostility, respectively), then a fourth mechanism of social control - coercion - must be brought into play. Here, the state must exercise its prerogative to constrain nonconformists, even if by violent means.

The Functionalist Perspective Today:

Rooted in the work of Durkheim, and rising to become the dominant perspective in American sociology in the 1950's under Parsons and Merton, functionalism began declining after the mid-1960's when a variety of competing perspective arose. We must look at the rise and fall of functionalism in its historical context.

The dominance of functionalism during the 1950's has led commentators to associate it with a time of economic prosperity and perceive political stability. Yet this misses the fact that much of Parsons' work was completed before that time - rooted in (1) the general crisis of the American middle class occasioned by the Depression; and (2) the role of WWI and its attendant wartime thinking. The first factor undercut the generally optimistic view of the Chicago school that disorganization would be followed by reorganization, aided by empirically-informed professional problem solvers. The Depression could not be explained away by problems of rapid social change, but pointed to deeper structural problems out of synch with American values and the ability of professional problem solvers to fix. The war, moreover, drew U.S. society into a wider sense of unease that had been brewing in Europe since the end of WWI. Existing U.S. sociological theory couldn't explain what was going on, and Marxism wouldn't be taken seriously as an alternative in the U.S. Into this breach Parsonian functionalism filled the gap. It's

idea that economic institutions were counterbalanced by other institutions in a self-preserving social system provided hope for the embattled U.S. middle class. This provided a conceptual escape from a world engulfed by economic and social disorder. It allowed sociologists to make peace with the existing order on the assumption that society would work things out in time. It "one-sidedly emphasized the adaptability of the status quo, considering the ways in which it was open to change rather than the manner in which its own characteristics were inducing the disorder and resisting adaptation to it."

Parsons himself, born of a stable family and ensconced at Harvard where he was insulated from the Depression, played a role in social policy: on the one hand calling for a pluralistic solution to racial divisions in the U.S., on the other being involved in certain "covert" cold war operations against the Soviet Union for the U.S. Army - recruiting Russian-born Nazi collaborators, including a social scientist wanted as a war criminal. Nevertheless, at Harvard, Parsons' optimistic view of society as a self-adjusting social system, and his enthusiasm for cybernetics, was transmitted to an entire generation of influential sociologists.

With regard to deviance, his viewpoint that deviance was therefore merely a form of "negative feedback" triggering adjustive responses corresponded to the ideology or belief system behind contemporary capitalist institutions ("management information systems"). This cybernetic link is also an offshoot of the white-male guided industrialization of modern warfare. Parsons' idea of cybernetic hierarchy of control (related to excesses or deficiencies in information or energy promoting change within or between action systems), for example, combines Herbert Spencer's evolutionary idea of the "survival of the fittest" with ideas about adjustive feedback drawn from contemporary biology and the work of Italian social theorist Vilfredo Pareto ("living systems"). These very abstract images focused on dissolving the boundaries between sociology, biology and economics - tend to be very inattentive to questions about the historical role of social power - thorny issues that are smoothed over by the machinelike metaphors of cybernetic theory. Moreover, this work appealed to the belief in the saving value of science rather than tradition prevalent in the intellectual climate of the 1930's.

By the 1950's, such a cybernetic fantasy of a self-regulating system of control had come to dominate mainstream North American sociology. Its conservative optimism represented a safe professional response to the crisis of the Great Depression, and its widespread acceptance was cemented by the victorious emergence of the U.S. from WWII in a wave of prosperity (War spending and Roosevelt's "New Deal" became seen as a "cybernetic-like adjustment" by institutions). Yet, this was all conditioned, as well, by violent social conflict.

After WWII many sociologists, moreover, worked for the government conducting research on a variety of management and organizational problems. At this time, the "triumph of professional sociology as a science," and its abstract generality, provided sociology with an identity as a science of high-level conceptualization, even predictive ability. Yet, this apparent strength (e.g. predicting the system's readjustment), was more apparent than real, ignoring or glossing over deeper cleavages in the economic, racial, and sexual organization of U.S. society.

For more than a decade the rose-colored glasses of functionalism belonged to "the power elite," and so, perhaps, did most sociologists at the time.

The surfacing of suppressed racial and political tensions in the 1960's destroyed the dominance of functionalist theory, and many sociologists came to prefer the view of society as a coordination of conflictual interests. Yet, despite its limitations, the functionalist approach has shed light on certain aspects of deviance previously not attended to - so we can't dismiss it entirely.

For example, Dentler and Erikson conducted research on Quaker work projects and basic training in the U.S. Army, concluding that: (1) Groups tend to induce, sustain, and permit deviant behavior; (2) Deviant behavior functions in inducing groups to maintain group equilibrium; and (3) Groups will resist any trend toward alienation (stigmatization, removal) of a member whose behavior is deviant. Essentially deviants in both groups were accommodated, had the highest intensity in social relationships, and served to reduce tensions by contributing something that others could not - or could not afford (e.g. certain emotions). Haven't we all had a roommate that all reacted to in a certain way such that helped all reduce tensions?

Similarly, Kai Erikson did a study of deviance among the Puritans of early Massachusetts, noting that every time the community moved to censure some act of deviation, it sharpens the authority of the violated norm and restates where the boundaries of the group are located. Moreover, the specific crimes focused on over time varied with changes in the nature of the threat to the community's religious purity. Thus, "it is not surprising that deviant behavior in a community should appear at exactly those points where it is most feared. Men who fear witches soon find themselves surrounded by them; men who become jealous of private property soon encounter eager thieves." Over 30 years, Erikson notes the volume of persons charged with deviance remained constant, but conviction rates for certain types of deviance went up when the dominant religious values came under specific threat. During such "crime waves," the community was called upon to reaffirm its moral boundaries in certain ways. This almost suggests something like "quotas" of functionally needed deviants, with channeling certain of its members into relatively fixed careers. Of course, Erikson's study raises more questions than it answers (e.g. his methodology relying on official documents, the difficulty comparing the colony to complex modern society, and the self-serving role of control agents themselves). Yet, his work stands as an imaginative and provocative piece of research rasing questions about a society's functional need for deviance.

Assessment of the Functionalist Perspective:

In successfully transforming the concept of deviance away from its exclusive identification with the dark and shadowy towards a consideration of its possible positive consequences, the functionalist perspective is a real innovation.

However, there are decided disadvantages built into the logic of functionalist thinking: (1)

An overly mechanistic view of social life as a social system; (2) the circularity of its analysis; and (3) its conservative bias.

The first problem, an overly mechanistic view, is just a little too neat for the complexities and messy nature of social life. While being at the mercy of a great, self-regulating machine is an appealing metaphor at times when we feel caught in a web of control not of our doing (e.g. bureaucracies, traffic, lineups), these are really sociological effects of often contradictory human *actions* in history. The functionalist model is an oversimplification that rules these out. Moreover, it is falsely teleological if it relates non-conformity to realizing goals of the system without specifying how the system causes this to happen. Its over-reliance on this metaphorical trap rules out human agency, contradictory choices, and so on in particular historical contexts. Moreover, if it were to admit this, the whole independent system metaphor would collapse.

The second problem, tautology, involves circular reasoning. If something exists, it must be contributing something. How do we know it contributes something? Because it exists. With this decontextualized and illogical reasoning, one can probably find a functional reason for just about anything (e.g. arson can rid society of old buildings, poverty has latent functions like ensuring a useful pool of cheap labor for the dirty jobs, jobs for counselors, etc.). Yet, such rosy "analyses" tell us nothing about the historical conditions that bring about or perpetuate poverty or about the lived experiences of the poor themselves.

Finally, the functionalist perspective has been plagued by a conservative bias. By documenting the positive contributions of deviance, it fails to ask whether deviance might be more beneficial to some rather than others (e.g. those alleged "deviants," such as Nelson Mandela, who were arrested, prosecuted and punished probably weren't as crazy about what happened to them). The fact is that some people benefit more from deviance than others, but this idea is alien to the conservative logic of functionalism (Robert Merton's qualifications aside). As a social system Nazi Germany may have benefitted from the mass deviantizing of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, communists, and so on, but it would be ridiculous to argue that all German residents, including these groups, benefitted equally from the Holocaust. When confronted with such facts, the functionalist perspective shows its basic conservatism. The system's benefits are listed without exploring who's in charge. Deviance may be functional, but the real question should be "functional for who?"