



Sociology Central Teaching Notes

**Crime and Deviance
4. Functionalist Theories**

Functionalist Theories

1

Introduction

In these Notes we're going to review a number of theories of crime and deviance from a **Structural Functionalist** perspective.

In case this sociological perspective is not clear to you, the **first part** of these Notes is given over to a brief **overview** of this perspective. If you are familiar with this perspective, then this overview will serve as **revision** material...

The **second part** of these Notes will provide an overview of some of the basic themes and theories put forward by writers working within this general perspective to explain crime.

Functionalism: An Overview

The **Functionalist perspective** is a form of *Structuralist* sociology and, as such, we can initially characterise it as a form of **macro** sociological theorising. In this respect, the main theoretical question addressed by sociologists working within the Functionalist perspective is that of:

How do social systems ("societies") hold together?

In their attempts to provide an answer to this question, Functionalists have initially concentrated upon two ideas that are closely related to the above:

1. **How is order maintained in any society?**
2. **What are the main sources of stability in any society?**

As you might imagine - given that the theoretical emphasis seems to be placed on rather grand questions about the nature of social systems - Functionalist sociologists are not particularly concerned with an examination of individual ideas, meanings and interpretations. We will look in more detail about why this should be the case in a moment. What they do tend to emphasise, however, is the idea that the basis of **social order** is to be found in **shared values / consensus** (hence this perspective sometimes being referred-to as **Consensus Structuralism** to distinguish it from the **Conflict Structuralism** of writers such as **Marx**).

When looking at varieties of Functionalist sociology, it is evident that all begin with an elaboration of two major concepts:

1. **Social System:** In basic terms, "society" is seen as an organised **structure** (or framework) of inter-related parts (called **Institutions**).
2. **Social Structure:** This refers to the specific framework around which any society is based (in effect, **social structure** refers to the specific ways in which various **institutions** are related to one another on a **functional** basis).

To develop these ideas, I've noted that the concept of **social institution** is central to this perspective and an institution can be loosely defined as:

Functionalist Theories

2

“A broad pattern of shared, stable, social relationships”.

In this sense, an institution involves large-scale, organised, behaviour patterns that persist over time. Examples in our society include:

- ✓ Family,
- ✓ Work,
- ✓ Education and
- ✓ Religion.

When Functionalists study "society", therefore, they look initially at **institutional** arrangements and relationships, since these are seen as the basic building-blocks of any society. The way in which institutions relate to one another determines the structure and basic character of any society.

Institutional arrangements are also significant in relation to the concept of **culture**, which can be defined as a:

“**Broad pattern of values and beliefs that both characterise a particular way of life and which are transmitted from generation to generation**”.

The main reason for the significance of the relationship is that people are born into an existing system of institutional arrangements.

In order to learn how to behave in society, therefore, arrangements have to be made for people to fit-into existing patterns of behaviour (patterns that are established - and held relatively stable and constant over time - by institutionalised patterns of behaviour). This process is **socialisation**:

Values and **beliefs** are transmitted to individuals (and **internalised** - that is, they become an essential part of an individual's social make-up), through a variety of **socialising agencies** (the family, peer group, mass media and so forth). These agencies may be institutions in their own right (the family for example) or part of an institutional set-up (the police, for example, are part of a legal institution).

Through the socialising process the basic values of any society are internalised by individuals and, for this to occur, Functionalists (such as Talcott **Parsons**, G.P.**Murdock** and William **Goode**) argue that any society is founded, maintained and reproduced on the basis of a **broad value consensus** (in this respect, broad levels of agreement over fundamental values, for example).

From the above it is perhaps easy to see why Functionalist writers are not particularly interested in the behaviour of individual social actors and the meanings and interpretations they place on various forms of behaviour:

1. Firstly, society is seen as a set of inter-related and mutually-dependent **social structures** that exist prior to any individual - the individual learns how to behave within society and, in this respect, behaves in ways that are effectively pre-defined by these social structures.

Functionalist Theories

3

2. Secondly, because people are, by definition, **socialised** into a set of existing **cultural values** (and they live their lives in accordance with such values), it follows that all human activity / choice effectively takes place in the context of this institutionally-determined cultural order.

In effect, we can note the following:

The **socialisation process** - through which cultural values are transmitted to the individual - places limits upon people's horizons, perception of potential courses of action and so forth.

People deviate from social norms, for example, not because they are irrational, "naturally bad" or whatever. Deviation occurs because people are placed under various kinds of **social pressure** that effectively limit their potential choices of action and it is to an understanding of such ideas that we need to now turn.

Durkheim and the Functions of Crime.

In any analysis of Functionalist theory, the work of Emile Durkheim looms large, mainly because he tends to be seen as the first sociologist to explicitly attempt the systematic theorising and **empirical study** of the social world. That is, he tried to develop theories that explained why people behaved in certain regular, broadly-predictable ways and, most importantly, he attempted to test such theories by collecting research data.

Durkheim's work is characterised by its logical elegance and the example of the way in which he attempts to locate criminal behaviour within an explicitly sociological context is instructive in this respect.

In relation to crime and deviance, therefore, Durkheim was initially faced with a methodological problem that stemmed from the way in which he attempted to theorise the general nature of the social world:

In basic Functionalist terms, if something exists in society it must have a purpose for existing and hence it must serve some kind of **function**.

For example, since crime existed it was necessary to explain the functions it performed for the individual and / or society.

From Durkheim's point-of-view, in order to understand the function of crime, it is necessary to look at the way he characterised the nature of two basic types of society - small-scale societies and large-scale societies

In small-scale societies (such as rural, pre-industrial, societies), **social organisation** was seen to be fundamentally based around closely-shared **norms and values**. In such societies there is a relatively limited number of **social relationships** and those that exist tend to be based upon close, personal, norms and values.

Durkheim argued that since norms and values tend to be the **social glue** that binds people together in groups, the combination of **informal social controls**, restricted geographic mobility and the like, served as the basis for **social order**.

Functionalist Theories

4

As societies develop and grow, Durkheim argued that the **moral ties** which bind people together are weakened because they cannot be continually reinforced by close, personal, contact. Thus, as societies become more-complex in terms of the multitude of **social relationships** that exist, a **mechanism** to regulate these types of relationships has to be developed - and this mechanism is, in effect, a legal system.

In this respect, legal systems develop in order to **codify** moral behaviour and, in so doing, Durkheim argued, this process lays the groundwork for our understanding of the functions of both law and crime. These functions can be outlined as follows:

1. Firstly, laws mark the **boundaries** of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in any large-scale society. That is, they represent broad social guide-lines for people's behaviour, in much the same way that norms represent specific social guide-lines.
2. Secondly, laws are a very public form of boundary marking. Unlike norms, for example, they are written-down and applicable to everyone in a society. In this respect, the codification of morals into laws requires **public displays** that such boundaries exist. Such displays may be seen to be a function of such **agencies** as:
 - ✓ The **mass media** - whereby criminal behaviour is publicised.
 - ✓ The **Courts** - wherein the traditions and rituals of the legal system serve to set it apart from everyday behaviour.
3. Thirdly, criminal behaviour was seen by Durkheim to be the way in which legal boundaries were tested. He argued that because laws were necessarily **social statics** (they are slow to change once adopted), there was the possibility that changes in people's behaviour over time would fail to be reflected by appropriate changes in the law - unless some **mechanism** existed to provide the impetus whereby change could be accommodated.

Criminal behaviour, in effect, represents the **dynamic** force whereby people are made to reassess the applicability of various laws. Where laws are out-of-step with general behaviour, they need to be changed.

A modern example of this idea might be found in the introduction of the Community Charge ("Poll Tax") in Britain in the early 1980's; because the law was widely disobeyed, the government was forced to rethink it's attitude to this particular law...

4. Finally, crime has an **integrating function**, in that public alarm and outrage at criminal acts serves to draw the law-abiding closer together. This, according to Durkheim, serves to increase levels of **social solidarity** (the communal feelings that people have for one another, the sense of belonging to a coherent social group / society and so forth). In this way, the bonds between people were seen to be continually reinforced by criminal behaviour. Although Durkheim was clear about the functional significance of crime, he was also aware of the fact that too much crime in a society would create problems.

Functionalism Theories

5

Why might too high a level of crime create problems, given the distinction that can be made between acceptable / unacceptable forms of behaviour and the idea of value consensus produced through socialisation?

In this respect, Durkheim saw that too a high a level of criminal behaviour would be potentially disruptive (or **dysfunctional**) because it would seriously weaken the moral order in society:

In effect, people would no-longer know what was morally right or morally wrong and so would be unsure as to where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour lay. This is an argument that we will return to in a latter Study Pack when we consider Ecological theories of crime and deviance.

In terms of the above, therefore, Durkheim argued that the basis of social order in complex, industrial, societies was to be found in the relationship between two ideas, namely:

1. The Collective Conscience:

This idea is used to express the way in which collective beliefs, values and so forth combine to create a kind of "collective sense of consciousness" about various aspects of the social world within which people exist. In effect, it reflects the idea that "society" is very much alive - just like a human being is alive - and the conscience of society is expressed as a kind of "sum total" of the beliefs and values of people who belong to that society. In effect, the **collective conscience** represents the **will of society as a whole**, just as the individual conscience represents the will of particular individuals.

2. Legal rules:

For Durkheim - as for many Functionalist writers - legal rules represent a form of **objective** expression of the **collective conscience**. In effect, laws develop out of (and are underpinned by) the **collective conscience** of a society. In this respect, laws are basically norms "writ large" - that is, norms of behaviour that don't just apply informally to specific groups but which, on the contrary, are applied formally to everyone in society.

As we have seen, Durkheim argues that people are shaped by their social experiences (they experience society as a moral force bearing down upon them) and it follows that if the collective conscience is weakened (by, for example, too much criminal behaviour), the moral ties that bind people together are also weakened.

When (or perhaps "if") this happens, the concept used by Durkheim to express this weakening of moral ties was that of **anomie**:

In a literal sense, this concept can be taken to mean a state of **normlessness** - a situation in which no norms of behaviour are in operation.

Identify possible situations in which norms of behaviour do not exist.

For Durkheim, therefore, **anomie** occurred when traditional norms of behaviour were undermined without being replaced by new norms. In the absence of clear moral guide-lines for their behaviour, people experience feelings of anxiety, aimlessness, purposelessness, disorientation and so forth.

Functionalist Theories

6

Giddens ("Sociology") describes **anomie** as a

"Process whereby social norms lose their hold over individual / group behaviour".

In relation to crime:

Explain how too high a level of crime might lead to anomie.

Indicate how you might define / measure "too high a level of crime".

Anomie, therefore, was seen by Durkheim to be a very dangerous phenomenon, mainly because when people no-longer believe in their obligations to others (because they no-longer have a concept of a **collective conscience** by which to guide their behaviour), they revert to **self-interest**. In effect, they attempt to look after themselves without bothering too much about how this may affect the lives of others...

Thus, high levels of criminal behaviour weaken the **collective conscience** and produce **anomie**. Since human beings cannot live in a state of true anomie for long, social collapse occurs, prior to the establishment of some new form of moral order...

Given the distinction between collective conscience and legal rules, briefly explain why small-scale societies would, according to Durkheim, have no-need for a legal system?

One of the major **criticisms** of Durkheim's general work in relation to crime has been the idea that he ignores the way in which **power** is a significant variable in relation to the way in laws are created and maintained in any society. Thus, whilst Durkheim argued that the **collective conscience** was the objective expression of the values held by everyone in society, **Erikson** ("Wayward Puritans", 1966) attempted to develop Durkheim's basic ideas about such things as the boundary setting function of law. He did this by arguing that powerful groups within any society were able to impose their views upon the majority by a process of **ideological manipulation**. Erikson used the example of 17th century **Puritanism** to illustrate this idea.

In the Puritan religion, the idea developed that "God speaks directly to the individual" and, therefore, clergy and Church organisation / hierarchies are not needed. This idea effectively challenged the prevailing (Catholic) orthodoxy whose power was effectively established around the principle that the word of God required mediation and interpretation through clerics.

Whilst we don't need to go into any great detail here, the Catholic Church played an active role in the organisation of the State in 17th century Europe and, clearly, the rise of Puritan ideas directly challenged not only the religious (**ideological**) power - but also the **economic** and **political power** - of the Catholic Church.

In effect, since the Puritans were teaching that the Catholic Church was not just an irrelevance but also an obstacle to religious thought and practice they were directly challenging the Church's authority. Puritan ideas were, therefore, condemned as **heresies** and Puritans duly persecuted as **heretics**...

The Puritan response to persecution was emigration to the "New World" (what is now North America), whereupon they faced a new challenge to their religion.

Functionalist Theories

7

In Europe, the power of the Puritan leadership derived from leading the challenge to established ideas. In the New World, however, no such established ideas held sway - there was, effectively, no Catholic Orthodoxy to challenge (and no persecution either). The problem for the Puritan leadership was basically that by leading their followers out of persecution they had (unknowingly) removed the basis for their leadership (since, as you will recall, the Puritan Church had no need of clerics...).

If we look at this in Durkheim's terms, it can be seen that:

1. The **collective conscience** of Puritan's in Europe expressed the **shared values** and common concerns of the Church.
2. In America, however, since the circumstances that gave rise to a Puritan leadership had been removed, the clear implication is that the **collective conscience** of the Puritan Church should have re-established the Church as being one that had no need of a leadership.

As you might suspect, the Puritan leadership did not simply fade away. On the contrary, they attempted to consolidate their **power** by attempting to change Puritan beliefs (although God still spoke directly to individuals - a fundamental tenet of Puritanism that could not be easily changed - it now began to transpire that a religious leadership was required in order to interpret the will of God for the masses).

In this way, any challenge to the leadership began to be interpreted as heresy (the work of a devil who wanted to destroy Puritanism), since it was the leadership who had given themselves the power to decide which ideas came from God and which came from the Devil.

Thus, as we can see, it is important, when considering the nature of law, crime and deviance in any society that we do not lose sight of the idea that powerful, vested, interests, may be able to ideologically capture legal norms and adapt them to their own interests.

It should be noted that **Erikson** was **not** attempting to **refute** Durkheim's basic ideas but merely to strengthen and extend them by introducing a "refining concept" to the basic theoretical position.

A further example of this is to be found in the work of **Robert Merton**, in that he adopted Durkheim's basic Functionalist position in relation to law and crime and refined the concept of **anomie** as a means of attempting to understand the phenomenon of conformity and non-conformity to social rules at the level of individual / group behaviour.

Functionalism Theories

8

Strain Theory: R.K.Merton.

As I've just noted, the work of Merton in relation to crime and deviance can be loosely characterised as an attempt to adapt Durkheim's general ideas about **anomie** to specific social situations and circumstances.

In this respect, Merton altered the general focus of Durkheim's use of the concept of anomie, changing it from a condition whereby a state of true **normlessness** existed (that is, a situation in which no moral guide-lines for peoples' behaviour existed) to one in which individuals could experience **anomie** if they were unable to follow the **dominant norms** in any society. In this sense, Merton is arguing that individuals can experience anomie not because normative guide-lines do not exist, but rather because they are unable (or unwilling) to behave in ways that conform to such norms.

In his work, (see, in particular, "Social Structure and Anomie", 1938), Merton explored the idea that, in American society, there existed a **disjunction** (a "lack-of-fit") between the socially-produced and encouraged **ends** or **goals** for people's behaviour and the **means** through which they could achieve these **desirable ends**. In effect, what Merton was arguing was:

1. People were encouraged, through the **socialisation process**, to want certain things out of life (**desired ends**). In simple terms, they were socialised into the "**American Dream**" of health, wealth, personal happiness and so forth.
2. American society was so structured as to effectively ensure that the vast majority of people could never realistically attain these **ends** - the **means** that American society provided - such as hard work and so forth - were simply not sufficient to ensure that everyone could obtain the desirable goals they were *socialised* to want.

In this respect, whilst American society placed a high social value upon "success" in all its forms (it became a kind of **universal goal** or value), the **means** to gaining **legitimate success** were effectively closed to all but a few - the vast majority of people would never achieve such goals by working...

As Merton argued, if people are **socialised** into both wanting success and needing to be successful by working - yet they are effectively denied that success through such means, **strains** develop in the **normative structure** of society.

On the one hand, you have people being socialised into actively desiring success (success, in all its forms and manifestations, is a desirable end in American society).

On the other, you have a large number of potentially very unhappy people when they discover that the supposed **means** to such success do not deliver the goods.

In such a situation, **anomie** occurs because there is a **tension** between what people have been socialised to desire and what they are able to achieve through legitimate means. Merton argued that the **disjunction** between wanting "success" and the relative lack of **legitimate opportunity** for success did not mean that people simply gave-up wanting to be successful. This was not possible because the whole thrust of their **socialisation** was geared towards the value of

Functionalist Theories

9

success. In a situation whereby people desired success - yet were effectively denied it - he argued that people would find other, probably less legitimate, **means** towards desired **ends**.

Before we look at the way in which Merton characterised a wide range of possible **responses** to this **anomic situation** (the **social strain** that is caused by wanting something that it is not possible to get legitimately), it's worth noting that in attempting to explain how people tried to resolve this "ends and means" problem, Merton was aware that different social groups had different expectations about the meaning of success.

For someone who has been unemployed for many months, for example, the simple fact of getting a job may be considered as success - a desired end has been met.

Merton elaborated five basic **responses** to the **anomic situation** which he claimed to see in American society. He classified these types of **conformity** and **deviance** in terms of acceptance and denial of basic ends and means:

Response	Means	Ends
1. Conformity	✓	✓
2. Innovation	X	✓
3. Ritualism	✓	X
4. Retreatism	X	X
5. Rebellion	Rejects	Rejects

An **example** of each category might be as follows:

1. **Conformity** applies to the **law-abiding citizen**. These people accept both socially-produced ends and the socially-legitimated means to achieve them.

2. **Innovation** could apply to **entrepreneurs** who develop new means to achieve socially-desired ends as well as those who operate on the margins of criminal / non-criminal means (the "Arthur Daley" type who cuts-corners, for example). It could equally apply to criminals; those people who pursue desired ends by **illegitimate means**.

3. **Ritualism** might refer to someone who conforms to socially-approved means, but has lost sight of the ends (or has come to accept that they will never achieve them). This person is likely to be someone who "goes through the motions" of working whilst secretly knowing that they will never achieve the most desirable things society has to offer. Such people are likely to be elderly and they probably enjoy a reasonably comfortable lifestyle.

4. An example of **retreatism** is someone who "drops-out" of mainstream society. The drug addict who retreats into a self-contained world, the alcoholic who is unable to hold-down a steady job and so forth.

5. Political deviance is a good example of the **rebellion** response, whether this is expressed in terms of working for a revolutionary group or through political terrorism / freedom-fighting.

Functionalist Theories

10

Merton's argument does two significant things, sociologically:

1. It provides a theoretical reason to explain why people **conform / deviate** (the concept of **anomie** and the idea that **social strains** push people into different forms of **behavioural response to anomie**).
2. It outlines a number of different types of potential deviance, based around the particular experience that the individual has of the social world.

From this second point, we can begin to answer an important question in relation to deviance - that of why a person chooses to either conform to social norms or to deviate from them. Merton argues that the answer to such a question lies in the concept of **differential socialisation**. Different social classes, social groups, sub-cultural groups and so forth socialise their members in slightly different ways, depending upon their particular social circumstances. Whilst we do not need to explore this idea in any great depth, a classic distinction - between **working-class** and **middle class** socialisation - might serve to illustrate the point:

Merton saw the working classes as being heavily involved in criminal behaviour and this observation was confirmed by Official Statistics about crime. The reason for this, he suggested, was that the socialisation of this group tends to be **less rigid** in relation to their acceptance of - and conformity to - **conventional means** of gaining desired ends.

This seems to contradict Merton's claim that order is based upon a number of fundamental, shared, values. However, the response to this is that the working classes, by definition, are the **least successful** members of any society. They are the class to whom conventional means to success have least meaning. In this respect, the experience of working class adults (the fact of their failure by following conventional means) leads them to socialise their children in ways that will give them the greatest possible advantage in their adult lives (the greatest possible chance of achieving desired ends) - and this means adopting **illegitimate / deviant means**.

Merton argues that, over time, these illegitimate means come to be seen (sub-culturally) as relatively normal; therefore, the working classes can violate "conventional norms / means" more easily and with less feelings of guilt etc. In this sense, the **socialisation process** acts a **sub-cultural channel** for deviant behaviour whereby the individual is socialised into deviant norms, which increases / decreases the likelihood of different forms of adaptation to **social strains** (anomie). Whilst this does provide some kind of explanation, there are a number of reasons for not viewing it as particularly convincing:

1. It assumes that people share similar ends.
2. It sees the socialisation process as being the crucial variable in relation to both conformity / deviance and the particular form that an individual's deviation takes. There is, for example, little or no sense of the deviant making a conscious choice.
3. It assumes that the social reality portrayed through Official Statistics on crime is a valid one in relation to criminals / non-criminals:

It's by no-means clear that such a clear-cut distinction can be made between criminals and non-criminals (a point that we will develop further when we consider Interactionist theories).

Functionalist Theories

Observations and Conclusions...

In this section on basic varieties of Functionalist strain theories of crime and deviance we have seen that such writers make a distinction between two related aspects of human behaviour:

1. Structural determinism:

"Society" determines the range of ends / goals available to its members through the general process of socialisation.

2. Voluntarism:

This involves individual choices as to whether or not to pursue these goals, the means by which they are pursued and so forth.

Such "choice", however, will be conditioned or "determined" by the individual's social circumstances. Thus, it might appear that an individual will only turn towards illegitimate means if they are denied adequate access to legitimate means. In this respect, "choice" does not mean "free will", since all choices available in society are conditioned by the individual's cultural background, socialisation and so forth.

Social order, from this viewpoint is based upon a fundamental value consensus that specifies such things as desirable social ends and the legitimate means towards their realisation. Social control, on the other hand, is maintained through the primary / secondary socialisation process in combination with legal constraints upon behaviour. The latter have both a symbolic significance (insofar as they function as boundary markers) and a real significance (insofar as law-breaking invites a possible - known - response from legal agents such as the police and judiciary).

In **methodological** terms, the reality of crime is measured in terms of Official Statistics (which represent what Durkheim termed "**social facts**").

Although such statistics do not always represent a "true", or necessarily valid, picture of crime, strain theorists argue that they represent "dominant cultural concerns" about crime. This is an idea that we will look at a bit more closely in relation to "Neo-Functionalist / Conservative" theories of crime which have drawn explicitly on this type of rationalisation.

In this respect, crime is seen as being concentrated at the lower end of the class structure (amongst the working class) precisely because it is here that we find the greatest disjunction (or "lack of fit") between socially-approved ends and means. However, since crime statistics don't tell us very much about either "hidden" forms of crime (crimes that are committed but for which no-one is arrested, for example) or the "crimes of the powerful" (who may be in a position to resist the process of criminalization in some way), strain theories do not tend to address these theoretical problems.

Functionalist Theories

12

The main **methodological problem** with this kind of theorising (for the technically-minded it involves the use of an "inductive positivist" logic) might be outlined as follows:

- a. Criminal behaviour in society is measured through official definitions of crime and crime statistics. This leads to:
- b. The analysis of those social groups who are most-likely (according the statistics) to be involved in crime (basically, the working class and men in particular). This lead to:
- c. The development of a theory that "explains the factual observations that can be made about crime". In this instance, Merton looked at "differential / faulty socialisation", for example.

Whilst this is clearly a logical form of analysis, it is built upon a fundamental assumption, namely that official statistics are an accurate representation of criminal behaviour. If this assumption can be shown to be false, then where does this leave the theory that has been developed to "explain criminal behaviour"?

What are the implications for this kind of theorising if we could show that official statistics are not an accurate representation of criminal behaviour?

In terms of explaining crime / deviance, strain theories:

1. Recognise that social structures exert some form of social pressure that constrains the actions of individuals.
2. Recognise that people make choices about how to behave. However, these choices are made in a social context that reflects both socialisation, the cultural context of behaviour and so forth.

Finally, we can highlight a couple of problems involved in this theoretical perspective:

1. Durkheim doesn't explain the causes of criminal behaviour, in the sense that we are given few clues as to why some people - but not others - engage in criminal behaviour. Secondly, the assumption that official statistics are a useful indicator of criminal activity tends to gloss over the fact that if we do not know the true extent of criminal behaviour in society, how is it possible to construct a theory that explains criminal behaviour?

2. In Merton's case, the use of anomie may (or may not) adequately explain various forms of crime directed towards economic ends (we can, for example, understand why people who desperately want something are prepared to steal for it if they cannot achieve it legitimately), it doesn't seem to have much application in relation to non-economic crimes such as:

Murder
Football hooliganism
Joyriding, etc.

In addition, neither Durkheim nor Merton tell us very much about why some activities are criminalised, but not others. We are, in effect, given very little indication about how and why definitions of crime arise in society - and, possibly, whether or not the interests of particular groups are served / denied by the creation of legal norms.

Functionalist Theories

13

FUNCTIONALIST THEORIES: KEY POINTS

Key Sociologists:

Emile Durkheim- Suicide: A Study In Sociology, 1897; The Rules of Sociological Method, 1895

Robert Merton- Social Structure and Anomie, 1938.

Key Concepts:

Anomie (the breakdown of normative guide-lines)

Social Integration (The extent to which people are "bonded" into the rules, norms, beliefs and so forth of the society in which they live).

Differential Socialisation.

Key Ideas:

Social Order is based on:

1. The functional dependence of institutions in society.
2. Shared norms and values (the "social glue" that binds people together, such that their relationships become functionally dependent).

Social Control based on:

1. Functional dependence at both the institutional and individual level (people need to co-operate in order for society to function).
2. Individual social relationships: Behaviour is controlled by relatively informal norms and values that develop out of the mutual need to create and maintain dependent social relationships.
3. Legal systems: In large-scale societies the legal system develops as a functional necessity to regulate relationships that cannot be adequately maintained by the operation of informal norms (mainly because instrumental nature of most relationships mean that moral ties are much weaker).

Social Conformity:

People conform to social norms because:

1. They are socialised into the norms and values of a society.
2. Institutional arrangements in society create pressure towards social conformity (the need to earn a living, for example, creates institutional pressure to work).

Functionalist Theories

14

Non-Conformity:

Functionalist theory argues social behaviour is a consequence of how society (as a social structure) pressurises people. In effect, people are born into an existing society and are taught the rules and relationships governing social behaviour. Social behaviour, therefore, is explained by changes in the social structures that produce consequent changes in human behaviour.

For Durkheim:

Non-conformity to social norms occurs when the social structure comes under pressure (or strain). For example:

Rapid technological change in any society (such as that which occurred during the Industrial Revolution in 18th - 19th century Britain) changes the way in which institutions relate to one another. This process of change produces new norms of behaviour, new values and so forth. Inevitably, people socialised into the "old" normative arrangements take time to adapt or re-orientate themselves to new conditions - there is effectively a "time lag" during which people have to be re-socialised in order to develop new norms / values that fit with structural changes. During such periods, "normative confusion" (anomie) is likely to occur.

Thus, strain at the institutional (structural) level of society leads to a weakening of the Collective Conscience and, as a consequence, increased levels of crime / deviance.

For Merton:

Begins with the basic Functionalist idea that people are socialised into accepting the values of the society in which they live. Where a society socialises people into the value of pursuing such things as wealth as a desirable social goal - but fails to provide the means by which everyone can successfully attain this goal, social strains occur.

Thus, if everyone is socialised into wanting wealth - but society fails to provide sufficient legitimate routes to its attainment - people will devise alternative (mainly illegal) means to attain the goals they have been socialised to want.

Again, this is a structural explanation of human behaviour:

- a. Society socialises its members to value something.
- b. Although everyone wants such things, society may not be able to provide sufficient means for everyone to achieve them.
- c. People are propelled by the desire for valued things and so attempt to devise alternative means (some successful, some not).

The strain aspect of the above is in the disjunction between:

- Socialisation of individuals to value things (ends).
- Inability of society to provide socially-acceptable means.

Functionalist Theories

15

Anomie occurs because, although something like the pursuit of wealth represents a social norm, some people are not given clear moral guide-lines concerning how they are to achieve this goal. When socially-accepted norms concerning how to achieve wealth fail (for example, an individual becomes unemployed), the individual experience anomie.

Since an anomic situation cannot, by definition, last for long, the individual may attempt to resolve it by developing new normative guide-lines relating to the achievement of the desired goal (by turning to crime, for example). On the other hand, they may devise alternative means (such as suicide, drug-abuse and so forth) to negate the ends they are unable to achieve.

Power:

Strain theorists have not been particularly concerned to explore the relationship between power, deviance and social control. Whilst power relationships are recognised (socialisation, for example, involves power), for Durkheim in particular people's behaviour was held in check by the development of the "collective conscience" that arose naturally from the fact of collective behaviour. In addition, the emphasis upon value consensus meant that the ability of various groups to impose their values, norms, interests and so forth upon others is not really considered. Erikson, as we have seen, did attempt to introduce some notion of power, but in general:

1. Where power exists it represents the expression of functional prerequisites ("needs") at the level of social institutions.

For example, in order for the institution of work to exist in an industrialised society this institution needs workers who are educated; this involves the development of an educational system over which the former must exercise some form of powerful influence.

2. The relationship between institutions in society is based upon functional dependence, therefore various checks and balances exist to ensure that institutional relationships do not deteriorate to the point where an institution can no-longer function.

In this respect, power is an important concept, but not one that is central to the Functionalist understanding of either the way in which society exists and develops or the relationship between social conformity and non-conformity (deviance).

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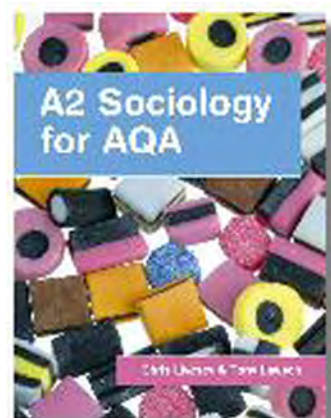
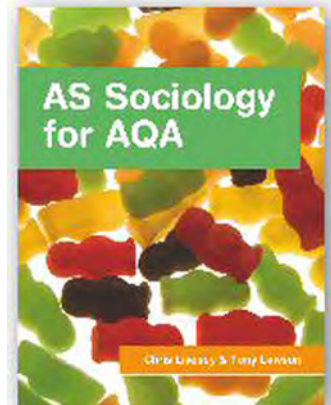
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