

SOC 3290 Deviance
Overheads Lecture 10: The Functionalist Perspective

* Unlike earlier perspectives, functionalism looks at contribution of deviance to the social order

Theoretical Images:

* Functionalism divides phenomena into functional/dysfunctional:

- functional = positive consequences for social organization
- dysfunctional = negative consequences for social organization

* Emile Durkheim: focused on “necessary” & “normal” features of any healthy, functioning society

* Felt that a “pathological society” is one where norms are either too strong or too weak:

- too strong = overly conformist, unable to flexibly adapt
- too weak = too loosely defined/unable to complete basic tasks

* Durkheim argued that a social phenomenon is normal if it is both “universal” & “necessary” (like deviance):

- universal=must be present in all or majority of societies
- necessary=a determining condition required for societal existence

* Deviance contributes to a healthy social order in four ways:

- (1) By setting moral boundaries;
- (2) Strengthening in-group solidarity;
- (3) Allowing for adaptive innovation; &

(4) Reducing internal societal tensions.

* Robert Merton: distinction between “manifest” & “latent” functions:

- manifest= recognized & intended
- latent= unintended consequences

* Deviance may be manifestly condemned but latently permitted/useful

* Examples:

- Robert Merton on corrupt city politics: maximizing benefits for all
- Kingsley Davis on prostitution: satisfying needs while maintaining marital bonds
- Denfield & Gordon on “swinging”: releasing sexual fantasies while maintaining sentimental bonds of marriage

Identifying Functional Deviance:

* Common assumptions guide functionalist research:

- limit researchers to certain images
- deviance must be seen in relation to whole society
- organic metaphor: society made up of interrelated parts

* Durkheim: important to separate causes from consequences (not always practicing what he preached)

* Two logical /conceptual problems result:

(1) *Circular reasoning* (tautology). “If something is universal, it must be functional.” Why is it functional? Because it’s universal.”

(2) *False teleology* (asserting something has a purpose without specifying how this happens, or how caused).

* Robert Merton's solution: Avoid all assumptions about:

- (1) The harmonious integration of parts of a system;
- (2) Any relationship between the existence of a phenomena & its contribution to the social order; &
- (3) The idea that social needs can only be met by the present phenomena.

* These pave the way for several considerations:

- deviance may be functional for some; dysfunctional for others
- the "net balance" of positive/negative consequences
- manifest & latent functions
- alternative ways of meeting same social needs

* Merton: five steps in a proper functionalist analysis:

- (1) Specifically describe deviant phenomena/control patterns;
- (2) Outline range/type of alternatives excluded in present instance;
- (3) Assess their meaning for those involved;
- (4) Discern motives for conforming/not conforming; &
- (5) Describe patterns/latent consequences not recognized by participants

* Avoid above problems better in theory than in practice.

Social Control of Functional Deviance:

* Relative benefit/harmfulness of deviance a matter of degree: some good for society; too much is pathological

*Talcott Parsons: healthy society=a stable society where parts coordinated as interrelated parts of an organic system.

* Parsons: systemic social needs coordinated by:

- (1) Adaptation to external environment;
- (2) Integration of the system's parts (values, roles, interests, & motives);
- (3) Goal attainment;
- (4) Pattern maintenance-tension reduction.

* Basic social institutions arise to fulfill these basic needs, each governed by internalized norms/expectations (e.g. economic, religious, political, educational, the family).

* If tension becomes too great & people deviate, tension-reduction institutions are mobilized to back up others:

- (1) Socialization;
- (2) Profit;
- (3) Persuasion; &
- (4) Coercion.

The Functionalist Perspective Today:

* Functionalism was the dominant perspective in the 1950's/early 1960's

* Yet, Parsons' work historically rooted in:

- (1) The Great Depression;
- (2) Wartime thinking (WWII).

* Both undercut Chicago school/linked U.S. to European unease

* Marxism not considered, Parsons' structural approach filled the gap.

* Provided a politically safe conceptual escape:

- "system is adaptable/things will work out in time"
- avoided how system itself induces crises/disorder/unease

* Parsons himself:

- stable/sheltered background
- insulated from Depression at Harvard
- mixed progressive/reactionary activities
- enthusiasm for cybernetics/idea of "feedback mechanisms"
- linked capitalist "management information systems" ideology, military "hierarchy of control," & Pareto's biological "living systems" ideas

* After WWII: victory & prosperity seemed to prove Parsons right (avoided factor of violent social conflict)

* 1950's "triumph of sociology as a science":

- focus on management/organizational problems
- high-level conceptualization/attempts at prediction
- glossed over economic, racial & sexual inequalities
- 1960's conflict broke "rose-colored glasses"

* Still, functionalist work is being done:

(1) Dentler & Erikson (Quakers & Army boot camp):

- (i) Groups induce, sustain & permit deviance
- (ii) Deviance functions to induce members to maintain group

equilibrium;

(iii) Groups resist trend toward alienation of deviant member.

(2) Erikson (Puritans):

- Level of charges constant over time
- Sanctioning increased with threats to religious purity of group
- “Crime waves” saw group reaffirm values in different ways
- Questions arise, but still provocative/suggests society needs deviance

Assessment of the Functionalist Perspective:

* Innovates by suggesting possible positive consequences of deviance

* Disadvantages:

- (1) An overly mechanistic view of social life as a social system;
- (2) Logical problems: (tautology/false teleology);
- (3) Conservative political bias.