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The Theoretical Approaches of Durkheim, Parsons and Luhmann: Intra-traditional Differences, Interdependencies and Contradictions

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Novelty:
This paper examines the individual differences, interdependencies, theoretical strengths and common flaws of Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann within the broad consensus tradition of sociology.

Abstract

Following an extensive reading of structural functionalism, this paper characterises the theoretical approaches of Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann within the broad consensus tradition of sociology and provide a critical analysis of their individual differences, interdependencies, theoretical strengths and common flaws.

Keywords: Antipositivism, Autopoiesis, Conflict, Functional requisites, Functionalism.

Introduction

Structural functionalism is basically a broad perspective which interprets society as structure with interrelated parts. Functionalism addresses the society as a whole in terms of function of its constituent elements such as norms, customs, traditions, institutions and so on. Social structures are stressed and placed at the center of analysis and social functions are deduced from these structures. From this broad perspective, Durkheim, Parsons and Luhmann can all comfortably be described as Structural functionalists (Ritzer, 1975).

While these theorists are all described in one sense as structural functionalists, we find their individual theoretical approaches to analysing society and social processes and how the analysis has transformed over the years as intellectually intriguing. The functionalist approach was implicit in the thought of the original work of Auguste Comte, who stressed the need for cohesion after the social disorder of the French Revolution. This was later presented in the work of Émile Durkheim, who developed a full theory of social solidarity (Coser, 2010), again informed by Comte's positivism

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in what he termed social facts. Latter functionalists such as Niklas Luhmann and Talcott Parsons can on the other hand be viewed partially as anti-positivists howbeit in the same tradition.

Durkheim's Theoretical Approach

Emile Durkheim like Auguste Comte was worried about the social disorder of his day which is why he dealt with the problem of social order. Durkheim had a lasting impact on the later development of the structural functionalist theory. In his theoretical approach, he sought to explain the apparent stability of societies (Coser, 2010). Like other functionalist, he believed that society is held together by the shared beliefs, sentiments and values of members in a society. That is to say that society exists because of consensus (agreement) to follow the rules to keep society stable. The subject matter of sociology according to Durkheim should be "social facts". Sociology as a discipline according to him should study these "social facts" –those things which are external to individuals and coercive of them in society. For example, social norms, traditions and customs, societal laws, common morality, and so on are things that are external to the individual and yet have coercive power over him (Ritzer, 1975).

On the matter of the evolution of society, he posited that society moves from traditional to modern. Society evolves from traditional to modern state due mainly to population growth. It is within this description that he discusses his central theme and what is arguably his theoretical legacy in the discipline of sociology in detail. This is social solidarity within which his concepts of collective conscience, happiness, anomie and suicide and the social significance of religion are emphasized (Scambler, 1987). His specific conception of the nature of social order was first sketched out in his 1887 essay "*The Positive Science of Morality in Germany*" but more fully developed in "The Division of Labour in Society" [1893] (Durkheim, 1984). The theme of Durkheimian thought is the relation between individuals and the collectivity (Nolan et al., 2004). The problem might be stated thus: How can a multiplicity of individuals make up a society? How can individuals achieve what is the condition of social existence, namely, a consensus? Durkheim's answer to this central question is to set up a distinction between two forms of solidarity.' – mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity, respectively.

Mechanical solidarity is, in Durkheim's (1984) language, a solidarity of resemblance. The major characteristic of a society in which mechanical solidarity prevails is that the individuals differ from one another in a very little way. The individuals, the members of the same collectivity, resemble each other because they feel the same emotions, cherish the same values, and hold the same things sacred. The society is coherent because the individuals are not yet differentiated. The opposite form of solidarity, organic solidarity, is one in which consensus, or the coherent unity of the collectivity, results from or is expressed by differentiation. The individuals are no longer similar, but different; and in a certain sense, which we shall examine some more, it is precisely because the individuals are different that consensus is achieved.

Interestingly, before Durkheim, everyone thought suicide for example to be a personal problem (Kushner et al., 2005). However, the act of suicide in Durkheim's theorising is influenced by social forces –the level of social integration and social regulation and not simply an individual matter as it might appear. He treats religion as a social fact which serves the social significance of social integration and social solidarity in line with his central theme. Having set the tone of the functional analysis of society and human action, we turn attention to the work of Talcott Parsons.

Parsons' Functionalism

Structural functionalism was exemplified highly developed in the work of Talcott Parsons. He is credited with the modern form of this tradition. This was indeed the reigning sociological paradigm during the mid-twentieth century. Although not all functionalists were equilibrium theorists, Parsons' functionalism implied at least an implicit systems analysis (Nolan et al., 2004). Basic functionalism enabled the analysis of part/whole relationships. The whole (the social system) would have certain needs, requisites, survival requirements, equilibrium requirements, or other requirements that would be generally expressed in terms of the "state" (such as a state of equilibrium or a state of integration) of the system as a whole. The whole was composed of internally related subsystems that were (either individually or in concert) fulfilling some survival functions for the whole (social system, or society). If the part (such as an educational institution) did not fulfil its function adequately, then the system whole would falter at the very least, and in the

worst instance, would fail to survive. Thus, in the consensus approach to functionalism, the function of the internal components is to ensure the maintenance of social equilibrium, thus ensuring societal survival (Coser, 2010).

His main theoretical exposition is expressed in his social action theory which was to become his general theory of action (Holmwood, 2005). Parsons's AGIL scheme summarizes four functional requisites or imperatives of any system of action: adaptation (A), goal attainment (G), integration (I), and latent pattern maintenance (L). The AGIL scheme specifies for structural functional theory the needs of any living system and how that system maintains order in relation to both its external environment and internal organization (Coser, 2010). Parsons argues that the AGIL scheme could be employed in the analysis and study of both abstract systems of action and actually existing, concrete societies.

One key tenet of the general theory of action states that any complex of actions or behaviours may be characterized as a system of action in which the parts interact with one another and with the external environment of the system. Each part of the system performs certain functions for the maintenance of the system as a whole. Some of these functions involve the relationship of the system to its external environment (Nolan et al., 2004), while others involve the interrelationship of the parts of the system to each other and to the whole. In addition, functions may be characterized as either consummatory or instrumental. The former describes functions concerning the determination of the ends or goals of a system, while the latter describes functions concerning the means with which the system pursues its ends. Four functional requisites of any system emerge from the superimposition of these two distinctions:

- Adaptation is an instrumental function by which a system adapts to its external environment or adapts the external environment to the system.
- Goal attainment is a consummatory function that defines the goals and ends of a system and mobilizes resources to attain them. Goal attainment is generally oriented externally.
- Integration is a consummatory function that manages the interrelationships of the parts of a system. The integration function maintains internal coherence and solidarity within the system.
- Latent pattern maintenance is an instrumental function that supplies all actors in the system with a source of motivation. It provides normative patterns and manages the tensions of actors internal to the system.

Parsons argued that any system of action could be further broken down into subsystems of action, each of which corresponds to one of the AGIL functions above. The behavioural organism performs the adaptation function, and although it is the subsystem that adapts to and transforms the physical world (Ritzer, 2008). Parsons devoted much more time to analysing the other three subsystems. The personality, or personality system, performs the goal attainment function insofar as it defines objectives and mobilizes resources for the pursuit of ends. The social system performs the function of integration by means of generating solidarity and loyalty, defining acceptable and unacceptable actions, granting rewards, and enforcing constraints. For Parsons, the social system consists of manifold interactions between ego and alter, norms and values, sanctions, status roles, and social institutions. Parsons insisted that social theorists could analyze many phenomena – from firms to entire societies – as social systems. The cultural system performs the function of latent pattern maintenance by supplying motivation to actors through ordered sets of symbols and institutionalized patterns to the system as a whole (Barber, 1994).

Parsons placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of the cultural system for the stability of action systems (Barber, 1994). The four subsystems are analytically distinct from and irreducible from one another, but one must remember that they are interrelated and interdependent in many ways. Note that the four subsystems are each analytical tools that do not correspond directly to reality; rather, they are aids for thinking about how systems function. While all functional theorists may share in the many criticisms against structural functionalism, Talcott Parsons' theoretical approach faces an additional criticism of over ambition in his attempt to suggest his social systems theory as a general theory (Owens, 2010). Robert Merton for one rejects Parsons' attempt at developing for us a general all-encompassing theory. He advocated for theoretical propositions of the middle –range. In this respect, Merton described Parsons' idea as 'an overambitious enterprise.' He thought pluralistic middle range theories could elucidate limited sets of empirical phenomena and could be subjected to empirical testing. In the next few

paragraphs we turn attention to the work of Niklas Lumann whose contributions to Systems Theory (ST) unlike Parsons are numerous and complex.

The Functional Perspective of Niklas Luhmann

Luhmann's approach is to sociology and functionalism is not wholesale (Holmström, 2007). He is particularly famous for his presentation of society as an autopoietic system. Although a lively debate exists over whether societies are autopoietic, Luhmann firmly believes that they are. The debate centres on the proper component for the social system. Luhmann says that the proper unit or component of the social system is not the individual, act, or social role, but instead the communication (utterance). Such communication in the form of an utterance is central to the existence of society and indispensable. However, the utterance is not permanent. Thus, if society is built around such temporary utterances, which disappear almost instantaneously, it follows then that society is autopoietic and must continually reproduce itself, by reproducing the components (utterances) that produce it or fail to exist.

The concept of autopoiesis has multiple advantages for Luhmann and those of us who follow him. It enables a clear analysis of social reproduction. It also facilitates a cogent analysis of social communication. It further serves as an excellent framework for the analysis of self-reference, including analysis of the notion of second-order sociocybernetics. Still further, it goes beyond traditional open or closed systems analysis by portraying the social system as simultaneously both open and closed. That is, Luhmann represents the autopoietic system as being organizationally closed. The internal autopoietic organizational processes by which the system ensures its reproduction are closed to the external environment and to other social systems. Yet, simultaneously, the system's borders remain open to exchanges of energy and information with its external environment (Luhmann, 1986).

Furthermore, even subsystems, particularly differentiated functional subsystems such as law or medicine, can have their own exchange relationships with the external environment, perhaps independently of the relationships of the larger society. The autopoietic model allows Luhmann to transcend the old part-whole analysis of functionalism with its overemphasis on system internals. Luhmann's systems differentiation theorising is given particular attention here. While theoretical positions like the Parsonian social systems and the capitalist world systems theory grant a basic description of general analysis of systems, they fall short of better explaining certain complex relations between systems parts. This is where I find Luhmann's differentiation theory middle-ranged and empirically -oriented and thus useful compared to the others. His theory gives the opportunity to explain the segmentary, stratificatory as well as the centre –periphery attributes of the existing relations exemplified between systems and their parts. As students of society and particularly of the sociology of work, my understanding of aspects of the work system is further illuminated by Luhmann's detailed explanation of the differentiation of functional systems.

According to Luhmann (1995), every society is divided into various autopoietic and separated (sub)systems such as the legal system, the political system, the scientific system, the educational system or the economic system which "maintain in an overly complex environment, a less complex, meaningful context invariant and are thus able to orientate actions" (Luhmann, 1995, p. 26). Luhmann's systems theory is based on some essential elements one of which is emphasised in the current discussion. They include communication, autopoiesis, differentiation, and structural couplings. As indicated, Luhmann's systems theory unlike others takes self - reference as central to systems and focuses on contingency; that is, the fact that things could be different. His theory demonstrates the complexity in differentiating a system and its environment which many systems theorists ignore. The system itself is always less complex than its environment. It meanwhile recognizes this complexity and how it could affect its own operations and survival as a system.

While systems can never be as complex as their environment, they develop subsystems and establish various relations between the subsystems in order to deal effectively with their environment (Ritzer, 2008). If they did not, they would be overwhelmed by the complexity of the environment. For instance, a sugar manufacturing firm, recognizing the complexities of the socioeconomic and legal environment, establishes a supply chain unit to coordinate the activities of other subsystems of raw material producers and suppliers. The unit in its coordination apprises the manufacturing firm of any disruptions in the supply of raw materials and takes steps to find alternative sources. From this theoretical position, the principal feature of modern society is the

increased process of system differentiation as a way of dealing with the complexity of its environment (Rasch, 2000). Each system as seen above must maintain its boundaries in relation to the environment. Otherwise, it would be overwhelmed by the variations of its environment, break down, and cease to exist (Ritzer, 2008). So, large systems adjust slowly through differentiation to the alterations in their environment in order to survive. These environmental alterations may include political changes, legal frameworks, concrete public demands and even technological changes.

Consequently, the differentiation process becomes a means of increasing the complexity of the system, since each subsystem in this can establish different connections with other subsystems. This allows for more variations within the system itself in order to respond effectively to variations in the environment. The kinds of differentiation that Luhmann discusses are in the form of segmentation, stratification, center-periphery, and functional differentiation. In segmentary differentiation, there is a division of the parts of the system on the basis of the need to fulfill identical functions over and over. So, the system can have subsystems irrespective of their locations having the same structure and fulfilling the same function while in stratificatory differentiation, the systems differentiation is conceived of as a hierarchy. It is a vertical differentiation according to rank and status in the system. Every rank fulfills a particular and distinct function in the system. In this differentiation, inequality is not accidental but essential even to the system. Here, the system is more concerned with the well-being of those in the upper ranks and generally concerned with the lower ranks only when their operations (actions and inactions) threaten the operations and very survival of the higher ranks. The higher ranks have access to resources and a greater ability to become the subject of 'influential communication'.

There is also the center - periphery differentiation which is more or less like a link between segmentary and stratificatory differentiation (Beneria, 1989; Chen, 2007). Functional differentiation is the most complex and most dominant differentiation in modern society. Every unit of the system is ascribed a particular function. Here, what is important is that, if one (sub)system fails to fulfill its task, the whole of the system will have great trouble surviving (Ritzer, 2008). Interestingly however, as long as each of the subsystem fulfills its function, the different (sub)systems can attain a high degree of independence. Luhmann's functionally differentiated systems are a complex mixture of interdependence and independence (Ritzer, 2008). For instance, while a system is dependent on another (sub)system in its periphery for raw materials, as long as the raw materials come as planned (Farrell et al., 2000), that system can be blissfully ignorant of exactly how these raw materials are produced and even the precarious conditions within which the actors within them work (Farah et al., 2010). In order to have any varying effect on the system however, actors in the lower ranks or peripheries must resort to some form of conflict.

The Consensus Tradition: Its Conservative Bias, Reductionism, Teleology and Tautology

Whether in political science, sociology or education, there is arguably no single theory which has attracted much interest and attention than functionalism. Until the mid -1960s where it began to see its dominance and significance reduce, structural functionalism enjoyed quite a lot of theoretical leadership and following especially in America (Nolan et al., 2004; Ritzer, 2010). Structural Functionalism as a theoretical orientation is concerned mainly with the interrelations between social phenomena in general and, more specifically, with the consequences of given items for the larger structure or structures in which they are variously embedded. Functionalists argue that society should be understood as a system of interdependent parts (Nolan et al., 2004). In this orientation, people are seen as constrained to a great extent by cultural and social forces. Here, patterns of social life are seen as the product of existing structural arrangements. As such, action is motivated by ideals, values, morals, traditions, habits, or emotional states.

The early roots of functionalism, that is positivism, was attacked for its reductionism –that is, its propensity to explain individual behaviour in terms of physiological, psychochemical, genetic, or geographical (environmental) influences - "and its consequent inability as a theoretical perspective to account for the voluntaristic, choicemaking, and goal striving tendencies of social actors" (Coser, 2010, p. 563). While these were earlier arguments, attempts by Talcott Parsons to deal with them in the theory he pioneered were insufficient. The farthest he could go in response was that 'human actors were seen as capable of making choices of courses of action, but he incurably adds that these

choices were constrained by biological and environmental conditions and, more importantly, the values and norms governing the social structures in which these actors are enmeshed. Clearly this does not make us understand the voluntaristic, choicemaking, and goal striving tendencies of social actors as are observed daily in society.

It has been argued that structural functionalism has a conservative bias. That is, it is unable to deal with history, change, and conflict and this is seen even in the theoretical expositions given in this paper. To start with, among the main criticisms levelled against the theory is its inability to deal with the past. The theory has been described as inherently ahistorical. In the early days of structural functionalism, most of the proponents heavily criticised the historical evolutionary approach to gain their own entrance into the theoretical space as a credible alternative. Following this, the theory has been unable to adequately deal with history which ties irredeemably into the problem of change. Consequently, functionalists have also been attacked for being unable to effectively deal with the process of change. The perspective is said to be unable to adequately explain how social change occurs. While the earlier criticism deals with the problem of the past, this latter one concerns the theory's deficiency in accounting for the contemporary process of social change. As others have argued, in the structural functionalist theory, all the elements of a society are seen as reinforcing one another as well as the system as a whole. This makes it difficult to see how these elements can also contribute to change. It is important to note however that some other authors believe that this weakness is not with the theory per se but the practitioners as would become clear in this paper.

Arguably, the greatest challenge and frequently mentioned criticism against the structural functionalist theory is its inability to deal effectively with conflict. This in part is because proponents of the theory tend to overemphasise harmonious relationships. Also, as Holmwood (2005) notes, these functionalists tend to see conflict as necessarily destructive and as occurring outside the framework of society. These positions make the theory one that is unable to explain conflict sufficiently in its traditional form according Alvin Gouldner and Irving Louis Horowitz. Methodologically and logically, structural functionalism has often been criticised as basically vague, unclear, and ambiguous. It is said to be ambiguous because it chooses to deal with abstract social systems and concepts instead of real societies. Although no single grand scheme can ever be used to analyse all societies throughout history sufficiently, this is exactly what structural functionalism tries to do. Critics see this attempt at a grand theory as an illusion and recommend as Merton did, historically specific 'middle –range' theories. Also, other theorists have questioned how the theory could help with comparative study and analysis since a part of the system cannot be understood without its system or context.

From the angle of logic, the issues of teleology and tautology have also been raised. Teleology is defined to mean the view that society (or other social structures) has purposes and goals. Thus, in order to achieve these goals, society creates or cause to be created, specific social structures and social institutions. On the other hand, a tautological argument is one in which the conclusion merely makes explicit what is implicit in the premise or is simply a restatement of the premise – this is often referred to as *circular reasoning*. In structural functionalism, the whole is defined in terms of its parts and then define the parts in terms of the whole. In much the same way, a social system is defined by the relationship among its component parts and then the component parts of the system are defined by their place in the larger social system (Ritzer, 2008, p.119). So, because each is defined in terms of the other, neither the social system nor its parts are in fact defined in the end.

Robert Merton for one, as has been alluded to earlier, rejects Parsons' attempt at developing for us a general all-encompassing theory. He advocated for theoretical propositions of the middle – range. In this respect, Merton described Parsons' idea as 'an overambitious enterprise.' He thought pluralistic middle range theories could elucidate limited sets of empirical phenomena and could be subjected to empirical testing. Merton also questioned Malinowski's assumption that every social phenomenon necessarily has function and also the implication that any item was indispensable to a given social structure's operation (Coser, 2010). Merton spoke of functional alternatives and dysfunctions in his functional analysis. His analysis also stressed on the need to be aware of basically structural sources of disorder, of socio-cultural contradictions, and of divergent values within given structures which had been neglected by his predecessors. He sees the idea of

considering societies, social processes, and structures as unambiguously unified wholes as problematic.

Coser (2010) makes the point that Merton's closely argued distinctions between manifest and latent functions [those consequential activities that are present in the actor's mind and those that are not] and his distinguishing of individual purposes from functional effects helped to remove some of the teleological implications that many critics had discerned in the writings of some of his predecessors and contemporaries. Following the many criticisms, the significance of the functionalist theory as an analytical tool declined from the mid -1960s till now. Subsequent to these criticisms however, what is described by Jeffrey Alexander and Colomy as a self –critical strand of functional theory that seeks to broaden functionalism's intellectual scope while retaining its theoretical core – *neofunctionalism* (Coser, 2010), emerged. In these redemptive efforts, the works of Kai Ericson, Smelser, Herbert Gans, Jeffrey Alexander, and Niklas Luhmann (as discussed here) have been particularly helpful in bringing back credibility to this consensus approach (Ritzer, 2010).

Conclusion

The discussion in this paper portrays all the three theorists as consensus theorists yet their differences and interdependence is particularly remarkable. While Auguste Comte's influence on the work of Durkheim is not contestable, one finds a much improved functional theorising in Durkheim's approach. He developed a full empirically –oriented theory of social solidarity howbeit informed by Comte's positive philosophy. A detailed look at Parsons's work on the AGIL scheme on the other hand shows that it owed a great deal to the thinking of Émile Durkheim. However, Parsons's strand was much more detailed and clearly analytical. In what could qualify as a response to Merton's criticism of Parsons's general action theory, Luhmann in the same tradition of partial antipositivism, presents a middle range systems analysis which could in the thinking of Merton elucidate limited sets of empirical phenomena and in deed could be subjected to empirical testing.

It must be said therefore that all the challenges notwithstanding, the structural functionalist theory continues to be (especially in its present modified form) an important perspective relied upon in the study and analysis of many social situations and processes the world over. So, while one cannot run away from the explanatory inadequacies of the functionalist perspective, its significance as a theoretical model cannot be underestimated.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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