

Sociological Theories

POST GRADUATE PROGRAMME IN SOCIOLOGY

Self Learning Material

M21SO05DC



SREENARAYANAGURU
OPEN UNIVERSITY

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

Vision

To increase access of potential learners of all categories to higher education, research and training, and ensure equity through delivery of high quality processes and outcomes fostering inclusive educational empowerment for social advancement.

Mission

To be benchmarked as a model for conservation and dissemination of knowledge and skill on blended and virtual mode in education, training and research for normal, continuing, and adult learners.

Pathway

Access and Quality define Equity.

Sociological Theories
Course Code: M21SO05DC
Semester-II

Master of Arts
Sociology
Self Learning Material



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Message from Vice Chancellor

Dear

I greet all of you with deep delight and great excitement. I welcome you to the Sreenarayanaguru Open University.

Sreenarayanaguru Open University was established in September 2020 as a state initiative for fostering higher education in open and distance mode. We shaped our dreams through a pathway defined by a dictum 'access and quality define equity'. It provides all reasons to us for the celebration of quality in the process of education. I am overwhelmed to let you know that we have resolved not to become ourselves a reason or cause a reason for the dissemination of inferior education. It sets the pace as well as the destination. The name of the University centers around the aura of Sreenarayanaguru, the great renaissance thinker of modern India. His name is a reminder for us to ensure quality in the delivery of all academic endeavors.

Sreenarayanaguru Open University rests on the practical framework of the popularly known "blended format". Learner on distance mode obviously has limitations in getting exposed to the full potential of classroom learning experience. Our pedagogical basket has three entities viz Self Learning Material, Classroom Counselling and Virtual modes. This combination is expected to provide high voltage in learning as well as teaching experiences. Care has been taken to ensure quality endeavours across all the entities.

The university is committed to provide you stimulating learning experience. The PG programme in Sociology is a logical development of the grammar of our UG programme. It is considered to be a progression of the finer aspects of theories and practices. The discussions are meant to arouse interest among the learners in understanding the discipline in the real context and therefore, the examples are drawn heavily from the real life experiences. The provision for empirical evidences integrated endeavour of the academic content makes this programme special and relevant. We assure you that the university student support services will closely stay with you for the redressal of your grievances during your studentship.

Feel free to write to us about anything that seems relevant regarding the academic programme.

Wish you the best.



Regards,

Dr. P.M. Mubarak Pasha

01.11.2023

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FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

BLOCK-01



Anthropological Functionalism

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the significance of Anthropological functionalism in Sociology
- ◆ explore the role of Radcliffe Brown in understanding the functional aspects of society
- ◆ discuss Bronislaw Malinowski's perspective to understand the various social elements within society

Background

Sociologists use various ways to study social life. Theoretical perspectives used by sociologists include interactionism, functionalism, structural perspective and conflict perspective. These different viewpoints provide sociologists with frameworks to describe the interactions between individuals and societies. Each perspective offers an understanding of society, social processes and human behaviour.

Functionalism is an approach that compares society to a living organism. It aligns with the school of thought that suggests that various parts and institutions of society such as religion, kinship and economy can be likened to the organs of a biological organism. Just as an organism relies on the organised interaction of its parts to function properly through the interaction of its components, individuals are seen as the cells in this social organism.

Functionalism is originated in the early twentieth century and significantly influenced the anthropologist anthropologists like A.R. Radcliffe Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. Anthropological functionalism divided into two main schools of thought: Malinowski's psychological functionalism and structural functionalism, which was advanced by Radcliffe Brown. These perspectives aim to understand the role and function of various social elements within a society.



Keywords

Structural functionalism, Kula ring, Trobriand Islanders, Magic, Totemism.

Discussion

◆ *Concept of functionalism*

Functionalism, as a sociological and anthropological approach, originated in the early 20th century. However, its roots can be traced back to the ancient concept of organic analogy, used by philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle referred to 'telos' or purpose as the final cause of things. The idea of a hidden purpose is also present in Adam Smith's concept of the 'invisible hand', which maximises wealth and individual welfare through increased labor. This concept gave rise to 'teleology', the belief that everything is determined by a purpose that scholars should strive to understand.

◆ *Roots of Sociological Functionalism*

The roots of Functionalism in sociology are found in the works of Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. Functionalism considers a culture as an interrelated whole, not a collection of isolated traits. Functionalism looks for the function or part that is played by several aspects of culture in order to maintain a social system. It is a framework that considers society as a system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. Functionalists argue that in order to understand a culture, it is necessary to investigate the social functions of institutions i.e., established laws, practices, customs etc. They believe that society is a logical institution and it functions in the best interest of the majority. Structural Functionalism is a sociological theory that attempts to explain why society functions the way it does by focusing on the relationships between the various social institutions that makes up society (e.g., government, law, education, religion etc.) Structural Functionalism is a theoretical understanding of society that puts social systems as the collective means to fill society's needs. In order for social life to survive and develop in society there are a number of activities that need to be carried out to ensure that certain needs are fulfilled. In the structural functionalist model, individuals produce necessary goods and services in various institutions and

roles that correlate with the norms of the society. Thus, one of the key ideas in Structural Functionalism is that society is made-up of groups or institutions, which are cohesive, share common norms, and have a definitive culture.

The Structural Functional School is divided into three main groups: British School of Structural Functionalism, American School of Structural Functionalism and French School of Structuralism. The names of contributors of Structural Functionalism School of Anthropology are given below:

Table no: 1.1.1
Structural Functional School of Anthropology

British School of Structural Functionalism	American School of Structural Functionalism	French School of Structuralism
A.R. Radcliffe Brown S.F. Nadel E.R. Leach R. Firth, Mayer Fortes E. Evans Pritchard	Talcott Parsons Merton R.H. Lowie M. Kluckhohn G.P. Murdock All anthropologists	Emile- Durkheim Levi Strauss

Radcliffe – Brown, a prominent figure in the British school of Structural Functionalism, argued that the elements of social structure consist of individuals, with the structure itself representing an organisation of people within institutionally defined and regulated relationships. In the field of anthropology, functionalism was primarily shaped by the work of Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe Brown. Both of these pioneers pursued their anthropological studies in England, the home country of Radcliffe Brown and the place where Malinowski relocated to. Reading the works of Emile Durkheim and other French sociologists influenced Malinowski’s thinking and led him to explore alternative theoretical perspectives. He continued to do so for the subsequent four decades, carrying his ideas to various parts of the world, including South Africa, Australia, China and the United States. While both Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe- Brown can be classified as functionalists, their approaches varied somewhat, with Malinowski being recognised as a functionalist and Radcliffe - Brown primarily identified as a Structural functionalist.

◆ *Anthropological functionalism*



Table no 1.1.2
Schools of Functionalism

School	Major Assumption	Advocates
Functionalism	Understands how cultures work for the well-being of the individual	Malinowski
Structural Functionalism	Determine how cultural elements function for the well-being of the society	Radcliffe Brown

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955)



A R Radcliffe Brown (1881-1955) was one of anthropology's most respected and important scholars. Much of Radcliffe-Brown's popularity stems from his keen and open mind as well as from his world travels across five continents. While Radcliffe - Brown had read Durkheim's *The Division of Labour* and *The Rules of the Sociological Method* during his graduate studies, he appears to have embraced functionalism only after confronting the problems of field work among traditional peoples.

His first published work was - the 1913 analysis of kinship among the Australian aborigines. However, the work does not reveal any functional theorising. Radcliffe-Brown's first ethnographic study on the Andaman Islands was conducted from 1906 to 1908. However, this early study was not published until 1922; and by this time, his disenchantment with historical reconstruction, evolutionism, and diffusionism led him to embrace functionalism. The delayed publication of his *The Andaman Islanders* in 1922 marked a dramatic point in the history of functionalism. For this ethnography Radcliffe-Brown had adopted much of Durkheim's functional method. From this point on, Radcliffe-Brown's work revealed a clear functional bent, although not to the degree evident in the work of his colleague and frequent protagonist, Bronislaw Malinowski.

Shortly after the publication of *The Andaman Islanders*, Radcliffe-Brown published a classic article on the *Mother's Brother in South Africa*. Here, he takes to task previous historical and evolutionary interpretations of kinship relations, and in the place of these earlier interpretations he offers a decidedly functional explanation. By 1924, then, Radcliffe-Brown's commitment to the functional approach of Durkheim was clear. As he travelled, lectured, and wrote, the contours of this approach became increasingly evident. Much of his approach remained unpublished until after his death while his other writings were lodged in obscure journals. Yet, Radcliffe-Brown's work, both published and unpublished, influenced an entire generation of anthropologists. His methods for the analysis of kinship are still used.

Major Works

- ◆ 1912: The Distribution of Native Tribes in Part of Western Australia
- ◆ 1913: Three Tribes of Western Australia
- ◆ 1922: The Andaman Islanders: A study in social anthropology
- ◆ 1931: Social Organization of Australian Tribes
- ◆ 1940: On Joking Relationships
- ◆ 1948: A Natural Science of Society
- ◆ 1952: Structure and Function in Primitive Society

1.1.1 Radcliffe-Brown's – Social System

◆ *Sociological inquiry and reality*

Radcliffe Brown, like Durkheim, believed that each branch of science deals with its own unique reality. This reality has its own set of elements that are only found in that particular system, not in any other part of the world. 'Social Systems', like the way people interact and relate to each other, are an example of such unique systems. These social systems have properties that are specific to human relations and can't be found in other systems.

◆ *Social facts and Anthropology*

Radcliffe Brown thought this was different from psychology, which focuses on how individuals relate to each other. He believed that the 'natural science of society' should find the rules that govern how social relations work. To do this, he said we should study whole societies and compare them to understand how different types of societies operate. These ideas form the basis of Radcliffe Brown's functionalism. Essentially, he gave new life to Durkheim's idea that sociology should study 'social facts' and that society is a unique and important concept, which was very influential for anthropologists.

◆ *Social structure and relationships*

Radcliffe Brown also believed that the study of society should focus on how people interact with each other. These interactions make up what he called 'social structure', which is like the framework of how society works. Social structure includes things like family relationships, and other important connections in a community. He points out that by understanding how people relate to each other can figure out the rules that make a society function well. He focused on culture that was organised and accepted ways where people interacted and followed rules. These rules help hold a society together by guiding people towards doing things that benefit the community. Hence, he shifted the focus from

objects and beliefs to how people act together and follow accepted guidelines. For example, when we look at how families work in different societies, we can learn a lot about how those societies are organised.

◆ *Synchronic analysis and social structure*

Radcliffe Brown had two important ideas to avoid looking at the history of social structures. First, he talked about 'diachronic' and 'synchronic' analysis. Diachronic means looking at how social structures change over time, while synchronic means studying them at one specific moment. He wanted to focus on the synchronic analysis to understand social structures without getting caught up in their historical changes. Second, he made a distinction between; ethnology' and 'social anthropology'. Ethnology was meant to be the study of a culture's history, while social anthropology aimed to create general rules and principles about how social systems work without diving into the details of a specific culture's history.

1.1.2 Radcliffe-Brown's – Functionalism

◆ *Functional analysis attribution*

Radcliffe Brown believed that when we study how societies work, we can compare it to how living things functions. He thought this idea was mostly credited to Emile Durkheim, even though Herbert Spencer really came up with it first. He points out that functional analysis means figuring out how social rules and structures match the needs of a society. He compared how human societies work to how living things work, like animals. But he warned that we should be careful with these comparisons. One big difference is that in nature, we can look at the structure of something without thinking about how it functions. But in human societies, we can only understand the way things are set up by seeing how people use them. In other words, you can understand social structures by watching how people interact with them, while in the natural world, you can study structure and function separately.

The concept of social structure and its functional features has been described by Radcliffe-Brown in his book *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952). According to him the concept of structure refers to an arrangement of parts related to one another in some sort of larger unity. For instance, the structure of a house reveals the arrangement of walls, roofs, rooms, passage, windows, etc. In social structure the ultimate components are the arrangements of persons in relation to each other. According to Brown, social structure

◆ *Nature of Social structure*

is the arrangement of persons in a relationship defined and controlled by institutions that are socially established norms or patterns of behaviour. For instance, in a village arrangement of persons into families are found, which is again a structural feature. Similarly, in a family, we find mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt etc. Intergroup interactions and individual interactions make a social structure abundantly clear.

◆ *Radcliffe-Brown's Social organisation*

After briefly discussing the idea of social structure, let's examine what Radcliffe Brown meant by social organisation. As we have seen, structure refers to the arrangements of people. Activities are organised through organisation. For example, while studying this block, you plan your actions, reading a certain section, doing the exercises, using the keywords as needed etc. This is an individual level organisation. Radcliffe Brown defined social organisation as 'the arrangement of activities of two or more persons adjusted to give a united combined activity. For instance, the bowlers, batsmen, fielders and wicket keeper on a cricket team all contribute to the game in some way.

◆ *Social health concept*

Radcliffe-Brown points out that an attempt to apply the notion of health and disease to society and the state was made by the Greeks in the fifth century B.C. They distinguished 'Eunomia' (good order, social health) from 'Dysnomia' (disorder, social ill-health). In the nineteenth century, Durkheim tried to understand social pathology with the help of the concept of 'anomie'. Radcliffe-Brown too adopts the terms 'Eunomia' and 'Dysnomia'. He points out that societies do not fall ill and die in the same sense as animals do, and accepts that it is not possible to have definite, objective criteria to determine the 'health' of society, because the science of human society, according to him, is not mature enough to do so.

◆ *Radcliffe-Brown's concepts*

For Radcliffe-Brown, the Eunomia of a society refers to the harmonious working together of its parts or, in other words, functional unity or inner consistency of the system. Dysnomia, on the other hand is a condition of functional disunity or inconsistency. A society thrown into a state of Dysnomia rarely dies, but instead struggles towards a new state of Eunomia or social health. In the process, it might even change its structural type.

1.1.2.1 The Historical Method and the Functional Method

Radcliffe-Brown mentions two methods for the

◆ *Interpretation methods*

interpretation of cultural materials, namely, the historical and functional methods. The historical method concentrates on the process of historical development of a culture, in other words, on how the culture has come to be what it is. This method is useful only when the society to be studied has historical records. In the case of primitive societies with no historical records, this method proves deficient. The result may be conjectural or speculative history. This is not a particularly useful exercise. The functional method of interpretation, says Radcliffe-Brown, rests on the assumption that culture is an integrated system. Each element of the culture has a specific function to perform in the life of the community. This method assumes that there are certain general laws of function, which are valid for all human societies and tries to discover and verify these laws with the help of logical, scientific methods. It must be noted that Radcliffe-Brown sees both these methods as complementary in sociological investigations. He does not discard the historical method but points out its limitations in studying primitive societies.

1.1.2.2 Structural Features of Social Life

According to A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, the structural features of social life as follows:

◆ *Existence of social group*

1. Social structure consists of all kinds of social groups like family, clan, moieties, social sanction, totemic groups, social classes, caste group, kinship system etc. The inter relations among these groups constitute the core of the social structural phenomenon.

◆ *Internal Structure of the group*

2. These groups have a specific internal structure. For example, a family consists of the father, mother and their children.

◆ *Arrangement into social class*

3. These groups are arranged into social classes and categories. For example, the economic classes in Western societies and castes in Indian societies.

◆ *Social distinctions*

4. There is social distinction between different classes which is based on sex, economic distinctions, and authority and caste distinctions. For example, in India, there is a social distinction between the Brahmins and Shudras.



◆ *Dyadic relationship*

5. A person-to-person relationship like master and servant.
6. Interaction between persons can be seen in social processes involving co-operation, conflict, accommodations etc. Interaction between groups can be seen when a nation goes to war with another nation.

1.1.2.3 Structural Functionalism

Radcliffe-Brown is more than just a 'functionalist', he is a 'structural functionalist'. By this we mean that he is concerned not just with the way customs and social institutions fulfil certain needs or conditions of existence. He is also concerned with the connection between social relationships of various kinds. His method of structural-functionalism is best understood through his works.

◆ *Emotional Customs*

- ◆ In *Ceremonial Weeping in the Andaman Islands*, the Andamanese people have special ceremonies where they cry on important occasions like reuniting with friends, weddings and more. Radcliffe Brown believed that these ceremonies are a way to express and share feelings, helping guide how people behave in society. He thought that formal crying occurs when social relationships that were disturbed or interrupted are about to get back to normal. For example, when long-lost friends meet, the crying ceremony shows that they can be friends again. So, these crying ceremonies serve a specific role in the Andamanese society, helping people manage their emotions and social interactions.

◆ *Totemism*

- ◆ Radcliffe Brown also talked about totemism, which is how people relate to natural objects they claim descent from. In his Australian field studies, he found that some tribes are divided into two groups, named *Eagle Hawk* and *Crow*. Eagle hawk people marry crow people and vice versa. Despite being seen as opponents, they also share some similarities like both birds being meat eaters. Radcliffe Brown saw totemism as not just a way to maintain group unity but also as a way to express social differences and connections between groups. This idea influenced future researchers

◆ *Kinship and traditional community*

who looked at the concept of 'opposition' to understand social customs and relationships. In his work, the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown writes: "Every custom and belief play some determinate part in the social life of the community, just as every organ of a living body plays some part in the general life of the organism".

- ◆ In his work on Kinship in Primitive Societies, Radcliffe Brown focused on two things. First, he stopped guessing about how families used to be in the past and instead focused on understanding how they functioned in the present. Second, he showed that in these traditional communities, family relationships were very crucial and helped organise how people lived. He also looked at the words and names people used for their family members. He found that in some societies, even people who weren't in your immediate family were called family. For example, your mother's 'sister might be called 'mother'. He came up with three important ideas about this:
 - ▶ Brothers and sisters, even if they weren't in your family, acted like a team and were seen as a group by others.
 - ▶ People in the same family line (like cousins) stuck together and were seen as one group by others.
 - ▶ In all families, there is usually some tension between parents and their kids because parents have to teach and control their children. But interestingly, grandparents and their grandkids often got along really well in many societies. Some people even thought that grandchildren replaced grandparents in the family structure.

Hence Radcliffe Brown works helped us to understand how families worked in traditional societies.

1.1.2.4 Structural Functionalism-Methodology

Radcliffe Brown's structural functional method is exemplified through his study of the maternal uncle's role in

◆ *Maternal Uncle's role*

primitive communities. In various societies like the Bathonga group in Eastern Africa, the Nama Hottentots in South Africa and the Friendly Islanders of Tonga, he observed a unique and affectionate relationship between a man and his sister's son. The nephew enjoyed certain liberties with his maternal uncle, who in turn, cared for him, made sacrifices when the nephew was ill, and sometimes even shared his property or even one of his wives. Radcliffe Brown emphasised that to truly understand a society's institution, we must consider their connections with other related institutions. He identified a similar affectionate relationship correlated with the maternal uncle-nephew bond.

◆ *Social structure and functional link*

Radcliffe Brown's functional methodology explores the role of the maternal uncle in primitive societies by considering interconnected institutionalised relationships. This approach highlights the interdependence of social structure and social function. Social structure, much like the arrangement of an organism's parts involves ordered arrangements of individuals and groups. The function of these individuals contributes to this persistence of social structure. Radcliffe Brown stressed that the relationships among parts of an organism are not static, they maintain the organism's vitality. Similarly, social structure and social function are logically linked, mutually supporting and necessary for each other's continuity.

◆ *Distinction between structure and function*

In Radcliffe-Brown's view, a community's social life is defined by the functioning of its social structure. For instance, recurring activities like crime punishments or funeral ceremonies play roles in the overall social life and contribute to maintaining structural continuity. He believed that distinguishing between structure and function was crucial for studying both the continuity in social life and processes of change. Radcliffe Brown also emphasised that the same things might have different meanings in various cultures, and different things could serve similar functions. Despite their individual meanings and functions, they all have a comparable social function within societies.

The following premises underlie Radcliffe Brown's structural functional methodology:

- ◆ The least integration of a society's components is a requirement for its survival.
- ◆ The term 'function' refers to the procedures that uphold the essential solidarity or integration.
- ◆ Additionally, it can be demonstrated that structural elements have a role in maintaining the required unity in each society.

◆ *Contribution to unity*

The function of social usage or activity refers to the contribution it makes to the functioning of the total social system. This implies that the social system has a certain kind of unity, which Radcliffe-Brown terms as 'functional unity'. By this he means a condition in which all the parts of the social system work together in a harmonious, consistent fashion i.e., without producing persistent conflicts which cannot be resolved or regulated.

◆ *Critiques on social system*

Radcliffe Brown's approach to sociology prioritised social structure over biological needs, viewing society as a system. He saw institutions as orderly sets of relationships with the role of maintaining the social system. Critics argue that it's not acceptable to compare a society to a living organism since an organism's structure remains fixed, whereas society evolves. This approach wrongly assumes that abstractions of social situations accurately reflect social reality in all its complexities. The approach's explanations are criticised for being overly technological and reliant on the idea of function as purpose, leading to a static view of society that fails to address change.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942)



Malinowski was born in Cracow in 1884, the son of a professor of Slavic philology. He graduated from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow in 1908, in mathematics, physics, and philosophy, and with the highest honours in the Austrian Empire. He enrolled for anthropology at the London School of Economics in 1910, under C G Seligman and Edward Westermarck, then set off for Australia in 1914. Between September 1914 and October 1918 Malinowski spent some thirty months, in three separate trips from Australia, conducting his work in New Guinea. All except the first six-month stint was spent

in the Trobriand Islands. At the outbreak of the second world war, he was in the US. He chose to remain there for the duration, but died in 1942, shortly after accepting a permanent post at Yale.

He was one of the founding fathers of British social anthropology. With Radcliffe- Brown, Malinowski pushed for a paradigm shift in British Anthropology that brought a change from the historical to the present study of social institutions. This theoretical shift gave rise to functionalism and established fieldwork as the constitutive experience of social anthropology. Malinowski's functionalism was greatly influential in the 1920s and 1930s. As applied methodology, this approach worked, except for situations of social or cultural change. However, Malinowski made his greatest contribution as an ethnographer. He also considered the importance of studying social behaviours and social relations in their concrete cultural contexts through participant-observation. He considered it essential to consider the observable differences between what people say they do and what they actually do. His detailed descriptions of Trobriand social life and thoughts are among the well-known ethnographies of the world and his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) is one of the most widely read works of anthropology. He was one of the leading Functionalists of the 20th century.

1.1.3 Malinowski's Functionalism

Malinowski at times is also known as the father of Ethnography due to his extensive fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands. He was a strong functionalist. Malinowski as opposed to Radcliffe-Brown, asserts the founding of a unique 'school', the Functional school. For him, the purpose of functional analysis is to determine the 'interpretation of anthropological facts by their function, by the theory and at

◆ *Father of Ethnography*



all levels of development they have inside the larger cultural framework. This can be understood in the following two ways:

◆ *Integrated customs and institutions*

He believed that all customs and institutions in a society are integrated and interrelated so that, if one changes the other would change as well. Each then is a function of the other. He asserts that 'every custom, thing, idea and belief fulfils some vital function, has some tasks to complete, and represents an indispensable fact within a working whole in every civilisation. For example: ethnography could begin from anywhere in a society but eventually get to the rest of the culture. A study of Trobriand fishing could lead the ethnographer to study the entire economic system about the role of magic, religion, myths, trade and kinship etc-. as all these institutions are interconnected. A change in any part of society would ultimately affect the other. So, in order to do a holistic study, the ethnographer might have to consider other parts of the whole also.

◆ *Needs for survival*

Malinowski's functionalism comprises two key strands, known as 'needs functionalism'. In this theory, Malinowski proposed that humans possess universal biological needs, and the various customs and institutions within a culture are developed to fulfill these fundamental needs. He emphasised that these needs are a combination of factors within the human body, the cultural context, and their relationship with the natural environment, all of which are necessary and sufficient for both individual and group survival. Needs are seen as the critical and indispensable factors, and to fulfill these essential requirements, a configuration of habits, motivating forces, learned behaviors and organisational principles must be in place. This configuration encompasses the biological urges that must be satisfied to meet fundamental needs. The primary role of any cultural practice, according to Malinowski, is to satisfy these biological needs, such as the need for food and shelter. He identified seven biological needs of individuals, making his approach known as Bio cultural functionalism.

Malinowski believed that culture is a system that serves as a need -satisfying mechanism, with culture fulfilling needs like food, reproduction, security and protection. Because of Malinowski's emphasis on individual needs, his functionalism is also termed 'Psychological Functionalism'. While biological needs are the most basic, this doesn't mean that culture is only about biology, as each level of need has

◆ *Psychological functionalism*

its distinct properties and requirements. Malinowski's main argument for functionalism is that every element of culture has a purpose and satisfies a specific need, which he categorised into three types: primary, institutional, and integrative needs. Primary needs encompass basic biological requirements like eating and reproduction, while institutional needs include economic, legal and educational components that aid in meeting these fundamental requirements. Integrative needs pertain to activities that promote social cohesion, such as play, magic and religion.

◆ *Universal needs*

Malinowski's perspective on culture revolved around several key concepts. He saw culture as a cohesive role, akin to a tribal microcosm, emphasising the need to understand how the various organisations, institutions and ideas within a culture function and interact. He was particularly interested in the distinction between an individual's biological and social inheritance, with the latter being what he termed 'culture'. Malinowski believed that cultural elements serve a purpose and that those without a function would eventually disappear. Therefore, he argued against examining cultural traits in isolation, emphasising the interconnection between different aspects of a culture. This holistic approach, known as the integrational theory, viewed a culture as an integrated whole where its various parts are interconnected and interwoven, similar to the components of a machine. Just as a malfunction in one part of a vehicle can render the entire vehicle nonfunctional, in the same way, aspects of culture are interconnected and the failure of one element can impact the entire culture. This interconnectedness and interdependence of cultural components characterises the integrational theory of Malinowski.

1.1.3.1 Different perspectives of Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown

◆ *Different perspectives on culture*

Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski had different ideas about culture. For Radcliffe Brown, culture is not as important as social structure, which is how people organise and interact in their groups. He thinks that by studying social structures, we can learn about culture, so there is no need for a separate study of culture. Radcliffe-Brown wants to make anthropology more like a natural science by focusing on what we can observe about people. On the other hand, Malinowski's approach is based on the idea of 'vital sequences', which are related to our biological needs and exist in all societies. These sequences have eleven parts, including a basic need, an action

related to that need, and the satisfaction that comes from it. In fact, Brown believes social structure is more important while Malinowski emphasises our basic needs and how they are met in different societies.

◆ *Anthropological influence*

Malinowski's position in British anthropology is analogous to that of Boas in American anthropology. Malinowski was a central European natural scientist brought by peculiar circumstances to anthropology and to the English-speaking world. He objected to armchair evolutionism and invented a fieldwork tradition based on the use of the native language in 'Participant observation'

◆ *Malinowski's superior fieldwork*

Many of Malinowski's students picked up theoretical ideas from Radcliffe-Brown, especially the emphasis on social institutions functioning within larger social systems. Yet the methods of Malinowski's well-known students such as Raymond Firth, Phyllis Kaberry, Isaac Schapera, Eileen Krige, Monica Wilson, and Hilda Kuper, are best characterised as 'Malinowskian'. Malinowski encouraged long stints of fieldwork, with close contact with informants over a long period of time.

◆ *Ethnographic study*

The most famous of Malinowski's works is *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). *Argonauts* begins with a statement on subject, method, and scope, then describes the geography of the Trobriand and his arrival in the islands. He moves on to the rules of Kula Exchange, facts about canoes, sailing, and canoe magic and ceremony. He then gives more detailed and specific accounts of aspects touched on earlier, including canoe journeys, the Kula and magic. He ends with a reflective (we would now say reflexive) chapter on 'the meaning of kula'.

◆ *Maternal authority*

For the Trobriander's, the father is a figure of supreme indulgence, not the authority figure postulated as a cultural universal by Freud. Rather, a boy's mother's brother is in the position of authority. This is because the mother's brother's power is derived from his place as a senior member of the boy's matrilineal kin group. According to Malinowski, the Trobriander's were ignorant of physiological paternity; thus, the role of the father would be quite different from that in patrilineal societies, where the biological relationship between father and son is considered the basis of their social relationship.

In more general terms, Kaberry describes three levels



◆ *Levels of Abstraction*

of abstraction in Malinowski's theory of function. The first, 'function' denotes the effects of an institution on other institutions, that is, the relationship between social institutions. This level is similar to that in Radcliffe Brown's work. The second involves the understanding of an institution in terms defined by members of the community. The third defines the way in which the institution promotes social cohesion in general.

◆ *Custom's Interconnection*

Malinowski argued that customs are 'organically connected with the rest of culture and that the fieldworker needs to search for the 'invisible facts' which govern the interconnection of the different facets of social organisation. He said that these discovered by 'inductive computation'.

Table no: 1.1.3

Malinowski's Seven Basic Needs and Their Cultural Responses

Basic Needs	Cultural Responses
1. Metabolism	Commissariat
2. Reproduction	Kinship
3. Bodily Comforts	Shelter
4. Safety	Protection
5. Movement	Activities
6. Growth	Training
7. Health	Hygiene

◆ *Malinowski's multiple perspectives*

In his later work, Malinowski presented a unique perspective on culture, emphasising a scientific approach. He identified seven biological needs and their corresponding cultural responses as the foundation of his theory. To explain this, he introduced the concept of 'vital sequences', which consisted of eleven sets, each involving an impulse, a related physiological action, and the satisfaction resulting from that action. For instance, the impulse for sleep is linked to the act of sleeping, resulting in the satisfaction of waking up with renewed energy.

He then simplified it into a seven-fold model, establishing the relationship between the seven basic needs and their respective cultural responses. Moving further, he introduced a fourfold model that linked complex instrumental imperatives with their cultural counterparts, including economics, social control, education and political organisation. Lastly, Malinowski explored integrative imperatives and the

◆ *Unpopular ideas*

instrumentally implemented vital sequence. This intricate framework aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how culture and biology intersect, offering a scientific theory of culture based on the biological foundations of human needs and their cultural expressions.

1.1.3.2 The Function of Magic

◆ *Magic in Trobriand life*

Magic played a central role in Malinowski's theory, particularly within the Trobriand culture. It served a wide range of functions, from harming enemies to ensuring safety, facilitating childbirth, enhancing beauty in dancers, safeguarding fishermen, and securing harvests. Malinowski argued that magic should not be dismissed as mere superstition but instead be understood as a belief in the ability to achieve desired outcomes through spells and rituals. Magic, he believed emerged in situations where human knowledge falls short. Primitive societies, unable to control natural elements like the weather, turned to magic as a way of dealing with these uncertainties. He thought that in the past, when people didn't understand why they got sick, they believed it was because of sorcery and thought they could get better through magic. He also said that when people are sick, whether in primitive or advanced societies, they hope for a miracle to make them feel better.

◆ *Belief in sorcery & magic*

Magic still exists in societies because it seems to work and helps people feel more in control when things are uncertain. Magic is strongest when people's important interests are at stake, when they have strong emotions, or when they are dealing with things they can't fully understand. For example, people use less magic for fishing in safe areas, but in more dangerous waters, they use a lot of magic to stay safe. The same goes for farming - in places where there is a lot of produce, they use more magic to make sure things go well. Magic and work go hand in hand, and they are a big part of how people in these cultures deal with the important stuff in life.

Summarised Overview

Anthropological functionalism is a theoretical approach within the field of anthropology that aims to understand the role and purpose of various elements within a society or culture. This approach was particularly influential during the early to mid-20th century and had key proponents such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown. Functionalism asserts that every cultural practice, custom or institution serves a purpose in maintaining the stability and functionality of a society. Anthropologists adopting this perspective seek to identify the functions of different aspects of a culture and how they contribute to the overall wellbeing and continuity of a social group. Functionalism often involves the examination of how cultural elements fulfill the basic needs of an individual and the society as a whole. Malinowski's work, for example, emphasised the role of 'vital sequences' and the idea that cultural practices help satisfy fundamental human needs. In contrast, Radcliffe Brown focused on social structure as the primary unit of analysis, believing that the study of social organisation encompassed the study of culture.

One key idea of functionalism is that cultural elements are interrelated, and changes in one aspect can have consequences for the whole society. Critics have argued that functionalism can oversimplify complex social systems and may not account for historical change or conflict within societies. Overall, anthropological functionalism provides valuable insights into how different aspects of culture contribute to the functioning and stability of societies, even though it is a theoretical perspective that has evolved and diversified over time.

Assignments

1. Critically evaluate the Functionalism of Radcliffe Brown and Malinowski.
2. Examine the specific features of the British school of Structural functionalism.
3. Discuss the historical roots of Sociological Functionalism.
4. Compare and contrast between Functionalism and Structural Functionalism.
5. Define the concept of 'Social Structure'.
6. Briefly examine the work 'Ceremonial Weeping in the Andaman Islands'.
7. Evaluate Brown's work on 'Kinship in Primitive Societies'.

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SGOU



Analytical Functionalism

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ describe the context of functional Perspectives
- ◆ assess analytical functionalism in sociology
- ◆ explore the role of Talcott Parsons in understanding sociology

Background

Functionalism in sociology is akin to viewing society as a complex machine with interconnected parts that collectively contribute to its smooth operation. Each component, be it educational institutions, government or others serves a specific role in maintaining social order and harmony. This perspective can be traced back to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim and had influential American proponents, notably Talcott Parsons and R.K. Merton, who expanded our understanding of how society functions by focusing on the interplay between different societal components.

Parson's brand of functionalism builds on the notion of society as a system of interrelated parts. More recent repetitions of functional theory aim to address challenging issues, such as explaining phenomena by their intended purpose and avoiding redundancy in explanations - problems that earlier sociologists struggled with. Modern functionalism, as developed by Parsons and his contemporaries, offers a clear framework for examining society by drawing analogies from the workings of living organisms and assessing how individual components of a system impact the entire societal structure.

Keywords

Action system, Pattern Variables, Social System, Neo Functionalism



Discussion

The notion of function, structural functionalism, social structure etc. were all covered in the previous unit. You also learned about Malinowski's individualistic functionalism, which was based on the theory of needs and scientific theory of culture. You will study sociological functionalism in this unit, and as part of that study, we will talk about Talcott Parsons, an American sociologist who had a significant impact on sociology following World War II.

◆ *Meaning of function*

Functionalism, as described by Marion Levy, is a method of scientific analysis that aims to understand social phenomena by examining their relationship to a broader system. It involves asking questions like, what observable patterns or structures are involved? What are the outcomes or functions that result from these patterns? And how do processes take place within these observable patterns and lead to specific conditions.

◆ *Approaches of functionalism*

There are two main approaches within functionalism. The first involves studying how a particular pattern of behaviour contributes to the maintenance of a larger system. The second approach seeks to explain why a particular pattern of behaviour persists and what causes it. The term 'function' can have several meanings, including referring to activities, mathematical variables, occupational roles, or system related activities. In this context, 'function' means the consequences, whether positive or negative, that result from the operation of a social structure over time. These consequences can either support the system or lead to its disintegration and change.

◆ *Objectivity of functionalism*

Functionalism is concerned with objective, observable outcomes rather than subjective feelings. It aims to describe the consequences of cultural practices or social elements, explain why certain patterns of behaviour continue, and analyse how one part of a system contributes to other parts and the system as a whole. This methodology involves identifying the actions required to maintain a system, understanding the motivations behind these actions, examining the actual motivations at play, identifying their sources and assessing the role of these patterns in the overall system.

Functional analysis as outlined by these propositions.

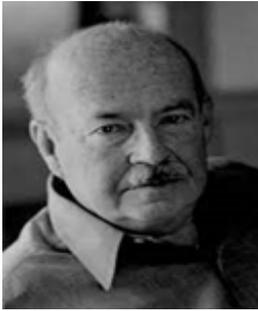
1. Functional analysis starts with the conceptualization of a system, emphasising the system's importance over its

individual elements. A system is more than the sum of its parts, it's the relationship among those parts. The focus is on how these elements contribute to the system's maintenance or disintegration.

2. All elements within a system are functionally interconnected. Society, like an organism, is seen as a system with components, much like organs, each performing a function essential for the system's survival. The normal operation of one element relies on the normal operation of others.
3. Each element in the system has a function that either positively contributes to the system's operation, negatively leads to its disintegration and change or has no impact. For example, religion may relieve tension in a group, while the incest taboo regulates sexual access.
4. Every system is a well-integrated configuration of elements that work together like an organic whole. These components are hierarchically controlled and interdependent. Both traditional and modern societies are regarded as systems with interconnected parts.
5. Every society is a relatively stable structure with built in mechanisms for self-regulation. The principle of homeostasis views society as self-regulating, striving to restore equilibrium when disturbed by internal or external factors. Society seeks to maintain relative stability despite environmental variability. This idea has evolved over time, moving from a focus on stability and order to a more mechanistic or casual analysis, ultimately allowing for dynamic equilibrium and change.
6. The functioning of a social system depends on the consensus among its members regarding common goals and values related to the society's basic needs.
7. The prevailing condition in society is one of order, stability and consensus rather than conflict based on coercion and dissension.
8. Certain functional requisites must be met for a system to survive. These requisites are generalised conditions necessary for maintaining a system or its specific units.

Functionalism thus focuses on understanding how society operates as an interconnected system, emphasising shared values, order, stability, and consensus as functional elements in its functioning.





Talcott Parson - (1902-1979)

Talcott Parson is often regarded as the single greatest contributor and practitioner of structural functionalism. He was born in Colorado Springs in 1902 and was the youngest of five children. Parsons, whose father was a Congregational minister, professor and university president, and mother a progressive and suffragist, completed his undergraduate studies in Biology at Amherst College in Massachusetts.

He also studied at the London School of Economics with Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), whose view of society as a system of interrelated parts influenced him. Parsons attended the University of Heidelberg in 1926, where he studied the theories of Max Weber (1864–1920) and engaged with Weber's notion that an individual is a rational, thinking agency, unlike earlier theorists who talked of individual behaviour as purely socially constructed, influenced by the social structure. He even translated Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905) into English in 1930. He was also influenced by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and thus took an interest in how actors or individuals choose goals and means in relation to the internalised norms and values. He argued for an objective external world that is understood empirically with concepts created by the ideas, beliefs, and actions of the actors. Parsons went on to become an instructor of economics at Harvard University, where he was mentored by Pitirim Sorokin (1889–1968), after which he became an inaugural member of the sociology department. Parsons established Harvard's Department of Psychology and Social Relations, an interdisciplinary collaboration in the behavioural sciences and economics, in 1945, where he served as chair of the department until its dissolution in 1972. He continued teaching at Harvard as a visiting professor upon his retirement in 1973. Parsons died in 1979.

Major Sociological Works:

- ◆ The Structure of Social Action (1937)
- ◆ The Social System (1951)
- ◆ Towards a General Theory of Action, with E. Shils (1951)
- ◆ Family, Socialization and Interaction Process, with Bales (1953)
- ◆ Essays in Sociological Theory (1964)
- ◆ Societies; Evolution and Comparative Perspectives (1966)
- ◆ Politics and Social Structure (1969)
- ◆ The System of Modern Societies (1971)



1.2.1 Social Action

◆ *Conceptual framework for social analysis*

Parson's theory is a conceptual framework designed to understand various aspects of social reality. It is a general and abstract theory that can be applied to both modern complex societies and simple primitive ones. This framework is versatile, as it can be used to analyse individual actions and interactions (micro level) as well as larger social systems, structures and organisations (macro level). Notably, lower order concepts used to analyse individual behaviour serve as the foundation for higher order concepts that are used to study societal systems. Parsons initially focused on individual actions and interactions in one of his books and later extended this framework to analyse social systems in another.

◆ *Micro level sociology*

Talcott Parson's work began with a focus on the micro level of social reality, specifically individual actions and interactions. In his book, *The Structure of Social Action* published in 1937, Parsons made a critical distinction between individual action and behaviour. Behaviour, as seen in natural sciences like physics and biology, involves automatic responses to stimuli. In these natural sciences, the response of objects and organisms to stimuli is studied. However, individual action in social science differs from such natural behavior because individuals are active and creative in their actions due to their possession of mind and consciousness, qualities absent in organisms.

◆ *Reflexive response and goals*

Individual action is not a simple reflexive response to stimuli; it occurs based on an individual's conscious mind and is actively shaped by goals and situational considerations. According to Parsons, 'action is behaviour oriented to the attainment of ends in situations by means of normatively regulated expenditure of energy'. He identified three primary types of orientation or motives for individual actions: cognitive (thinking), categorical (feeling) and evaluative (valuing or willing). These orientations or motives underlie the various ways individuals act in response to their goals and the situations they encounter.

◆ *Behavior and action*

In *The Structure of Social Action*, Talcott Parsons talked about how people behave in society. He made a distinction between two things: 'behaviour', which is like a reflex or automatic response to things, and 'action', which is when people think and plan before doing something. He said we should focus on understanding human 'action' when looking at social behaviour.



◆ *Integration of theories*

Parson wanted to understand how society works and stays organised. He said that just like one action by itself doesn't make sense, social behaviour needs order too. By 'order', he meant that things should not happen randomly, but they should have a purpose. To explain this, he introduced the idea of a 'unit act'. This is like the basic building block of human actions. It includes a person who wants to do something, a goal, the way to achieve that goal, the situation they are in, and the rules they follow. He believes that actions are shaped by what people think and know, and this comes from learning what's considered right or wrong in their society. So, Parson's theory suggests that all actions, whether they seem independent or passive, involve a part of our inner thoughts and knowledge. The 'unit act' helps combine things we do with what we think and know.

◆ *Social action and individual decision*

Talcott Parsons introduced three key concepts to analyse social action. Firstly, 'Need Dispositions' refer to our fundamental biological needs, which are influenced by how society uses resources and expresses artistic values. Secondly, 'Motivational Orientations' capture an individual's level of concern about satisfying these needs. A strong motivation orientation implies a high degree of interest in fulfilling these needs. Lastly, 'Values Orientation' relates to the cultural standards and norms that guide people's choices and actions, underscoring the significance of societal values in shaping individual decisions. Together, these concepts help us understand how our basic needs, motivations and cultural values all play a critical role in shaping our actions and behaviours within society.

1.2.2 AGIL

◆ *Functional imperatives*

Talcott Parsons proposed that all action systems, whether in society, groups or individuals face four fundamental requirements to survive as a functional system. These are the basic challenges that need to be addressed for any system to thrive. In his analysis of the patterns of interactions are made various individuals, Parsons primarily focused on the social system. These interactions are organised and stabilised by factors like status, roles and institutionalisation. Parsons then delved into the social system by examining its structures and functions. He identified four essential functions or prerequisites that must be fulfilled for a social system to endure, collectively known as the AGIL paradigm. These functions are present at every level, from entire social systems to specific subsystems and individual actors. The

AGIL framework explains how a social system meets these needs and maintains order in both its external environment and internal organisations. Parsons, along with Robert F. Bales and Edward A Shills, first introduced the AGIL schema in 1953, and it serves as a key element of Parsons broader action theory.

All “action systems,” including society, face four main “problems” (or “needs”): adaptation (A), goal attainment (G), integration (I), and pattern maintenance, or, as Parsons later renamed it, latent pattern maintenance—tension management, or simply latency (L). Society, or the social system-face four functional issues that are represented by the acronym AGIL.

◆ *Adaptation to social system*

- ◆ The adaptive (A) function: This refers to the way in which the social system adapts to the environment and also the way in which the environment is adapted to by the social system. In order to require the resources needed for survival, it is the economic structure which fulfills this need by making arrangements for the production, consumption and distribution of resources.

◆ *Social system and goal*

- ◆ The goal-attainment (G) function: This refers to the problem of resolving the discrepancies between “the inertial tendencies of the system and its ‘needs’ resulting from interchange with the situation”. At the level of the individual, goal attainment is met primarily by the personality system. At the level of the social system, the requirement of goal attainment is typically met by the polity, as it is the realm in which goals and resources are prioritised, and discrepancies are resolved between “the inertial tendencies of the system and its ‘needs’ resulting from interchange with the situation”. The polity and government establish status and reward systems so that social goals can be attained. Goal Attainment refers to the way in which the social system establishes the priorities of goals to be attained by it and it is the political structure of the social system which fulfils this need by organising the people to attain these goals by: a) setting goals, b) organizing people and c) motivating their energy towards

the goal(s).

◆ *Social system and independent units*

- ◆ The integrative (I) function: Integration refers to the coordination of a system or subsystem constituent parts, since “all social systems are differentiated and segmented into relatively independent units”. It is the coherence, coordination and management of the relationship between various parts of the social system i.e., the system must regulate the interrelationships of its component parts. Within the four systems of action (behavioural organism, personality, social system, and cultural system), the function of integration is met primarily by the social system. Integration involves solidarity, that is the feeling of “we-ness” that develops in a social group as distinct roles are carried out. Integration depends on interaction and the norms that guide interaction more than abstract cultural values. It must also manage the relationship among the other three functional imperatives i.e., Adaptation, Goal Attainment and Latency. This need is fulfilled by law.

◆ *Cultural system and motivation*

- ◆ The latency (L) or pattern maintenance - This refers to the “imperative of maintaining the stability of the patterns of institutionalised culture”. This function is carried out primarily by the cultural system, as it is through culture (made up of shared meanings and values) that specific patterns of behaviour are maintained. Within the social system, the function of latent pattern maintenance, that is the maintaining of shared values, is most readily apparent in the realm of religion. It has been divided into two aspects called pattern maintenance and tension management. Pattern maintenance means the motivation of actors and the cultural patterns which sustain these motivations must be maintained in each generation and passed on from one generation to another. Tension management means that internal tensions, strains and stress of the actors must be dealt with in order to sustain the motivation of actors. This ensures that the actors display appropriate characteristics. This need is fulfilled by the structures of the school.

However, as indicated previously, the AGIL scheme refers to the dilemmas or problems faced by all systems of action.

◆ *AGIL scheme:
Systemic
dilemmas*

Thus, for instance, the need for latent pattern maintenance exists within all social units, including the economy, as the Great Depression attests. The great crash of 1929 was rooted in collective panic, a lack of faith in the banking system, or in Parsons's terms, a failure in latent pattern maintenance. Although religion is intimately connected to the problems of latent pattern maintenance (L) and integration (I), religious organisations adapt to the environment (A) and set goals (G). Indeed, as the Protestant Reformation during the 1600s dramatically reflects, it is by adapting to external conditions and setting fresh goals that new religions and religious institutions are born.

Apart from social systems that constitute the more general system of action in Parsonian theory, the other primary constituents that he talked about, in relation to the AGIL scheme, are: cultural systems, personality social systems, and behavioural organisms, each of which serves a functional imperative:

1. The behavioural organism performs the adaptive function;
2. The personality system performs goal attainment;
3. The social system performs the integrative function; and
4. The cultural system performs pattern maintenance.

Table 1.2.1
Talcott Parsons Division of the Social World

Cultural System (Values, Beliefs, Norms)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Norms and Values ◆ Basic Guidelines ◆ E.g., talking to father, teacher, friend varies
Social System (Patterns of Interactions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Interaction between units of the system ◆ Interaction between families, educational institutes, politicians, etc.
Personality System (Role playing skills)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Hidden aspect • Emotions, tensions, stress, wishes are always there. ◆ E.g., solving a tension related to ZOOM app usage.
Behavioural System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Biological or Physical Aspect ◆ Makes energy available. ◆ E.g., Father brings in money to energise the family affairs.

Talcott Parsons divide the social world into four main components, each playing a distinct role in his sociological framework.

◆ *Interaction between individuals*

◆ Social System: Parsons started his analysis at the micro level, considering the basic interaction between individuals. He defined a social system as a group of individuals interacting within a situation, with motivations geared towards optimising their satisfaction. The relations among these actors are shaped by culturally shared symbols. Parsons did not focus on individual interactions, but rather on the status -role complex, where 'status' refers to one's position in the social system, and 'role' is the function one performs in that position.

◆ *Interactions in social world*

◆ Cultural System: Parsons saw culture as a crucial force that binds various elements of the social world. It mediates interactions, integrates personality and social system, and has the unique ability to become part of these systems. Culture includes norms, values and a social stock of knowledge. It is both transmitted between systems and can influence and control them, leading Parsons to consider himself a cultural determinist.

◆ *Cultural and social systems*

◆ Personality System: The personality system is influenced by both the cultural and social systems. Parsons defined personality as the organised system that guides an individual's actions. It is driven by 'need dispositions', significant units of motivation that are different from innate drives. While the personality system is given some independence, it is somewhat secondary in his framework.

◆ *Physical body*

◆ Behavioural System: Parsons included the behavioural organism, which is the physical body and its genetic makeup. However, he didn't delve into this system much. It provides energy for the other systems and is affected by conditioning and learning throughout an individual's life.

In sum, Parson's sociological framework breaks down the social world into these four interrelated systems, with culture

as a central and influential component, shaping individual actions and interactions in society.

1.2.3 Parsons and the Emergence of Neo-Functionalism – A Critique

◆ *Internalised norms of society*

Parson's theory faced criticism in the 1960s and 1970s. Some critics argued that his emphasis on norms and intentional action was problematic. Idealists pointed out that while he talked about intentional action, it wasn't entirely intentional because it was influenced by internalised norms from society. On the other hand, materialist critics argued that Parsons ignored the social forces that constrain action, focusing too much on individual intentions.

◆ *Subjective and Objective social forces*

Parsons believed individuals couldn't be completely free from constraints, as they were influenced by various social forces, especially normative ones. Parsons aimed to bridge the gap between the subjective and objective aspects of human action, emphasising that actions may seem free and intentional, but they are influenced by internal judgements shaped by normative standards.

Some critics also accused Parsons of neglecting social change in his theory. However, Alexander argued that Parson's theory of voluntarism was embedded in his theory of social change, specifically in the concept of differentiation. Differentiation involves institutions developing their own criteria for performance and gaining the ability to regulate resources independently.

◆ *Revival of Neo-Functionalism in Sociology*

Jeffrey C Alexander and others revived Parsonian thought in the 1980s, leading to the emergence of neo functionalism. Alexander saw Parson's theory as a starting point for a more comprehensive social theory. He emphasised the interplay between social action and order and acknowledged the complexities of maintaining social order. Neo functionalism, focused on understanding systemic needs, the interaction between control, integration and deviance, and the role of differentiation as change. It also recognised the importance of considering individual interests, environmental factors, and unforeseen circumstances in explaining social dynamics.

Summarised Overview

Talcott Parson was a key figure in advancing the functionalist approach in sociology, which views society as a complex system of interconnected parts, each with specific functions that contribute to maintaining social stability and order. Parsons believed that societies have certain functional prerequisites or basic needs such as adaptation to the environment, goal attainment, integration and pattern maintenance. These needs are met by various social institutions and structures such as the family, education, religion and government. He argued that each institution plays a specific role and contributes to the overall equilibrium of society. For example, the family is responsible for socialising individuals, while the government provides order and protection.

Parson also introduced the concept of the AGIL system, which stands for Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration and Latency. This system represents the key functions that must be fulfilled in a society for it to function smoothly. Analytical functionalism emphasises the stability and equilibrium of society, emphasising the role of shared norms and values in maintaining social order. It also underscores the importance of roles and expectations in regulating human behaviour. However, critics have argued that this perspective can oversimplify complex social systems and may not adequately address issues of conflict, change or inequality within society.

Assignments

1. Relate Parsons Action system with the present Kerala society
2. Analyse AGIL with real life examples.
3. Examine the concept of functional analysis and its propositions.
4. Evaluate the framework outlined by Talcott Parsons to understand social reality.
5. Critically evaluate the work 'The Structure of Social Action'.
6. Discuss Parson's different systems which serve as functional imperatives.

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SGOU



Empirical Functionalism

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ discuss the role of Robert K Merton in understanding functionalism
- ◆ analyse the significance of Middle Range theories in sociology
- ◆ explore Merton's explanation on crime and deviance in society

Background

Empirical functionalism developed by Robert K. Merton signifies a significant departure from traditional structural functionalism, placing a strong emphasis on empirical research and real-world observations. This approach aimed to rectify the limitations of classic functionalism and promote a more evidence-based approach to sociological analysis. Emerging in the mid-20th century as a response to prior functionalist theories, including those proposed by Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, it critically assessed the belief that social structures and institutions serve specific functions contributing to overall societal stability.

Empirical functionalism prioritises empirical research as the cornerstone of sociological theory. Merton contends that sociological theories should be rooted in empirical evidence, gleaned from careful observations, experiments and data collection. In addition, Merton introduced the concept of middle range theories, acting as connective frameworks bridging abstract, overarching theories and specific empirical observations. These middle range theories facilitate the comprehension of complex social phenomena by grounding them in empirical evidence.

Merton was a key figure in this development. He came up with new ideas like manifest and latent functions, self-fulfilling prophecies, and many more to better understand how society works as a whole. Understanding these ideas helps us see how different parts of society fit together to create the society. Merton's approach to social science is about building on the ideas of others to make progress. He believed that scientific understanding should focus on what we can observe and measure, not just what people think or feel.



Keywords

Functionalism, Middle Range Theory, Deviance, Dysfunctions, Latent Function, Manifest Functions.

Discussion

Unquestionably, Robert K. Merton is one of the most important sociologists and a pioneer whose broad-ranging theoretical and methodological contributions have had a significant impact on the field. He is best known for developing such ideas and techniques as unexpected outcomes, self-fulfilling prophecies, focused group interviews, functionalism, middle-range theory, opportunity structure, and analytical paradigms.

Robert K. Merton is a major theorist who, as indicated above, coined several pivotal sociological concepts. However, Merton was also a prolific researcher who studied a wide variety of empirical areas and topics, including deviance, drug addiction, friendship formation, medical education, technology, media, and the history of science. In addition, Merton wrote extensively on the discipline of sociology, making vital methodological as well as empirical and theoretical contributions. (For instance, he developed the “focused interview,” now called “focus group research.”) Indeed, one could argue that Merton’s single most important achievement has been to establish connections between theory and research, thereby charting the course of the discipline of sociology.

◆ *Merton’s contributions*

Merton was influenced by a broad array of theorists, philosophers, and social scientists. He read widely, and one can see traces of Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Marx, as well as the structural functionalist anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, in his work. Merton also drew inspiration from the work of William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. Above all, however, Merton learned from Pitirim Sorokin, the first chair of the Department of Sociology at Harvard University, who recruited Merton for graduate school, and Sorokin’s young colleague at Harvard, Talcott Parsons. In contrast to Parsons, who sought to delineate a highly abstract, master conceptual schema, Merton favoured what he called middle-range theory: theories that “lie between



◆ *Merton's Influences: Diverse Theorists*

the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behaviour, social organisation, and social change". Merton's middle-range reformulation of structural functionalism made it eminently more useful. Indeed, Merton has contributed numerous concepts that are now "staples" in sociology, and you will read about these concepts below. Yet, perhaps the single most important contribution that Merton made to functionalism – and sociology – is that he extended Parsons's point that society is a system of interrelated parts and reworked it in order to emphasise that the components of the system may or may not be "in sync," and that the results are not always predictable. This pivotal theoretical contribution is readily apparent not only in Merton's highly influential concepts of manifest and latent function and dysfunction, but also in his oft-cited theory of deviance, discussed below.

Robert K. Merton - (1910-2003)



Robert King Merton was born Meyer R. Schkolnick on July 4, 1910, in South Philadelphia, to working-class, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. After a rough-and-tumble early childhood – which allegedly included membership in the local street gang – the teenaged Schkolnick began to perform magic tricks around the neighbourhood, at parties and social gatherings, using the stage name "Robert Merlin." After a young friend convinced him that borrowing King Arthur's mentor's name was clichéd, he changed it to "Robert King Merton." From a very early age, Merton showed a passion for learning, and upon graduating from high school he earned a scholarship to Temple University. He graduated from Temple with a degree in sociology in 1931 and went on 'to earn his doctorate in Sociology from Harvard University, where he was one of the first and most important students of Talcott Parsons. Merton first began publishing while still a graduate student, and by the time he was forty he was one of the most influential social scientists in the United States. He developed the very idea of studying science sociologically (i.e., the sociology of science), and as early as 1942 his "ethos of science" challenged the common public perception of scientists as eccentric geniuses free of normal social constraints. It was primarily for this work that Merton became the first sociologist to be awarded a National Medal of Science in 1994. Merton continued to study the sociology of science, perhaps the field closest to his heart, publishing his masterpiece on this topic, In 1949

(albeit revised and expanded in 1957 and 1968), Merton published what would become his magnum opus, *Social Theory and Social Structure*. From 1941 until his death in 2003, Merton was a professor of sociology at Columbia University. He mentored an extraordinary number of students, many of whom would become prominent in their own right, including Robin Williams, Jr., Jesse Pitts, Peter Blau, James Coleman, Lewis Coser, Rose Coser, Alvin Gouldner, Seymour Martin Lipset, Alice Rossi, and Arthur Stinchcombe.

Major Publications

1. *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949)
2. *The Sociology of Science* (1973)
3. *Sociological Ambivalence* (1976)
4. *On The Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (1985)
5. *On Social Structure and Science*

1.3.1 The Concept of Function

R.K. Merton has done a unique exercise by tracing various etymological/contextual meanings of the term function under the heading "Single Term, Diverse Concepts".

1. Function means 'simple public gathering or festive occasion', usually conducted with ceremonial overtones.
2. Function is 'equivalent to occupation', tracing a definition of occupation from the writings of Max Weber.
3. Function refers to the 'activities assigned to the incumbent of a social status', more particularly to the occupant of an office or political position.
4. Function as used in mathematics, refers to 'a variable considered in relation to one or more variables' in terms of which it can be expressed on which its own value depends ($y = fx$).
5. As used in biology, function refers to the 'vital or organic processes considered in respects in which they contribute to the maintenance of the organism'.

◆ *Meaning of Function*

In his work, Merton discusses the concept of 'function' and its adoption and modification by anthropologists in the

◆ *Anthropological modification of function*

study of human societies. He credits A.R. Radcliffe Brown and Malinowski for laying the foundation for the concept of function, which they initially applied in their understanding of primitive societies. Merton, however, takes this concept and adapts it to the study of complex societies, particularly American society in the early and mid-20th century. He formulates the essence of these earlier ideas as 'postulates of functionalism'. In his essay 'Manifest and Latent Functions', which is part of his book '*Social theory and Social Structure*', Merton revisits these postulates to make them applicable to the complex society in which they lived.

◆ *Merton's adaptation of function concept*

Merton emphasises the importance of clarifying and elaborating on the concept of function, and he believes that the entire functional theory should not be dismissed just because some early contributors made mistakes. Instead, he suggests learning from these mistakes, identifying them, and working to improve functional theory, making it a valuable approach for research in sociology. Merton also highlights the interplay between theory and facts in the context of social research, indicating that the two should inform and complement each other. This interplay is essential for advancing our understanding of complex societies and their functions.

◆ *Merton's view: Sociology meaning*

Merton defined sociology as the study of logically connected and evidence supported ideas about how society is structured, how people behave within it, and the outcomes of their actions. He believed that sociology's primary goal is to understand how a person's behaviour and life are influenced by their position in various social groups and changing cultures. This involves looking at social structure, behaviour and the consequences of actions. Merton's approach to sociology also delves into the origins, functions, current operations and changes within society. He emphasised the importance of understanding how social phenomena impact the larger societal structure they are part of and, later explored this concept in greater depth with his work on 'structural analysis in Sociology' which examined the interplay between social phenomena and their structural context.

Merton's analysis of functionalism, focusing on the structural context, outlines four essential criteria for understanding social structure. First, it involves an organised set of social relationships, emphasising how various parts of society are interconnected. Second, it exhibits a pattern, showing regular and repetitive features in social interceptions.



◆ *Social context's impact*

Third, it considers latent functions, which are hidden and deeper level consequences of social phenomena, contrasting them with manifest functions that are more apparent. The fourth criterion, which Merton finds particularly important, involves structural context and constraints. It recognises how the social structure either limits or enables individual behaviour, beliefs, attitudes and motivations. Merton emphasises that human behaviour is shaped not only by personal qualities but also by the structural situation in which individuals act. These social contexts significantly influence how people's abilities are expressed and they can either restrict or encourage certain choices and actions, not solely in a negative sense but also in a positive way.

1.3.1.1 Merton's Perspective on Structural Changes

Merton's perspective on social structure involves understanding how it initiates changes both within and to the structure itself. This happens through a series of patterned choices in behaviour and the magnification of problems that arise from tensions, conflicts and contradictions within society. His theory encompasses changes that can be categorised into two main types.

◆ *Maintaining structure*

- ◆ Reproductive changes: These are changes that pertain to the regular functioning of everyday society. They involve ongoing adaptive processes that help maintain the existing states of the social structure. In other words, they ensure that the structure stays within certain limits by preserving its identity.

◆ *Structural Transformation*

- ◆ Transformation of structure: These changes disrupt the current structure, giving rise to a new one in its place. Merton's theory suggests that structural conflicts can lead to a transformation of the social structure, ultimately resulting in a new form of structural conflict. Rather than seeing compensation for these conflicts, Merton's emphasis is on the amplification and extension of these tensions and contradictions, which can lead to significant structural change.

1.3.1.2 Different types of Function

Merton's functionalism is firmly rooted in the realities

◆ *Merton's functionalism: Time and space*

of time and space, focusing on empirical, real-world situations. He emphasises that functional theories proposed by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, originally designed for simpler, isolated tribal societies, cannot be directly applied to complex contemporary societies with overlapping historical traditions. Merton highlights the changing nature of institutions like religion, which while integrative in simpler societies can become divisive in modern societies with multiple competing belief systems. His concepts of latent and manifest functions are also grounded in the historical context of modern society. Merton makes a distinction between functions and dysfunctions. He introduces the idea of manifest functions and latent functions. Merton's views on social research can be found in his book, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968).

i. Manifest, Latent and Dysfunctions

Merton and other functionalists viewed society as an organism with various parts, and each part has a function to perform. Merton recognized that some functions were intentional and other functions were not. Merton has adopted these two terms 'manifest' and 'latent' from Freud. He also acknowledged that some functions actually disrupted society. From the above analysis it is now clear that Mertonian functionalism questions basically the three primary postulates of early functionalism, viz. the functional unity of the social system, the functional universality of social items and the indispensability of functional items for social systems. Rather, for Merton, the components of social structure, at both levels such as social structure proper and of cultural structure are variously interrelated. Rejecting the earlier functional ideas of equilibrium, consensus and harmony, Merton sees these ideas (integration) as problematic and contingent. For him various kinds of strains, tensions, contradictions and conflicts in social structure are very much functional and not pathological. They are normal, typical, and permanent. Merton believes that every society needs some cultural beliefs and practices and these are important for both society and individuals. Every structure present in society must have the feeling of integration and unification.

◆ *Functionalism critiques traditional ideas*

- ◆ **Manifest Functions:** Merton defines manifest functions as 'those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognised by participants in the system'. Here people are

◆ *Adapting to the system*

aware or expecting these consequences, while in latent function, one is not sure or aware of the consequences he or she might be facing. Merton pays much attention to latent functions to understand the society. Thus, manifest functions are objective consequences for a specified unit (person, subgroup, social or cultural system) which contribute to its adjustment and are intended.

◆ *Not aware of system*

- ◆ **Latent Functions:** latent functions are 'those which are neither intended nor recognized'. These are unintended and often unrecognized consequences. The concept of latent functions extends beyond whether or not behaviour attained its purpose. It directs attention towards individual personalities involved in behaviour, and the persistence and continuity of larger group.

As a result, sociologists will be concerned with determining whether a practice instituted for a particular purpose does, in fact, achieve this and also whether sociologists are capable of examining the familiar (or planned) social practice to determine the latent, unrecognized, functions. Be it a manifest or latent function, it is the objective, observed consequences which makes for the adaptation and adjustment of a given system. However, for Merton there are certain consequences that lessen the adaptation and adjustment of the system, and he uses the term 'Dysfunction' to explain this.

◆ *Integration of society*

- ◆ **Dysfunctions:** it consist of three main functional aspects

1. **Functional unity of society:** Here he talks about the harmony and unity of society. He says that not all societies are well unified and have some difficulties. Everyone does not enjoy the same opportunities which lead to a disturbed society. There is no society which does not have its issues. Merton says that civil war is an example of a not well-integrated society. Parsons made the supposition that every aspect of society functions as a component of a larger whole or unity. As a result, if one portion changes, it will affect other sections as well. This was criticised by Merton, who countered that while it could be true for smaller civilizations, some aspects of more recent,

sophisticated societies might in fact be independent of one another.

◆ *Diverse advantages*

2. Universal functionalism: in this, he discusses that not all norms and ideals are an advantage for all. He says that there are certain things present in society which are advantageous to one and disadvantageous to the other. That is why he says what is accepted by one may not be accepted by others. He says poverty may be good for rich people as they will get the chance to enjoy the benefits and maintain their wealth throughout their lives.

Parsons made the supposition that everything in society serves the interests of society as a whole. Merton asserted, however, that some facets of civilization can really be unhealthy for the community. Instead, he advocated starting from the premise that every aspect of society might be either functional, dysfunctional, or non-functional when doing functionalist analysis.

◆ *Same functional necessity*

3. Indispensability: Merton firmly believed that there are some institutions which can perform the same functions as other institutions and do not have one specific function. Parsons believed that every social structure, in its current form, is necessary for proper functioning. But Merton asserted that this is an unproven presumption. He suggested that a variety of different institutions may fulfill the same functional necessity. Democracies, for instance, can offer a useful contrast to autocracies. As a result, Merton develops terms like “functional alternatives,” “functional equivalents,” and “functional substitutes.”

ii. Unanticipated consequences and Manifest and Latent functions:

When we talk about functions, we know what are our intended consequences and are probably not aware of our unintended consequences. So that is why most of the sociologists tried to study these unintended consequences. For instance, many times we plan and take action on it but there might be some consequences we have to face or we can say that things do not go according to our plan. To conclude Merton’s dichotomy, we can say that - manifest functions are those consequences that are intended are recognised by the participants in the system of action concerned, and latent functions are those consequences neither intended and are

◆ *Intended and unrecognised consequences*



recognised by participants. Function (or eufunction is the word of Levy) is any activity or usage that contributes to the adaptation or adjustment of the unit to unit's setting and dysfunction is any activity that lessens the adaptation or adjustment of the unit to its setting. These distinctions and Merton's clarification of them have made functional analysis of cultural patterns and social institution both meaningful and scientific.

◆ *Functional analysis as investigator*

To ascertain the causes and consequences of a particular structure and process, Merton insists that functional analysis begins with 'sheer description' of individual and group activities. In describing the patterns of interaction and activity among units under investigation, it will be possible to discern clearly the social items to be subjected to functional analysis. They can also stand as a major step due to the functions performed by such patterned activity. Hence the first step of the investigator is to indicate the principal alternatives that are excluded by the dominance of a particular pattern. The second analytical step beyond sheer description involves an assessment of the meaning, mental and emotional significance of the activities of a group. Merton has also devised alternative functions known as the substitutes which could instead deliver the sort of functions advocated by Talcott Parson's in the form of functional prerequisites. He termed them as Functional Alternatives.

1.3.1.3 The Reference Group

You studied Merton's contribution to functional analysis in the preceding section. This time, we want to introduce you to the idea of reference group behaviour in particular, as it was developed and supported by Robert Merton in his renowned book *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949). A reference group is one to which you always refer in order to evaluate your achievements, your role-performance, your aspirations and ambitions. It is only a reference group that tells you whether you are right or wrong, whatever you are doing; you are doing badly or well. For instance, as a learner, you are a part of a community of peers with whom you frequently engage. You are aware of the sort of relationships you want to have with the people in your group as well as what they want from you. In other words, the group you belong to always influences how you carry yourself, behave, and interact. As a student, you must behave in accordance with the group's predetermined expectations in order to maintain good behavior. So, one might say that the

membership groups to which you belong are your reference groups.

◆ *Comparison and aspiration*

Merton's idea is that not only the groups we belong to but also those we don't belong to can influence how we feel about ourselves. Life is mobile, and we often learn about the lives and ways of people from different groups. When we see others who are more powerful or prestigious than us, we start to compare and sometimes feel deprived. We aspire to be a part of those more powerful or prestigious groups as reference points to evaluate our own achievements and performance.

◆ *Relative deprivation*

This concept is connected to Merton's idea of relative deprivation. He talks about this while discussing a study called 'The American Soldier' from 1949. In this study, they looked at how American soldiers thought about their roles, careers and achievements. For example, a soldier who was married might compare himself to unmarried soldiers and feel like he had to make more sacrifices. But when he looked at other married soldiers, he might feel like he was making fewer sacrifices than them. This feeling of being worse off than some and better off than others is what Merton called relative deprivation.

◆ *Reference groups: Evaluation benchmarks*

He says there are two types of reference groups, positive reference groups which we like and want to be like and negative reference groups which we dislike and want to be different from. Merton says that these reference groups are how we judge ourselves, and they can be groups we belong to or ones we don't. We don't just see ourselves through the eyes of our own group but also through the eyes of others in different groups. Merton's work along with Kitt's studies, introduced the idea of 'anticipatory socialisation' where people choose a group, they aren't part of as their reference group and try to act like them to fit in.

1.3.1.4 Anticipatory Socialization

Merton talks about 'anticipatory socialisation, which is like preparing to be part of a group you want to join but aren't yet. It means adopting the values and ways of that group. For example, if a village boy wants to be part of a music band, he might start acting like the members of that particular band. If he does manage to get into that band, his anticipatory socialisation helps him fit in better.

Merton also points out that this can have both good and

◆ *Open and closed system*

bad effects. If the system is open and allows for movement between groups, anticipatory socialisation is helpful. But if its closed and doesn't let people move, then it's not helpful. In a closed system, the person can't become a part of the group they are trying to be like, and they might not be liked by their own group either. This makes them a kind of outsider. So anticipatory socialisation is only good in a system where people can move between groups. In a closed system, people are less likely to compare themselves to better-off groups, and they might feel less unhappy about their positions.

1.3.2 Middle Range Theory

◆ *Social theory and actual facts*

In sociology, 'sociological theory' refers to a set of ideas and hypotheses that help us understand and predict how society works. A crucial part of this is 'middle range theories', which are like bridges between very detailed, specific explanations and huge, overarching theories that can't explain the determined social behaviour. Middle range theories are super important because they guide our real-world research. They are not too specific or too general, and they use abstract ideas but are based on actual facts we can test. These theories help us understand specific parts of society, like how groups of people behave, how social norms are formed, or how people move up or down in society.

◆ *Empirical sociological theories*

The concept of middle range theory came about in the 1940s to solve a problem. Back then, sociologists wanted a single, big theory to explain everything, but it became so broad that it couldn't be tested in real life. So, sociologist Merton suggested middle range theories to examine smaller parts of these big theories in a practical way. The goal is to find a balance between having a theory that's useful for understanding behavior but still stays rooted in real life so that we can test and verify it.

◆ *Bridge theory*

To put it simply middle range theory is, at its most basic level, a set of theories or propositions that bridge the gap between the empirical observation and broad, often abstract and untestable, general or high-level theories. According to Merton theories of the middle range, 'lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behaviour, social organisation, and social change'.

1.3.2.1 Features of Middle Range Theories

◆ *Indirect inferences*

a. They are not directly inferred from experience but rather themselves generate inferences about experience: Each of these theories provides an image that gives rise to inferences. For example, if the atmosphere is thought of as a sea of air, then, as Pascal inferred, there should be less air pressure on a mountain's top than at its base. The initial idea thus suggests specific hypotheses which are tested by seeing whether the inferences from them are empirically confirmed. The idea itself is tested for its fruitfulness by noting the range of theoretical problems and hypotheses that allow one to identify new characteristics of atmospheric pressure

◆ *“Guide empirical inquiry” or “Direct research”*

b. These inferences ‘guide empirical inquiry’: Middle-range theory is principally used in sociology to guide empirical inquiry. It is intermediate to general theories of social systems which are too remote from particular classes of social behaviour, organisation, and change to account for what is observed, and to those detailed orderly description of particulars that are not generalised at all.

◆ *Limited scope, empirical testing*

c. Middle-range theories are limited in scope: ‘Middle-range theories involve abstractions, of course, but they are close enough to observed data to be incorporated in propositions that permit empirical testing. Middle range theories deal with delimited aspects of social phenomena. One speaks of a theory of reference groups, of social mobility, or role-conflict and of the formation of social norms just as one speak of a theory of prices, a germ theory of disease, or a kinetic theory of gases’.

◆ *Middle-range theories suggestion*

Hence, Merton has suggested that social sciences focus on theories of the middle range, rather than, on the one hand, mere hypotheses with little explanatory power, or, on the other hand, high-level all-encompassing theories that can be neither clearly defined nor empirically validated. Although middle-range theories are not, at least in the usual circumstances, derived from more general theories, they may have logical relationships to those broader theories. Last but not least, rather than offering specific historical accounts of specific social systems, the logic of analysis presented in this sociological theory of the middle range is developed entirely in terms of the elements of social structure. As a result, middle-range theory helps us to get past the fictitious

theoretical conflict between historicism and sociological generalisation theory, the nomothetic and the idiographic, and the general and completely particular.

◆ *Gradual theory development*

In his view, middle-range theories start from the level of empirical observation which then would lead towards generating more general statements that could be verified by data. However, while Merton was critical of total theoretical systems, he was still committed to the gradual development of a universal theory. He perceived middle-range theories as a stepping stone towards building a more complex and elaborate sociological explanation. For Merton, sociology was not as 'mature' as physics and other sciences and as such it could not generate universal theories. Nevertheless, with the development of more comprehensive middle-range theories sociology would eventually reach the level of other sciences and produce a system of universal laws.

◆ *Analytical functional analysis*

Merton's approach to structural functionalism differed from Talcott Parsons by being less abstract and more amenable to empirical research. Merton's functional analysis aimed to interpret data by identifying the consequences for the larger social structures, avoiding the rigidity of traditional functionalism. He agreed with Parsons that functional interdependence and shared values are crucial for social order but also emphasised that not all social actions promote social integration. Merton distinguished between social functions, which contribute to unity, and social dysfunctions, which create tension and conflict. In contrast to Parson's view of society as a giant equilibrium, Merton acknowledged that disorder and disorganisation are part of social life, citing examples such as civil wars and the marginalised position of African Americans in the 1950s as instances of dysfunctional social order.

◆ *Functional Analysis: Latent and Manifest*

Merton distinguished between manifest and latent functions in his sociological analysis. Manifest functions refer to the intended and expected outcomes of an action, while latent functions are unintended and often unnoticed consequences of the same action. For instance, in traditional societies, rain dance rituals have a manifest function of trying to bring rain for crops, but they also have a latent function of fostering social integration among the tribe.

1.3.3 Theory of Deviance

In addition, Merton made highly influential contributions to the study of crime and deviance. The starting point of

◆ *Merton's deviance theory*

his analysis is the functionalist strain theory of deviant behaviour. According to this approach, crime and deviance are by-products of the mismatch between one's expectations and goals on the one hand, and the legitimate opportunities societies provide, on the other. Thus, social progress and reduction in crime levels are achieved in societies where individual goals match social opportunities.

◆ *Crime due to anomie*

However, when there are no opportunities and individual goals and expectations are blocked, this generates a situation whereby some individuals turn to crime to attain financial and other material means in order to fulfil socially desirable goals. For Merton the rising levels of crime and deviance often reflect an anomic social condition. Drawing on Durkheim's idea, Merton describes anomie as a situation of normlessness that emerges when there is 'an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them'. However, Merton recognised that anomie does not automatically lead to crime. Instead, the disconnection between cultural expectations and actual structural conditions often generates a variety of social responses, some of which lead to deviant behaviour.

◆ *Anomie theory: Cultural goal mismatch*

The term anomie, derived from Emile Durkheim, for Merton means discontinuity between cultural goals and the legitimate means available for reaching them. Applied to the United States he sees the American dream as an emphasis on the goal of monetary success but without the corresponding emphasis on the legitimate avenues to march toward this goal. This leads to a considerable amount of (the Parsonian term of) deviance. This theory is commonly used in the study of criminology.

Table no 1.3.1
Means and Modes of Adaptation of Cultural Goals

Cultural goals	Institutionalized means	Modes of adaptation
+	+	Conformity
+	-	Innovation
-	+	Ritualism
-	-	Retreatism
±	±	Rebellion

These adaptations describe the kinds of social roles people adopt in response to cultural and structural pressures.

1. Conformity, is a non-deviant adaptation where people continue to engage in legitimate occupational or educational roles despite environmental pressures toward deviant behaviour. That is, the conformist accepts and strives for the cultural goal of material success (+) by following institutionalised means (+).
2. Innovation, on the other hand, involves acceptance of the cultural goal (+) but rejection of legitimate, institutionalised means (-). This type of adaptation occurs when the individual has assimilated the cultural emphasis on the goal without equally internalizing the institutional norms.
3. Ritualism, represents quite a different sort of departure from cultural standards than does innovation. The ritualist is an over conformist. Here, the pursuit of the dominant cultural goal of economic success is rejected or abandoned (-) and compulsive conformity to institutional norms (+) becomes an end in itself.
4. Retreatism, is the rejection of both cultural goals (-) and institutionalised means (-). Therefore, retreatism involves complete escape from the pressures and demands of organised society. Merton applies this adaptation to the deviant role—activities of psychotics, outcasts, chronic drunkards, and drug addicts.
5. Rebellion, is indicated by different notation than the other adaptations. The two (+/-) signs show that the rebel not only rejects the goals and means of the established society but actively attempts to substitute new goals and means in their place. This adaptation refers, then, to the role behaviour of political deviants, who attempt to greatly modify the existing structure of society. In his later work, Merton uses the term nonconformity to contrast rebellion to other forms of deviant behaviour that are atypical. The nonconforming rebel is not as secretive as the other deviant ones. The rebel publicly acknowledges his or her intention to change those norms and the social structure that they support in the interests of building a better, more just society.

◆ *Anomie is a sociological concept*

Merton emphasised that anomie is primarily a sociological concept, not a state of mind in individuals. Anomie is characterised by a break down in the social system, often associated with the loss of faith in the government, a prevalence of mistrust in cooperative agreements, or a rising crime rate in the community. Merton's theory is influential because it provides a straightforward framework for explaining various forms of deviant behaviour.

1.3.4 Critiques on Functionalism

◆ *Ambiguity and disagreements*

Functionalism, a prominent sociological perspective, faces several notable criticisms. One significant concern is its teleological approach, where social forms and cultural practices are often reduced to their functions, simplifying complex social phenomena. This view has also been labelled as speculative and untestable, with critics arguing that functionalism relies on numerous assumptions and lacks a strong empirical data foundation. Ambiguity in the use of key concepts like function and integration further adds to the critique, causing confusion and disagreements among scholars. Merton's underemphasis on conflict and structural strain is also a point of contention, as they are often relegated to the category of deviance. Additionally, the accusation of ideological bias surrounds of functionalism, with Merton and others asserting neutrality while critics contend that its methodology relies on observer intuition, potentially leading to observer - generated interpretations, particularly in identifying latent functions unrecognised by actors. These criticisms shed light on the limitations and challenges inherent in the functionalist perspective within sociology.

Summarised Overview

Robert K Merton's sociological contributions span various areas. His work explores the roles of intellectuals in public bureaucracy, the social responsibilities of technologists, and the influence of applied social sciences on policy formation. In his theoretical works, he delves into topics such as deviance, anomie, racial discrimination, marriage patterns, political systems, propaganda and medical education. Merton's understanding of 'function' emphasises the perspective of an observer rather than a participant, focusing on observable, objective consequences rather than subjective intentions. Merton is considered the foundational figure of functionalism in sociology, identifying new sociologically significant aspects of social life.



Merton categorises functions into three types - manifest functions, latent functions and dysfunctions. He introduces the concept of Middle range theories, which guide empirical inquiry by generating inferences about experiences and are of limited scope. Merton's structural functional idea of deviance and anomie categorises individuals into different groups, including conformists, ritualists, innovators, retreatants and rebels based on their responses to societal norms and goals.

Assignments

1. Examine the different kinds of social roles in response to cultural and structural norms.
2. Evaluate Merton's contribution to the study of crime and deviance.
3. Describe the major features of Middle range theories.
4. Examine the concept of the Reference group with an example.
5. Critically evaluate the different types of function with an example.

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SGOU



CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE

BLOCK-02



Conflict Theory

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ examine the significance of Conflict perspectives in sociology
- ◆ understand the Lewis A Coser's contribution of conflict functionalism
- ◆ explore the Ralph Dahrendorf's understanding of dialectical conflict theory

Background

In this unit, you will learn about how sociological theory discusses conflict, with a focus on the sociologist Lewis.A. Coser and Ralph Dahrendorf. In most human societies, except for the very simplest ones, there is inequality. Small societies usually follow established norms for allocating resources, but in large societies, the structure of the organisation determines who gets what, and this often results in stratification. Some scholars believe that inequality is a natural part of being human, while others think we can overcome it and create a fairer society. For example, Pareto represents the first group, while Karl Marx belongs to the latter. Initially, the conflict theory was mainly associated with Karl Marx's class theory. However, later scholars broadened the perspective by considering various sources of power in society, including expertise, knowledge, politics, gender, race and ethnicity, in addition to economic factors.

Conflict theorists not only study conflict but also explore its resolution, social solidarity and the maintenance of social equilibrium. They differ from functionalists in that they examine how equilibrium and continuity are maintained despite the potential for conflict due to hierarchy, inequality and exploitation, which are common to all societies to varying degrees. Conflict theorists see conflict as a normal and inherent part of social relationships and organisations. As a result, societies transition from one state to stability to another by making changes in their organisations. These changes aim to minimize or hide the underlying conflicts that are always present but not always visible. Moreover, conflict theory is a study of social organisation and behavior, differing mainly in methodology, whether it takes a macro historical perspective or focuses on situational and empirical aspects.



Keywords

Power, Group interest, Manifest Interest, Violence, Interaction

Discussion

◆ *Diverse perspective*

In the 1950s, the sociological framework developed by Parsons faced heavy criticism because it focused too much on the functional aspects of society. Sociologists who wanted a different approach began embracing conflict theory as an alternative. As the 1960s and 1970s rolled around, the criticism of functionalism, which included Parson's ideas, intensified. It was criticised for being too similar to Parson's thinking and for being overly focused on institutionalisation and equilibrium. Meanwhile, the conflict theory offered a more diverse perspective.

◆ *Positive role of conflict*

Within the realm of conflict theory, there were different viewpoints. Lewis A. Coser's conflict functionalism, in contrast to Ralph Dahrendorf's dialectical conflict perspective, emphasised the shortcomings of Parson's functionalism in addressing conflict issues. Coser also criticised Dahrendorf and other dialectical theorists for not adequately recognising the positive role of conflict in maintaining a social system. According to Coser, conflict can be defined as a struggle over values, scarce status, power and resources, where opponents aim to neutralise, harm or eliminate their rivals.

2.1.1 Conflict Theory

◆ *Conflict and functionalism*

In the early days of sociological theory, there was a shift away from traditional ideas of social unity and structure. The main difference between functionalism and conflict theory is not that one ignores either structure or change, but rather which one takes the central focus. Conflict theory, although it was formally recognised in sociology only in the 20th century with the work of Ralph Dahrendorf and Coser, has been implicit in historical writings since ancient Greek thinkers like Thucydides. Both conflict theory and functional theory consider the importance of both social structure and change since they are essential aspects of all societies. However, unlike functionalists, conflict theorists see conflict as a central driver of social structure, pushing it towards inevitable change. They believe that conflict can contribute

to both positive stability and disruptive change. So, while ideas of social unity and stability exist in both conflict and functional theories, the difference lies in how these concepts are understood and used to explain how social organisations and relationships form, persist and evolve.

◆ *Sociological understanding*

From a sociological perspective, it is crucial to view social groups as the fundamental units, not just individuals. Conflict theory focuses on the conflicts between these groups. Identifying and categorising groups with potential or actual conflicting relationships is a key element of conflict theory. At its core, conflict theory assumes that stratification, inequality and domination are integral aspects of all societies. Most social actions are driven by either maintaining existing inequalities or challenging dominant powers. The unequal distribution of social resources is both a cause and a result of inequality and hierarchy, which often leads to conflicts. When conflicts escalate to a critical level, they can result in social change, leading to the establishment of new organisational principles and the redistribution of resources. For instance, the Russian revolution resulted in the overthrow of the monarchy and the rise of a communist/socialist regime, as conflict between aristocrats and common people reached a breaking point.



Lewis A. Coser - (1913-2003)

Lewis Coser, born in Berlin, Germany in 1913, relocated to Paris in 1933, where he pursued literature and sociology at the Sorbonne. Due to his Germany ancestry, he was detained by the French government early in World War II. Eventually, he secured political asylum in the United States and arrived in New York in 1941. Coser conducted his doctoral research at Columbia university, studying under Robert K. Merton. His doctoral dissertation, *The Functions of Social Conflict* was published in 1956 and is regarded as one of the most widely read post war sociological classics. He authored *Masters of Sociological Thought* a highly influential work on sociological theory within the English language. Beyond his academic achievements, Coser founded the Department of Sociology at Brandeis University, established, Dissent magazine served as president of the American sociological association in 1975, as well as the society for the study of Social Problems and the Eastern Sociological Association in 1983. His legacy lives on through the American Sociological Association's annual Lewis A. Coser award for Theoretical Agenda setting. Lewis A. Coser passed away in July 2003.

He was the first sociologist to attempt to bring structural functionalism and conflict theory together. His research centred on the functions of social conflict. He developed a theory of social conflict in which he examines Georg Simmel's ideas in his classic work *Conflict* and describes the relationship that exists in various aspects of the conflict. He depicts conflict as a form of socialisation and explain conflict in terms of interactive processes. He claims that no group can be completely harmonious because that would mean that it lacks process and structure. According to him, group formation occurs as a result of both association and dissociation, and both conflict and cooperation serve a social purpose. As a result, some level of conflict is necessary for group formation.

In two crucial ways, Coser's contribution to conflict theory is unique. First, he talks about social conflict that arises from reasons other than conflicting group interests. Second, he gave conflict's harmful effects a great deal of thought. He was less interested in the institutional means of conflict, even if his analysis was concerned with the intensity and severity of conflict. He explain the circumstances in which a conflict is most likely to cause division. Let's examine his theory in more detail.

2.1.2 Social Conflict Theory and Social Change

◆ *Conflict spurs innovation*

The functions of social conflict in the process of social change deals with some functions of conflict within social systems, relation to its institutional rigidities, technical progress and productivity and the relation between social conflict and the changes of social system. Conflict always prevents the inflexibility of the social system. It exers pressure for innovation and creativity. And conflict within and between groups in a society can prevent accommodation and habitual relations from progressively impoverishing creativity. Conflict not only generates new norms, new institutions but also stimulates the economic and technological realm. Economic historians look at conflicts which result in technological improvement through conflict activity of trade unions which demand the raising of wage levels.

In his theory, Coser emphasises the significant role of human emotions in social interactions. He shares Simmel's view that people can have aggressive or hostile impulses,

◆ *Emotion and Conflict*

and he underscores that both love and hatred are present in close and intimate relationships. According to Coser, being in close proximity with others provides ample opportunities for conflicts and disagreements, which are natural parts of human relationships and not necessarily signs of instability or impending breakup. He argues that the nature of hostility and conflict varies for sociological reasons and can lead to meaningful changes. Coser consistently focuses on maintaining group cohesion and emphasises the functional aspects of the subject. He distinguishes conflicts as being both internal and external to a group, as they help establish identity, preserve stability and enhance group cohesion.

◆ *External conflict shapes group identity*

Coser, influenced by the ideas of Simmel and Marx, underscores the importance of external conflict in shaping a group's identity. Like Marx, he believes that conflict can lead to class self-awareness, while following Simmel's view, he suggests that conflict helps define boundaries between groups, strengthening their collective consciousness and awareness of their distinct identity within a social system. Coser also differentiates between hostile sentiments and actual conflict, arguing that the former is more crucial for group formation. He contends that external conflict not only reinforces a group but also heightens members awareness of their identity by presenting a strong negative reference group against which they can contrast themselves, ultimately fostering increased group participation.

◆ *Internal conflict's importance*

Coser aligns with the perspective of Durkheim, Mead and Marx by asserting that a group's opposition to and conflicts with 'deviants' help clarify the expected behaviour for group members. This internal conflict plays a central role in defining the group's identity, which is reflected in its norms for correct conduct. He contends that internal conflict contributes to a group's survival, cohesion and stability. Like Simmel, Coser suggests that internal conflict serves as a necessary safety valve during times of stress, preventing the dissolution of the group by allowing the release of tensions among hostile participants. Without the opportunity for opposition to one's associates, people might feel compelled to take drastic measures; opposition, on the other hand, offers inner satisfaction, distraction and relief. Lastly, Coser emphasises that internal conflict can be significant, as it contributes to the stability of loosely structured societies by constantly addressing various conflicts within them.

◆ *Emile Durkheim:
Functionalism and
Conflict Critique*

Coser critically examines Emile Durkheim's functionalist approach, which he views as conservative and lacking an adequate understanding of social conflict. Durkheim, in his analysis, often considers violence and dissent as deviant and disruptive to social equilibrium, rather than as opportunities for constructive social change. While Coser appears to reject Durkheim's approach, his own work is filled with analogies related to organic systems, notably following George Simmel's ideas.

◆ *System
disruption and
integration*

Coser presents an image of society as a complex system with interconnected parts, acknowledging that imbalances, tensions and conflicts of interest are inherent in all social systems. He proposes that various processes, including those typically seen as disruptive (such as violence, dissent, deviance and conflict) can under certain conditions, strengthen the system's integration and adaptability to the environment. From these assumptions, Coser outlines a set of ideas about the functions of conflict in social systems and conditions under which conflict can lead to both disruption and integration. He explains how conflict serves several purposes, including addressing imbalances in system integration, leading to conflicts, temporary reintegration of the system, increased structural flexibility, enhanced adaptability, and the ability to cope with changing conditions. In essence, Coser highlights the role of conflict in maintaining and enhancing a society's cohesion and adaptability.

◆ *Strengthening
integration and
adaptability*

Coser's research delves into the intricate dynamics of hostility and conflict, shedding light on the sociological factors that shape these phenomena, such as financial stability, societal roles, familial support, and external assistance. He presents a nuanced perspective on society as an interconnected web of components, where tensions and inequalities naturally arise. Coser underscores the adaptive processes that operate within and between these components, elucidating that what we traditionally view as disruptive forces – violence, dissent, deviance and conflict- can under specific conditions, strengthen a system's foundation and its ability to adapt. Drawing inspiration from the work of Simmel, Marx, Weber, and contemporary conflict literature, Coser offers a comprehensive understanding of conflict, exploring its causes, the role of violence, the duration and the multifaceted functions it serves in society.

In systems, where the different parts are highly distinct

but rely on each other, conflicts tend to happen more often, but they are usually not as intense or violent. When conflicts occur frequently but are less severe and aggressive, they can bring about several positive results. These include promoting innovation and creativity within the system's units, preventing hostilities from getting worse, establishing rules to control conflicts, increasing awareness of real problems, and encouraging social units to form partnerships. Its important to note that the more these conflicts lead to positive outcomes, the stronger the connections within the system become, and its ability to adapt to changes in the external environment improves. In essence, this perspective highlights how conflicts, when handled well, can have a positive impact on the health and adaptability of social systems.

2.1.2.1 Coser's Functionalism: A Critique

Coser's approach serves to reintroduce Simmel's ideas into conflict theory. However, Coser's analysis exhibits unique perspectives. While he initially acknowledges the inevitability of force, coercion, constraint and conflicts, his focus quickly shifts towards exploring the integrative and adaptive consequences of these processes. His emphasis on the integrative and adaptive functions of conflict seems to draw more inspiration from Simmel's organic model rather than Marx's dialectical schema. He suggests that social conflict arises to meet the integrative needs of the social body. Despite acknowledging that conflict can cause change in a social system, he primarily views it as a vital process for promoting integration and adaptation. In an attempt to balance the specific perspective of dialectical theory and functionalism, Coser presents a skewed approach.

◆ *Conceptual ambiguity*

The main issue with Coser's approach lies in its functionalism, particularly in his propositions regarding the causes, violence and duration of conflict. To rectify this problem, it is essential to redirect the focus of his analysis towards these aspects. This redirection should aim to present important questions in a more balanced manner that correct past theoretical biases without introducing new one's. Coser's ideas demonstrate an awareness of the critical role of conflict in social systems, and with further refinement and adjustment, they can provide valuable theoretical insights.

◆ *Critique of Coser's functionalism*



2.1.3 Dialectical Conflict Theory- Ralph Dahrendorf

◆ *Dahrendorf's theory: Power and conflict*

We move now to Ralf Dahrendorf's theory of power and dialectical change. Like Coser, Dahrendorf sees conflict as universally present in all human relations. But Dahrendorf doesn't see the inevitability of conflict as part of human nature; he sees it, rather, as a normal part of how we structure society and create social order. In this sense, Dahrendorf is concerned with the same issue as Talcott Parsons: How is social order achieved? However, rather than assuming collective agreement about norms, values, and social positions, as Parsons does, Dahrendorf argues that it is power that both defines and enforces the guiding principles of society. Dahrendorf also follows Coser in talking about the level of violence and its effects, but Dahrendorf adds a further variable: conflict intensity.



Ralf Dahrendorf - (1929 - 2009)

Ralf Dahrendorf, born in Germany in 1929, had an eventful life. His father was a democratic politician. Ralf Dahrendorf's life's work was influenced by his engagement in analytical debates with Karl Marx, Weber and Parson. He differed from Marx and drew inspiration from Weber, ultimately establishing his place in the social sciences of the 20th century distinct from Parsons. Throughout his life, he was deeply concerned about the connection between politics and science. He strongly advocated for freedom in active politics and believed that conflict is a driving force in human history. According to Dahrendorf, 'civil society' is a crucial foundation for freedom, offering stability alongside political democracy and a free market economy in the pursuit of freedom's ideals.

Dahrendorf's career was both highly successful and extraordinary. He taught sociology at various prestigious institutions including Hamburg, Tübingen, and Constance. He served as the director of the London School of Economics. He was the warden of St Antony's College in Oxford, and held significant roles such as commissioner of the European community in Brussels. Since 1993, he has been a member of the British House of Lords. His life was marked by crossing various boundaries, whether between different occupations, nations, political parties or between social science and value judgements. This dedication to transcending boundaries became a defining theme in his life.

2.1.3.1 Concepts and Theory: Power and Group Interests

The concept of power is complex and often evokes discomfort in discussions. It's a word we tend to avoid, whether in polite or impolite company, as it can come across as insensitive. Social scientists, however are both intrigued and uneasy about power because they recognise its central role in shaping the human world. Defining and pinpointing the sources of power, prove challenging because it permeates every social situation. Questions about who wields power, where it resides, and how it operates have confused social scientists. Some view power as a component of the social structure, tied to one's position within it, like the power associated with the U.S. presidency. Others see it as a facet of exchange or influence. Certain thinkers like Michael Foucault link power to text, knowledge and discourse. Understanding the way theorists interpret and apply the concept of power in society is crucial, as it is a multifaceted and fundamental social factor. For example, Dahrendorf defines power as the likelihood that one actor in a social relationship can carry out his will, regardless of the basis for this probability. Power is considered a universal and factual aspect of human life, arising from sources like persuasion and other than physical effort. Dahrendorf is more interested in authority than this kind of factual power.

◆ *“Understanding Power”*

The concept of authority, particularly as it relates to the sociological perspectives of Ralf Dahrendorf, is a form of legitimate power, tied to social positions and roles within organisations. He coined the term 'Imperatively Coordinated Associations' (ICAs) to describe social systems where authority is exercised through binding and compulsory rules and hierarchical structures. Dahrendorf's perspective differs from the equilibrium approach, which suggests that social order results from shared norms and values. Instead, he advocates the constraint approach, asserting that social order is maintained through the imposition of norms and values by authoritative power, rather than consensus. In this view, power is a central factor in society, in contrast to the functionalist perspective that emphasises cultural agreement which downplay the role of power. Furthermore, Dahrendorf as a conflict theorist, asserts that the culture of a society reflects the interests of the powerful elite rather than those of the middle or lower classes. He defines social classes in terms of their participation in or exclusion from

◆ *Authority is legitimate power*



the exercise of authority within ICAs, indicating that class conflict is more narrowly defined in his perspective compared to other sociologists like Lewis Coser, who are interested in explaining a broader range of internal and external conflicts.

2.1.3.2 Latent and Manifest Interests

Observe in a workplace, like a restaurant, there are managers with power over employees and simultaneously, regional and corporate managers have authority over the local managers. This creates different sets of power interests within the organisation. Let us relate this to Dahrendorf's theory.

◆ *Power and class*

Dahrendorf views power and class interests as dichotomous, meaning that individuals are either in a position to wield legitimate power or not. He refers to social relationships organised around legitimate power as 'imperatively coordinated associations' indicating that social relations are embedded within a hierarchical structure of authority. Dahrendorf emphasises that within this hierarchy of power, there are dichotomous sets of interests.

◆ *Quasi and interest groups*

Dahrendorf's key point is that society is essentially woven together by various sets of power interests. Additionally, he introduces the concepts of 'quasi-groups' and 'interest groups'. Quasi groups are comprised of people who share similar latent power interests based on their roles, and they serve as potential sources for the formation of real interest groups. Interest groups, according to Dahrendorf, are the primary agents of group conflict. The central question posed by Dahrendorf is how these latent interests in quasi groups transform into manifest interests within interest groups. In other words, he seeks to understand the social factors and processes that lead a loosely connected aggregate of individuals with similar interests to unite into organised and actively engaged interest groups.

Dahrendorf's theory on group conflict highlights the three essential conditions that need to be met for a group to become actively engaged in conflicts: technical, political, and social conditions. The technical conditions encompass the presence of active members who play a pivotal role in organising the group, a distinctive set of ideas or ideology that distinguishes the group from others, and the crucial presence of norms that help maintain unity and order within the group. The political conditions emphasise the need for effective organisation and the ability to meet and mobilise.

◆ *Conflict Group Conditions*

In terms of social conditions, two key elements come into play: communication, which is now given in modern society with the advent of advanced communication technologies, and structured patterns of recruitment, which determine how individuals form connections within the group. While these conditions are dynamic and can evolve with technological advancements, Dahrendorf's framework sheds light on the intricate dynamics that underlie the formation and functioning of conflict involved groups in contemporary societies.

◆ *Conflict intensity and violence*

Is it interesting to know the diversities of conflict? Ralf Dahrendorf's perspective on conflict delineates variations in conflict based on its intensity and violence. Conflict intensity is measured by the extent of costs and the level of involvement. The cost of conflict encompasses the financial, human, material and infrastructural losses incurred during conflicts. Involvement refers to the significance individuals attach to their group and its issues, ranging from the limited involvement akin to playing a game of checkers to the full absorption of one's psyche as seen in a front-line soldier's commitment. Conflict violence, according to Dahrendorf, is determined by the manifestation of conflict and is essentially gauged by the types of weapons employed. Peaceful demonstrations signify conflict with low violence, while riots exhibit more violence. The intensity of conflicts is often associated with their capacity to bring about profound social changes, exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent but highly intense conflict, which led to substantial and lasting societal transformations. Conversely, the level of violence in a conflict can impact the speed of change, as illustrated by the rapid social upheaval following the US military violent invasion of Iraq in 2003, highlighting the close relationship between conflict violence and the pace of structural change.

2.1.3.3 Level of Violence

Dahrendorf's examination of violence in class conflict within a society identifies three crucial sets of social factors. First, he underscores the significance of a group's organisation, indicating that well organised groups are less likely to resort to violence, as they tend to pursue rational goals and seek peaceful means to attain them. Second, the presence of legitimate channels for conflict regulation reduces the likelihood of violence, contingent on both parties recognising the fundamental justice of their cause and their organisational strength. Finally, Dahrendorf highlights the

◆ *Violence and Organization*

concept of relative deprivation as a driving force behind violent conflicts. This perception of unfair treatment or disadvantage in comparison to others can inflame class conflicts and lead to violent actions. Dahrendorf's analysis thus demonstrates the intricate interplay of organisation, regulation and relative deprivation in shaping the level of violence within class conflicts in a given society.

◆ *Level of social mobility*

In a social system, the intensity of conflict is influenced by various factors, including the technical, political and social conditions of group organisation. This intensity also relates to the level of social mobility within society and the distribution of power and scarce resources. Notably, both violence and conflict intensity exhibit negative relationships with group organisation.

◆ *Conflict intensity*

Enhanced organisation tends to reduce violence and intensity by promoting more rational actions. Furthermore, Dahrendorf highlights the connection between conflict intensity and the distribution of scarce resources. When these resources predominantly favor one social category, the intensity of conflict tends to increase, as groups perceive their goals as more significant and worthy of greater involvement and cost. Conversely, conflict intensity decreases with greater social mobility.

◆ *Factors of conflict intensity*

When an imperatively coordinated association (ICA) encounters systematic obstacles in attaining society's valuable goods and positions, group members are more likely to invest themselves in the conflict and accept higher costs. As a result, violence tends to rise with increased emotional involvement, the presence of transcendent goals, and a shift from absolute to relative deprivation. Conversely, the likelihood of violence decreases when groups meet organisational conditions, articulate rational goals, and have access to norms and legal channels for conflict resolution. In situations of heightened violence, profound social changes occur more rapidly, characterised by stronger group boundaries, increased solidarity and more effective control and authority. Dahrendorf particularly emphasises that diminishing class organisation and social mobility while increasing the correlation between authority and rewards tends to heighten conflict intensity, which in turn, leads to more profound structural changes within society.

2.1.3.4 Ralf Dahrendorf Theory – A Critique

Critics of Ralf Dahrendorf's theory point out several

◆ *Missing factors in theory*

limitations and shortcomings. Firstly, they argue that his theory places too much emphasis on conflict while neglecting other important social dynamics such as cooperation and the building of agreements. Some believe that collaboration and shared values are equally crucial for societal stability and that society isn't solely characterised by power struggles. Another criticism relates to the disregard for cultural factors in Dahrendorf's thesis. Critics argue that cultural elements like conventions, values and beliefs play a significant role in shaping social interactions and that ignoring them hampers a complete understanding of social conflicts. Some researchers also contend that Dahrendorf's theory lacks empirical support. They find it overly abstract and missing specific examples that illustrate how power and authority dynamics lead to conflict in various social contexts.

◆ *Conflict Determinants and complexity*

Dahrendorf's exclusive focus on power and authority dynamics as the sole components of social class is criticised for oversimplifying social stratification and inequality. Critics argue that factors like occupation, wealth, and education also contribute significantly to class distinctions and his theory doesn't adequately capture this complexity. Critics also argue that Dahrendorf's theory overlooks the role of the state in establishing power structures and managing social tension. They believe that the state plays a crucial role in maintaining social order and resolving disputes between different groups, which his theory does not address.

Summarised Overview

Ralf Dahrendorf's social conflict theory centres around the concept of Imperatively Coordinated Association (ICAs), which are organised groups based on differential power relations. These ICAs create latent power interests, with conflicts becoming manifest when certain conditions of group organisation are met. Conflict intensity is influenced by group organisation and social mobility (negatively) and by the concentration of scarce resources in society (positively). More intense conflicts lead to more profound structural changes. Dahrendorf sees these conflicts as normal and as potential catalyst for societal transformation, highlighting shortcomings in current social arrangements. However, if not properly controlled, conflict can turn violent. Dahrendorf's theory underscores that unequal power and authority distribution in society are the root causes of conflicts between the rulers and the ruled. Social change, according to his theory, involves shifts in the personnel of ICAs, which establish new hierarchies, roles, norms and values giving rise to another set of ICAs and latent power interests.

Assignments

1. Discuss the difference between conflict perspective and functionalism.
2. Evaluate the functions of social conflict in the process of social change.
3. Analyse the critique on Coser's functionalism.
4. Critically evaluate the concept of power and group interests as per Dahrendorf's perspective.
5. Discuss the limitations and shortcomings of Ralf Dahrendorf's theory.

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Critical Theory

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the historical context of critical theory in sociology
- ◆ become aware about the major thinkers of critical theory
- ◆ explore the theoretical understanding of Jurgen Habermas towards critical theory

Background

Sociologists have always been interested in analysing social contradictions and conflicts. Dialectical method theorised by Karl Marx could uniquely analyse social problems. A group of scholars who popularised dialectical method to interrogate social contradictions, finally formed a sphere of critical theory. Thus, The Frankfurt school is a group of social scientists from Frankfurt University who developed a type of critical theory. This theory reevaluated Marxism and became the central theme of their research. The school started in 1923, but the critical theory aspect really took off in the 1930s when Max Horkheimer became the director. The main goal of this critical theory was to rethink Marxism.

Critical Theory and Frankfurt School have rich legacy of academics. Over time, the school had to change locations, but their focus on reevaluating Marxism remained consistent. Even though they had diverse ideas within the critical theory, they all shared a common goal; studying the emerging nature of organised capitalism and reexamining the idea of human emancipation, which was different from the earlier idea of proletarian revolution. This unit will allow an in-depth understanding on the most relevant school of sociology - critical perspective.

Keywords

Rationality, Logical, Enlightenment, Reason, Marxism

Discussion

◆ *Critical theory:
History and
transformation*

Critical theory, initially rooted in the legacy of the Institute of Social Research founded in Frankfurt in 1923 and subsequently influenced by Jurgen Habermas, revolves around several influential figure connected to the institute. The pioneers of critical theory emphasised the pivotal role of history in their philosophical and societal approach. Their focus spanned from historical concerns to a forward-looking perspective, echoing Karl Marx's engagement with the forces propelling society towards rational institutions. These rational institutions were envisioned as the guarantors of genuine, liberated and equitable life. Yet, they were well aware of the formidable obstacles that hindered radical change. Hence, their primary interest was in the realms of interpretation and transformation. Critical theorists believed that while our knowledge is inevitably shaped by historical circumstances, social beings possess the capacity to assess the validity of truth claims independently of our immediate social interests. They defended the concept of an autonomous moment of critique and aimed to establish the foundations of critical theory on a basis that was non-objective and devoid of materialistic determinism.

2.2.1 The Historical Context of Critical Theory

◆ *Impact of
historical events on
critical theory*

Critical theory emerged as a response to a range of political and historical events, which had significant impacts on both the Frankfurt school and Habermas, whether those impacts were direct or indirect. Before World War I, the German nation-state managed to temporarily suppress the prevalence of class conflict. However, the years following World War I were marked by a turbulent period during which many of Europe's long standing political systems crumbled. In 1917, following the downfall of Tsarism in Russia, the Bolshevik party seized power within a remarkably short span of nine months. This revolutionary moment was seen as bringing the Marxist programme closer to realisation.

After World War I, the German imperial system weakened, leading to the declaration of a republic in Berlin on November 9. A coalition of majority Social Democrats and independent Social Democrats assumed power. In Hungary, a Soviet Republic emerged following the bourgeois government's

◆ *End of WWI consequences*

abdication. Italy and Austria saw the formation of robust workers' councils. However, unlike the Russian Revolution, central and southern European revolutions faltered against the strength of the ruling classes. This checked and isolated the momentum of the Russian Revolution. The late 1920s witnessed the suppression of European socialist movements, and the Russian Revolution shifted away from Lenin's original path. Following Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin assumed leadership.

◆ *Stalin's control and political changes*

Stalin's rule brought about centralised control and censorship, leading to the subjugation of many European communist parties to Moscow's influence. In Germany, the Communist party (KPD) proved ineffective, primarily due to its alignment with the International Bolshevik stance, which hindered its ability to gain and organise support among the working class. This, in turn, contributed to the emergence of the Second International and the German Democratic Party as divisions within the German working class deepened. In 1914, the Social Democrats formally committed to an international struggle against capitalism. However, in 1917, the left-wing faction of the Social Democrats formed a radical and revolutionary movements. The subsequent decades were marked by significant challenges, including massive inflation, high unemployment, failed peace settlements, the international capitalist crisis of 1929, and ongoing social and class struggles.

◆ *Rise of Nazism and fascism*

During the period from 1924 to 1933, the ascendancy of Nazism and fascism posed a significant challenge to liberal and democratic forces. As the influence of the Communists waned, Adolf Hitler capitalised on the situation in Germany, ultimately leading to the Nazi party's seizure of power in 1933. A pivotal moment came on August 22, 1939, with the signing of the Hitler - Stalin pact, marking the end of an era characterised by complex political developments and the growing influence of authoritarian ideologies in Europe.

2.2.1.1 The Nature of Critical Theory

◆ *Marxist disillusionment*

The period between the 1920s and 1930s deeply unsettled many Marxist supporters. Their belief in socialism as an inevitable part of historical progression faced a serious challenge. This era saw the emergence of differing perspectives among Marxist followers, with some emphasising the importance of historical forces and others focusing on the role of the party. The Marxist theory of the

time failed to align with the political events and revolutionary actions as expected, leaving adherents with persistent questions. They contended with issues such as how to reconcile theory and practice, how to justify revolutionary ideals in evolving historical contexts, and how to maintain hope for the future within their theoretical framework.

◆ *Critique of positivist historical materialism*

You should know that Karl Marx's ideas have been subjected to intense discourses. In the early 1920s, thinkers like Lukacs and Korsch wrote books that questioned the traditional ideas of Marxism. They wanted to look at Marxism in a new way, considering what was happening in their time. They believed that people who followed traditional Marxism were not sticking to the ideas of Marx himself. Lukacs and Korsch tried to fix these mistakes by studying how Marx's ideas were originally formed. One big issue they had was with the way people were interpreting historical materialism, which is a key concept in Marxism. Some were using a scientific method to understand history, but Lukacs and Korsch argued that this didn't fit with what Marx had in mind. They thought this approach ignored the importance of how people think and feel. They believed that traditional Marxism didn't pay enough attention to human thoughts and feelings and failed to understand how people interpret the world. They also thought that this approach missed important factors that could lead to revolutionary change.

◆ *Critical theorists' critique*

The critical theorists shared some of Lukacs concerns but criticised his use of certain terms. They drew inspiration from a variety of intellectual currents, looking to German idealism, Kant and Hegel to enrich the philosophical aspects of Marxism. They delved into Marx's early writings, particularly the 1844 manuscripts, and also explored the contributions of Heidegger and Husserl in contemporary philosophy. Freud's ideas helped them study human subjectivity, while Weber's writings were seen as valuable for contemporary sociology. Within the Institute of Social Research, there was a reciprocal influence with figures like Horkheimer and Adorno leaving an impression on each other. Benjamin influenced Adorno, and Adorno, along with Marcuse, had a lasting impact on Habermas. This collaborative exchange of ideas and influences played a key role in the development of critical theory.

2.2.1.2 Fundamental Views

◆ *Kant's Perspective*

Critical theory's fundamental ideas are drawn from the works of Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Kant explored the nature and limitations of human knowledge in his writings on epistemology. He emphasised the need to go beyond just examining the contents of consciousness because they are already influenced by the knowing subject. Kant aimed to provide a critique that would clarify the forms and categories of knowledge. However, he aligned these categories with the ideals of mathematics and natural science, leaving the role of the knowing subject somewhat unclear.

◆ *History of epistemology*

Hegel believed that to reach absolute truth, we need to understand the historical development of knowledge. He saw mathematics and science as important stages on the path to truth. Hegel thought that by critically examining our experiences and uncovering the conditions of knowledge, we could reveal errors and illusions. He used dialectics to expose contradictions in different stages of experience. Dialectics showed that our basic senses weren't the foundation of knowledge, but rather its through struggles and recognition with others that we gain self-awareness. This journey eventually leads to the emancipation of the human spirit. According to Hegel, it is from this point of spiritual freedom that we can fully grasp and understand the truth.

◆ *Marx criticised Hegel*

Marx drew inspiration from Hegel but disagreed with Hegel's view that the existing modern state represented Reason. Marx was acutely aware of the dehumanising and alienating aspects of emerging capitalist societies. While Hegel saw the modern state as gradually achieving reconciliation between the universal and the particular, Marx believed that this reconciliation could only be realised through a communist revolution. For Marx, Hegel's vindication of the modern state and the reconciliation of opposites were ideological formulations, and true reconciliation required concrete historical change.

Hegel argued that philosophy's greatest contribution was the idea that the world operates according to reason, with world history being a rational process. However, given the horrors and moral disasters of recent decades, this notion appears overly simplistic and irresponsible. In contrast, Marx not only critiqued the negative aspects of modern societies but also demonstrated how the essence of an emancipated society was embedded in the development and crises of capitalist societies. Marx envisioned that the end of

◆ *Hegel's Idealism, Marx's Communism*

capitalism would usher in a classless, communist society, and this future emancipation was viewed through the lens of historical dialectics. Marx criticised Hegel for justifying negative aspects of the modern state as a result of rational cooperation. He believed that by challenging the ideological underpinnings of capitalist property, he could dismantle Hegel's entire political thought and provide an alternative explanation for the alienation present in modern societies. Marx's goal was to eliminate the dehumanising elements and functional divisions of the modern state, paving the way for unity and solidarity in a communist society. However, even among Marxists, Marx's historical dialectics have faced skepticism. Max Weber proposed a different perspective, known as the negative dialectics of progress and enlightenment, which challenges Marx's view.

Frankfurt School - Major Theorists

- ◆ Max Horkheimer
- ◆ Theodor. W. Adorno
- ◆ Walter Benjamin
- ◆ Herbert Marcuse
- ◆ Friedrich Pollock
- ◆ Erich Fromm
- ◆ Jurgen Habermas

Let us analyse major ideas and Theoreticians that are related to Frankfurt School

2.2.1.3 Max Weber and The Enlightenment Tradition

Max Weber's ideas left a growing influence on Frankfurt School. Max Weber was concerned with the growing rationalisation of modern life. He was interested in how scientific and technical advancements were changing traditional society. This process involved making more and more aspects of society based on logical decision making, the growth of industrialization, the rise of bureaucratic administration, the decline of traditional values and the move towards a more secular world. Weber believed this transformation was irreversible and resulted in a kind of 'bondage' for modern people where they were controlled

◆ *Rationalization, Social Sciences, Paradox*



◆ *Rationalisation and logical reason*

by rational systems. Unlike some western Marxists, Weber did not see a socialist revolution as a solution because he thought it would only further increase bureaucratic control. He is often called the 'bourgeois Marx' because he viewed modernization as a progressive rationalisation that aligned with the Enlightenment idea that history progresses toward greater reason and logic.

Weber's concept of rationality had three aspects: purposive, formal and discursive. Purposive rationality meant efficiently choosing means to achieve predefined goals, mainly related to economic or administrative efficiency. The formal sense of rationality implied imposing systematic order on chaotic situations, beliefs, and actions leading to formalisation and universalisation of law in modern society. Rationalisation also involved the shift from communal to associative forms of social action. Weber analysed the transition to modernity as a rationalisation process and believed the social sciences would play an increasingly vital role in it. He argued that progressive rationalisation both brought about emancipation and reification. This paradox in Weber's ideas was later addressed by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

2.2.2 Herbert Marcuse and Critical Theory

Herbert Marcuse started leaning towards critical theory when he wrote *On the Critique of Sociology* in 1931. When he published his first article in 1928, Marcuse supported a type of Marxism that had messianic qualities, similar to that of George Lukacs in his work *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923. George Lukacs had presented the idea of the working class (proletariat) in a sophisticated way, and Herbert Marcuse admired his approach. However, by 1931, Marcuse had moved away from Lukacs' ideas and was more into critical theory. Both Lukacs and Marcuse understood that real-life workers often don't have a strong sense of class consciousness, meaning they might not fully recognize their shared interests as a group. However, they believed that the destiny of the working class is not just limited to its current awareness or actions. They thought that the role of the working class is to become a powerful force in history, whereby they succeed in changing society. Even if workers seem passive or conservative at a certain time, their ultimate goal is to unite and work towards freedom from class oppression.

Marcuse believed that knowing history is really important

◆ *Marcuse and Heidegger*

for our lives. He used the idea of “historicity” to say that what happened in the past matters more than what’s happening right now. He explained the difference between historical being (how things change over time) and existence (what we see happening now). He said historical being is like the foundation of our lives. This is different from what Heidegger proposed. Heidegger believed that what we see now is the most important. Marcuse said understanding how things change in history is key to making big changes in society, like evolutions.

◆ *Proletariat and power*

When Marcuse talks about the working class (proletariat), he believes that a revolution is bound to happen because the working class is in a unique position to change their own situation. He says that the working class is ‘thrown’ into a situation they want to change. So, today, the only way to make big historical changes is through the actions of the working class, as they naturally have the power to do so. This not only shows how important the working class is in history but also how the society of the rich (bourgeois society) is bound to decline or get worse.

◆ *Reason and revolution*

Marcuse looks at humanity and the world through a broader idea called “historicity”. Marcuse’s main point is that what occurs in history happens in a unique way, different from events in nature or the economy. He sees historicity as what gives meaning to something being considered ‘historical’. The connection between historicity, happening, and motility is indicated by the word “history” itself. Essentially, when something is historical, it occurs in a specific way. So Marcuse is interested in studying history as a process of unfolding events and a form of movement. Herbert Marcuse believes there are typical patterns or forms of change in history. In his major work, *Reason and Revolution* he tries to look beneath the surface of events and find the underlying reasons for how things change. Like Marx, he sees every social system in history as always changing, and he pays attention to both the temporary and the long-lasting aspects of these changes. So, Marcuse thinks there are general patterns in history, but he also knows that real history is much more complex and involves the actions of specific groups of people in particular circumstances.

Critical theory is special because it takes both sides of important ideas seriously, such as freedom and necessity, historical change and what’s happening right now, and what can be changed versus what’s given. At the beginning

◆ *Human freedom and social pressure*

of his career, Herbert Marcuse believed that people were mostly driven by historical forces they couldn't control. However, he soon realised that in history, unlike in nature, freedom and the idea of things happening for a reason are both important. He believed that there should not be blind, uncontrollable necessity in the things that lead to a free and self-aware society. He shared this insight with other thinkers influenced by Kant, but Marcuse and his fellow Critical Theorists understood that the idea of human freedom is complex. It's not just about saying people are free; it's a question that needs to be explored through evidence and history. Sometimes, individuals or groups may not be entirely free due to social pressures. The Frankfurt School, which Marcuse was part of, made it a central concern to explore the potential for people to make choices and be self-determined.

2.2.3 Walter Benjamin and Critical Theory

◆ *Abstract thinking and Practicability*

Walter Benjamin was a prominent thinker in the 1920s and 1930s who was influenced by Marxist ideas. Like many of his peers, he felt like an outsider because of his views and background. He combined ideas from Marxist cultural theory with 'qabalah', a mystical form of Jewish theology. Qabalah practitioners believed that you can't reach a special, spiritual dimension in our regular world. They tried to have extraordinary experiences through meditation, prayer, and self-discipline. Within Marxist theory, Benjamin was torn between two different groups. On the one side, there was the abstract and complex thinking of the Frankfurt School and on the other side, there were the more practical ideas of consciousness-raising promoted by Bertolt Brecht.

◆ *Marxism and revolution*

In terms of politics, he often focused on the idea of sovereign violence. Benjamin aimed to create a materialistic alternative to religious salvation and power struggles. In various writings, he portrays capitalism and the state as if they were religious or metaphysical systems based on destiny and guilt. Benjamin mainly wrote within a Marxist tradition, but his ideas became less orthodox over time. His main interest was in giving emotional expression to the idea of revolution.

He played a big role in the founding of cultural studies. Alongside other thinkers like Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, and Antonio Gramsci, Benjamin argued that culture studies shouldn't just focus on so-called "great" works. It is also important to look at every day, popular culture,

◆ *Cultural studies and political stability*

like mass-market books and even the layout of streets and advertisements. Benjamin helped establish the idea that these things are crucial to understanding the history and politics of culture. He wasn't saying that everyday things are as beautiful or historically significant as "great" works. Instead, he wanted to shift the focus from aesthetic values to the social and political importance of cultural texts. In other words, it's not about how pretty or famous something is, but how it relates to society and politics.

Walter Benjamin's way of doing philosophy aims to create and extend moments where we see something special. These moments aren't just about enjoying something wonderful; they also push us to change the way we see the world. He believes that the world can be saved or made better through a revolution. He often talks about the 'politicisation of art', which means that art becomes political when it helps us see a glimpse of this better, redeemed world.

2.2.4 The Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno

◆ *Capitalism and barbarism*

Horkheimer believed that capitalism, in addition to its other problems, causes widespread suffering, leading to feelings of guilt and inadequacy. This process, he argued not only hinders progressive political change but also contributes to a new form of barbarism. While modern science, technology and production offer many possibilities for humanity, a realistic view, as expressed by Adorno, suggests that these possibilities often result in a 'real hell'.

◆ *Frankfurt school and enlightenment*

Horkheimer and Adorno, in their famous work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, wanted to understand why humanity, instead of becoming more humane, seemed to be moving toward a new kind of barbarism. They focused on the connection between rationality and how society works, as well as the relationship between nature and how we control it. One of their main concerns was the rise of instrumental reason, which they saw as a key issue in the Frankfurt school. They have explored the significance of instrumental reason in the context of Enlightenment philosophy and different forms of enlightenment. While enlightenment typically refers to intellectual movements in the late 18th century, Horkheimer and Adorno saw it as broader principles. Their goal was to find a positive and liberating concept of enlightenment that breaks free from blind domination.



2.2.5 Neo-Marxists and Orthodox Marxists

◆ *Diverse interpretation on Marxism*

Aforesaid there had been different interpretations of Marxism. Orthodox Marxists believed that capitalism would lead to economic crises and armed conflicts, while revisionists emphasised the evolutionary aspects of historical materialism and believed the working class could improve its position within a democratically organised capitalist society. Both groups found support in Marx's writings, with Engels being a key influence.

◆ *Neo Marxists and Weber*

Neo Marxists sought to revise Marxism by incorporating some of Weber's insights into the Marxist framework. The philosophers of the Frankfurt School, influenced by Weber's idea of a negative dialectic of progress, criticised his concept of instrumental reason. They saw Weber's notion of rationality as limited and biased, incapable of organising society in line with the emphatic conception of reason, which included ideas like freedom, justice and happiness. They used this concept as a reference point to critique 20th century societies as irrational.

In contrast, Weber saw no possibility of rationally justifying norms, values or social organisation in a disenchanted world, and he considered the idea of rationality organising society as nonsensical. The Frankfurt school philosophers, while acknowledging the practicality of Weber's notion of rationality, argued that it accurately portrayed the nature of advanced industrial societies. They believed it revealed the negative consequences of capitalism, such as the distortion of consciousness and the reification of social relationships.

◆ *Liberation from capitalism*

The Frankfurt school thinkers used the Marxian perspective of a liberated, classless society to reevaluate the historical dialectics of progress and revolution. They viewed the dialectic of progress as a negative one, aiming at the destruction of reason rather than its realisation. As a result, they couldn't conceive of a liberated society as the natural outcome of capitalism's contradictions. Instead, they saw its realisation as a break from the negative cycle of progress leading to a realm of freedom. This form of critical theory, based on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, identifies historical and social tendencies pointing toward the emergence of a post-capitalist and liberated society.

2.2.6 Habermas and Critical Theory

Habermas is focused on creating a practical theory of

◆ *Historical context awareness*

society and pushing back against scientism's dominance. He explores how theory and practice are connected, reflecting on how we think, study society, and follow cultural norms. His aim is to make a theory of society that's practical and distinct from other theories. Habermas reworked critical theory by considering the major events of the 20th century. He saw significant changes in both capitalist and socialist societies that made Marx's ideas seem less relevant. He also noted that older social theories did not fit in today's world. So, he felt a strong need to reassess and update these traditions to make them relevant. His project has always aimed at promoting radical democracy and increasing freedom while bringing theory and practise closer together.

◆ *Ineffective Marxism and State intervention*

Habermas carefully considers the many significant events that have shaped our history, especially in the 20th century. He questions whether all these changes have truly improved our understanding of concepts like freedom, justice, happiness, and self-realisation. He's also aware that the rise of nihilism and anti-modernism has posed challenges to the ideals of modernity, and the enlightenment ideas have sometimes led to dogmatism and superstition. Additionally, there's been a sense of disconnection and loss of meaning in our human history. During this time, some significant events shaped the political and economic landscape. The Russian Revolution, originally hopeful, turned into Stalinism, and Marxism faced challenges in the West. Capitalism was on the rise, with increased state intervention and profit-driven markets. However, this growing emphasis on rationality and bureaucracy threatened the public sphere and limited human freedom. While technological progress brought many benefits, it also had downsides. Habermas suggests that we should not abandon the gains of modernity but carefully examine the issues and pitfalls that come with progress in our modern world.

◆ *Rationality and Two-level society*

In his intellectual journey, Habermas had three main concerns. First, he wanted to develop a concept of rationality that didn't rely solely on individualistic and subjective ideas found in modern philosophy and social theory. Second, he aimed to create a two-level concept of society. Third, he focused on building a critical theory of modernity that could understand and address its problems while still upholding the ideas of the Enlightenment. Habermas believed that the traditional critical theory, as developed by thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno, had run its course. To move forward, he suggested a shift in the critical theory paradigm, moving



away from a focus on the philosophy of consciousness.

◆ *Divergence from Marx*

From the 1920s to the 1960s, critical theory took a different path from Marx's ideas. It moved towards a more generalised critique of instrumental rationality, which ultimately led to Adorno's "negative dialectics." However, this shift raised concerns for Habermas. Critical theory has previously set itself apart by identifying real possibilities in specific historical situations that could promote human freedom and combat domination. This required a scientific understanding of contemporary society. Habermas believed it was crucial to correct the errors in the Marxist tradition and demonstrate its limitations in the 20th century. He aimed to integrate the most promising developments from the social sciences into a critical approach for understanding society.

◆ *Habermas's philosophical evolution*

Despite differences between him and Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas shared their concern about how the Enlightenment, particularly in the form of instrumental rationality, went from being a liberating force to becoming a new source of oppression. We can identify three main directions in which Habermas explored this concern in his early works. First, he delved into a deep study of classical philosophical texts, aiming to find wisdom from the past that could help us with modern challenges. Second, he grappled with the impact of technology, trying to find a way to counter the idea that technology completely dictates our lives. Third, he focused on the idea of rational political discussions and practical reasoning within modern technocratic democracies, with the goal of ensuring that people have a say in decisions that affect their lives. In the 1960s, Habermas embarked on his intellectual journey with a goal in mind. He wanted to keep the critical perspective on modern society that his predecessors had, but he needed to refine what rationality meant. He aimed to envision a fair and liberated society. In essence, Habermas's philosophical journey marked a departure from the views of Horkheimer and Adorno.

Habermas's views have evolved over time, and they continue to evolve. He often presents his ideas as works in progress. One of his key concerns has been the growing influence of instrumental reason in various aspects of society. He's particularly worried about the rise of technocratic thinking, which harms public discourse. He discusses this issue on two levels. First, from a social theory perspective, Habermas argues that turning practical problem into purely

◆ *Habermas's evolving views."*

technical matters threatens something essential about human life. Technocratic thinking doesn't just serve the interests of a particular group seeking domination; it also affects the core interests of all people. So, addressing this issue requires looking beyond specific historical interests and delving into the fundamental interests of humanity as a whole.

◆ *Instrumental reason*

Habermas looks at how instrumental reason has taken over modern thinking. He's concerned about how the study of knowledge, called epistemology, has broken down and how positivism has become more prevalent in the past century. He examines how the importance of the thinking individual, and their ability to reflect on their actions, has slowly faded away. He argues that if we want to keep the idea of freeing ourselves from oppression as a human goal, we need to push back against this trend. We must reaffirm the importance of self-reflection as a way to truly understand ourselves and the world around us.

◆ *Knowledge tied to interests*

Habermas believes that our knowledge is shaped by our history and what we care about. He has a theory about different kinds of interests that guide our understanding of the world. He thinks that as humans, we have certain built-in interests that influence how we make sense of our experiences. He sees us as both makers of tools and users of language. We use tools to shape the natural world to meet our needs and communicate with others using shared symbols within social systems. So, our interest in knowledge comes from the desire to control the world around us and to keep the lines of communication open with one another.

◆ *Reflective Emancipatory Knowledge*

Habermas identified a third interest: the pursuit of understanding human life, which helps us see how our knowledge is influenced by our concerns. It's an interest in reason, our ability to reflect and make rational choices, which leads to greater autonomy and responsibility. Habermas initially explored this in the theory of cognitive interests. Later, in his theory of communicative competence, he argued that all communication aims for a genuine consensus, often falling short. This ideal speech situation serves as a standard for truth and correctness. It's central to his critical theory of society, which critiques distorted communication. Habermas saw distorted communication as a modern form of ideology. Emancipation involves breaking free from such distortions through critical reflection and criticism, unmasking various forms of domination.



Summarised Overview

Critical theory is a way of looking at the world and society with a critical eye. It started in the 20th century as a response to authoritarianism and aims to understand how power works, why there are inequalities, and how our beliefs and ideas are shaped. It uses ideas from many areas like sociology, philosophy and psychology to analyse these issues. Critical theory is often connected to politics and social movements, as it seeks to empower marginalised groups and challenge the status quo. It's not without its critics who say it can be too abstract and biased, but it still plays a big role in discussions about society and culture.

Critical theorists are scholars and intellectuals who engage in the practice of critical theory, a philosophical and interdisciplinary approach. They analyse and critique various aspects of society, culture and power dynamics. Critical theorists are known for their contributions to understanding and challenging social inequalities, examining the role of ideology and advocating for social change. Notable figures associated with critical theory include Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas from the Frankfurt school. These thinkers often explore how societal structures shape individual experiences and how to transform those structures to create a more just and equitable society.

Self Assessment

1. Describe the historical context of critical theory.
2. Examine Neo and Orthodox Marxist perspective on critical theory
3. Discuss on Max Weber's perspective on enlightenment.
4. Evaluate the contributions of Walter Benjamin and Marcuse in critical perspective.
5. Discuss Habermas views on critical theory.
6. What is distorted communication?
7. Explain briefly Habermas' theory of cognitive interests.

Assignments

1. Write a note on the Frankfurt school and its role in the development of critical theory.
2. Critically evaluate the Marxian and Hegelian perspective in the development of critical theory.
3. Compare and contrast the views of Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin towards critical theory.

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Suggested Readings

1. Guess, R. (1991). *The Idea of a Critical Theory. Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Habermas, J. (1989). *The Theory of Communicative Action: Life world and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Vol. 2. Boston: Beacon Press.
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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

BLOCK-03





Symbolic Interactionism

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ comprehend symbolic interactionism understanding human relationships
- ◆ explore G.H. Mead's contribution towards the social construction of self
- ◆ examine 'Goffman's interactionist perspective towards dramaturgy

Background

A portion of your happiness is influenced by your genetics and unchangeable life situations. Researchers have found out that happiness could be attributed to human's behavior and perspectives.

Symbolic interactionism is a perspective in sociology that looks at how individual behavior creates relationships and sees the interaction between individuals and society as a two-way process. It views people as both subjects and agents, not just objects. Instead of focusing solely on social roles and statuses, symbolic interactionism emphasises the concept of self and consciousness. This perspective introduced a dynamic and process-oriented approach to sociology, as well as a link with social psychology. Unlike other sociological approaches that mainly consider how society affects individual behavior, symbolic interactionists look at how individuals make sense of society and find meaning in their actions. George Herbert Mead is often credited as the founder of this perspective, even though he did not coin the term 'symbolic interaction'. This perspective places a strong emphasis on the concept of the Self, which helps us assess the consequences of our actions. In essence, communication through language and symbols is how people understand the social realities in which they live. G.H. Mead's work, especially 'Mind, Self and Society', remains relevant today, especially in the context of social media. People often shape their appearance based on what others think. This reflects how people present themselves to please others, react to criticism and how it can alter their self-perception.



Keywords

Gesture, Behavior, Language, Social interaction, Social reality, Self

Discussion

◆ *Influential figures in Symbolic interactionism*

In the late 19th century, societal theorists started exploring how individuals relate to larger societal systems. Symbolic interactionism became a key perspective, focusing on communication, social behavior and personal relationships. It sees individuals as active participants who not only react but also interpret and act in social interactions. Every person has a 'self' that develops through interactions, and these interactions shape how we communicate the social world, and react to reality. All of this happens through symbols and manufactured meanings. Herbert Blumer was a foundational figure in symbolic interactionism. George Simmel's research in Europe emphasised the importance of interpersonal contact for society. Max Weber's ideas on significant and symbolic social actions also influenced this perspective. The early American sociologists saw connections between social processes and larger structures like class, the state, family and religion.

◆ *Conceptual meaning*

The term 'symbolic interaction' was coined by Herbert Blumer to describe the unique nature of human interactions. He believed that this perspective was distinct from structural functionalism and behaviorism, as it emphasised the importance of individuals giving purpose to their actions. Symbols and interpretation play a crucial role in human connections. Manford Kuhn, Erving Goffman and C.H. Cooley are also notable figures in symbolic interactionism.

Herbert Blumer made important points about symbolic interactionism, including four guiding principles:

- ◆ People act based on how they personally interpret things. For example, someone who sees family as unimportant will make choices reflecting that belief.
- ◆ Interactions happen within a cultural and social context, where meanings are attached to objects, people and situations based on individual perspectives.
- ◆ Our meaning and understanding come from



interactions with others and society.

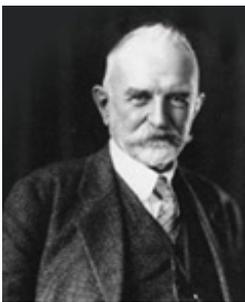
- ◆ Our interpretations of things are shaped through ongoing communication with others.

◆ *Self Perception as mirror*

The *Looking Glass Self* introduced by Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, is a key concept in symbolic interactionism. It suggests that our self-perception is influenced by how we think others see us. We see people as mirrors reflecting our true selves, and our interactions with society shape our sense of belief. In this theory, a symbol is something that represent an idea, feeling or action in the real world.

◆ *Interpretations of human actions*

Now, let's focus on the contributions of George Herbert Mead in the study of interactions. Mead's ideas laid a crucial foundation for symbolic interactionism.



George Herbert Mead - (1863–1931)

George Herbert Mead, an American intellectual born in 1863, is known for his pioneering work in symbolic interactionism, which is a part of the Chicago school of thought. He believed that social interactions play a crucial role in shaping how people see themselves. Mead's father moved the family from Massachusetts to Ohio in 1869 to join the faculty at The Oberlin Theological Seminary.

In 1887-1888, Mead got his MA degree in philosophy from Harvard University. He studied philosophy and also took courses in Psychology, Greek, Latin, German and French. His philosophy teachers were George H. Palmer and Josiah Royce, and Royce's ideas had a big impact on Mead. It is interesting to note that, even though Mead later became a major figure in American pragmatism, he did not study under William James at Harvard, although he worked as a tutor for James' children.

George Herbert Mead is a significant figure in American philosophy, known as one of the founders of pragmatism. Mead studied at Oberlin College and later at Harvard university, where he focused on the concept of the 'self' in Sociology and Philosophy. His work was influenced by psychological behaviorism and the pragmatic school of thought. Mead's key idea was that society takes precedence in shaping an individual's self-concept and it arises through social interactions. He disagreed with behaviorist theories that suggest people react unconsciously to environmental stimuli, emphasizing that humans have consciousness and a sense of self. His most important work, *Mind, Self and Society*, published posthumously in 1934, highlights how the social environment influences an individual's mental state and self-identity. His ideas have a major influence on 20th century social theory, impacting both philosophers and social scientists.



In addition to his social philosophy, Mead made important contributions to the philosophy of nature, anthropology, and history. One of Mead's key ideas is his theory of the social self, which argues that the self is a product of social interaction. According to this view, individual selves are not predetermined at birth but emerge through social experiences and activities.

3.1.1 Mind, Self and Society

George Herbert Mead, an early advocate of social constructionism, believed that communication and symbolic interaction shape our thoughts, self-image and the larger community we are a part of. He discussed this idea in his book, *Mind, Self and Society*, emphasising the importance of language in these aspects of human life. Symbolic interaction involves not just speaking but also using language and body language in anticipation of how others will respond. Mead's approach began with the behaviorist idea that social psychology starts with observable actions and interactions. He expanded behaviorism to include the mind and society, as he believed traditional psychological behaviorism ignored both mental and social factors. Mead aimed to give society a central role in his framework, not just as an afterthought. Mead's theory revolved around three key elements: mind, self and society, and he emphasised the significance of symbols and interactions in understanding human behavior and social dynamics.

◆ *Language and behaviours*

3.1.1.1 Mind

George Herbert Mead believed that the human mind is not a fixed entity, but a social process. He emphasised that understanding social experiences requires considering the importance of the social context. Unlike the minds of animals, the human mind is different in that, it involves deliberate mental processes between a stimulus and a response. For instance, when we see someone raise their fist, its not just a physical action, it carries various meanings, and our minds interpret these meanings based on the situation. Such visible signs or language forms can be significant symbols.

◆ *Interpretation of physical action*

◆ *Gestures and symbols*

What sets humans apart is our ability to create, store and use language. Language enables us to respond to words and symbols, and it is a product of our social interactions. Mead argued that gestures become significant symbols when they generate the same responses in an individual as they do in



others or are intended to elicit in others. This emphasises the importance of language in the development of human experience because it allows stimuli to affect the speaking individual just as they affect others.

◆ *Mind as a social process*

Mead defined the mind as an internal dialogue with oneself using significant symbols. Being able to take on the perspective of others is crucial in the process of understanding what someone else means or does. The mental dialogue we have with ourselves about the meaning of a gesture during a competition, for example, is at the core of the mind. Mead saw the mind as a process rather than a physical object, and it emerges and grows as a result of social interaction. In his view, the social process precedes the development of the mind, and thinking is a part of society, not something separate from it. This means that the mind is defined functionally rather than as a fixed entity. As a child becomes more proficient in differentiating and understanding social interactional symbols through gestures and languages, the level of meaningful communication between individuals' advances.

3.1.1.2 Self

◆ *Mead's perspective on self*

In the symbolic interaction method, the central idea is the 'self'. This means that the concept of self is what enables human society to function uniquely. According to Mead, the self is not a passive entity influenced by external values and institutions but an active and creative process. It involves taking on different roles, evaluating these roles, and responding to them. Its like having a conversation with yourself, where you can be both the speaker and the listener.

◆ *Reflection of self*

Mead believed that our ability to reflect on ourselves and react to our own actions sets us apart from animals. This self-reflection is crucial for our social interactions and personal growth. The self has several dimensions, including the ability to react to ourselves as we do to others, to understand how a collective or generalised group of people might react to us, to engage in inner dialogues, and to use this self-awareness to make decisions.

Mead also proposed three stages of self-awareness development:

- ◆ The imitative stage, where we imitate others without understanding why.
- ◆ The play stage, where we take on different roles

and learn about social reality by emulating important people in our lives.

- ◆ The game stage where we can juggle multiple roles and understand our place in a larger group. This stage allows us to plan and coordinate actions within a group.

◆ *Identity and interactions*

The self keeps evolving throughout life through our interactions with others. It consists of two parts: the 'I', which initiates actions based on how others react to us, and the 'Me', which completes these actions. This concept helps us understand how we form our identity through our interactions with the world.

◆ *Role plays and social reflection*

In the imitative stage, young children imitate the actions of people around them, like their parents and siblings. However, they do not really understand why they are doing it or who they are. They are like little mirrors, copying others without thinking much about it. In the Play stage, as children grow, they start to take on different rules during play, often imitating important people in their lives, especially their parents. This helps them get a better sense of how social interactions work and what different roles mean. And in the game stage, children can handle multiple roles simultaneously in group activities. They start to understand themselves better and can even take on the role of the 'generalised other', which means they can see things from the perspective of a larger social group. This stage involves self-reflection and the ability to act based on their own goals, but they may not fully understand all the details or events.

◆ *Development of self*

Mead uses the game of baseball to explain this concept. At the play stage, a child might pretend to be a fan, a catcher or a pitcher without fully grasping the purpose of the game. However, as they move into the game stage, they can plan and coordinate their actions with the group, gaining a more complete understanding. As people grow, their sense of self continues to evolve through social interactions. Mead identified two key aspects of the self: the 'I', which is how we initiate actions based on how others react to us, and the 'Me', which is how we complete those actions. This helps us understand how we develop our identity based on how we interact with others.



3.1.1.3 Society

◆ *Society and social behavior*

Mead believed that society is like a big, organised group activity created by people. It's not just a structure but a dynamic process where people interact, solve problems and work together. Society depends on our thoughts and our sense of self to exist. Our ability to think and control ourselves is crucial for making society function. Mead thought that society is not something separate from us; rather, we carry it with us in our minds. This society help us behave in ways that fit with the rules and expectations of our community. So, Mead saw society as a dynamic process that's closely linked to our thoughts and self-awareness, because it shapes our thinking and how we behave in our communities.

◆ *Gestures and symbols*

According to Mead, symbolic interactionism is a skill that has developed over time and is essential for meaningful communication between people. Language is a key social activity that emerged from the need for cooperation. It all starts with gestures, which are like the building blocks of languages. Gestures are actions and reactions that happen when we interact with others, and they help prepare us for communication. When a group of people agrees on the meaning of a gesture, it becomes a significant symbol. This is similar to how words or phrases work in language. When someone uses a gesture or says something, they expect a specific reaction from others. Mead believed that gestures become significant symbols when they generate the same reactions in both the person making the gesture and the one receiving it. Mead also emphasised the importance of language in shaping our experiences. The idea of 'reflexivity' from the philosopher Hegel was essential to Mead's thinking. It means that when we use vocal gestures, our brain processes them in a way that makes us hear our own words like others do. This is a complex process that helps us communicate effectively.

◆ *Self and interactions*

Mead's focus was on how people communicate with each other, especially through language and various types of conversation. He believed that the 'self', which includes our self-awareness and self-image, develops through social interactions. Instead of looking at big social structures, Mead and other interactionists pay attention to the personal and subjective aspects of social activities. They believe that people are rational and often adjust their behavior to match others. This adjustment can happen when people understand each other's actions and thoughts symbolically. Language is

a vital tool for communication, and it helps us understand each other's thoughts and opinions. Mead also pointed out that our sense of self is closely linked to our interactions with others. Unlike plants and animals, we not only respond to our environment, but we also have a sense of our own identity through our interactions with others.

3.1.2 The Self, Roles, and the Generalized Other

Mead argued that our ability to anticipate how others will react to our actions is crucial for the development of language. This anticipation is related to using symbols. We can use gestures and language to understand how others might respond to us. This ability also helps us become more self-aware and self-conscious. Mead believed that the 'self' is mainly shaped by social and cognitive factors, unlike 'personality', which has non-cognitive aspects. The self develops as we interact with others and take on different roles. Roles are like sets of behaviors that we adopt in response to what others do. Concepts like role-taking and role playing are important in sociology and psychology. Role playing means we can imagine what someone else thinks or feels. Mead's study of physiological psychology, combined with ideas from philosophers like Hegel and the Scottish theorists, has influenced his theories about the self and how it develops.

◆ *Language and gestures*

Mead believed that simply imitating others would not lead to true self-awareness. Instead, people develop a basic sense self-awareness through role taking, which allows them to understand how others see them. This basic self-awareness is like a first step, but it is not a full sense of self yet. To explain how a full sense of self develops, Mead introduced the concept of the 'generalized other'. This is the collective attitude and expectations of the larger social group or community that shape an individual's self-concept. Generalized others can be found in specific social groups like political parties, clubs or companies. These groups have direct communication among their members and the shared expectations and attitudes within these groups shape how individuals see themselves.

◆ *Self-awareness and role play*

William James, in his book *Principles of Psychology* discusses different aspects of the self, including material, social and spiritual selves. He suggests that people can have multiple social selves, especially when it comes to how others perceive them. Mead agrees with this idea and believes that a person



◆ *Multiple social selves and groups*

has as many social selves as there are people who have an impression of them. However, James does not delve into the concept of an audience or how language plays a role in shaping our self and self-awareness. Mead extends this concept by suggesting that James' audiences should be thought of as organized groups, similar to those found in some video games. These groups give rise to what Mead calls 'generalized others.

◆ *Reflexivity of self*

Mead emphasises the need to understand how we learn to see ourselves through the eyes of these groups, moving beyond just 'sympathetic attachments. He introduced the concept of 'reflexivity', which has its origins in vocal gestures and is crucial for adopting roles and adopting the perspective of the generalized other. Reflexivity also allows individuals to see themselves in broader or more 'universal' communities. Mead connects this broader perspective with global political and cultural preferences, showing how our sense of self can be influenced by larger societal influences.

◆ *Objectification of self*

The concept of the self as a social construct emphasizing that individual selves are formed through social interactions rather than being inherent or biologically predetermined. Mead's perspective on the development of the self is highlighted, stating that the self emerges through social experiences and activities shaped by interactions with others. The idea of objectifying oneself is presented as a part of self-consciousness, where individuals view themselves as objects in their own experiences. Mead asserts that this self-objectification occurs through interactions with others in a social environment, leading to self-consciousness as a result of trying to see oneself from the perspective of others and adopting their attitudes. The emergence of the objectified self is seen as a novel outcome within social systems and intersubjective processes.

◆ *Self and society*

Mead suggests that our sense of self is not a fixed entity but rather something that develops through our experiences in a social and symbolic world. It is not like a machine with external relations, which are shaped by how we interact with others. Mead uses the example of role playing in games to illustrate this idea. When we play, we take on different roles and follow certain norms. These roles and norms create a shared understanding called 'generalised other', which is like a collective perspective that helps understand and describe our own behavior. In short, role play in games is a

crucial role in shaping our sense of self and understand how society works. Mead's exploration of games is a significant contribution to social theory, as it highlights how games can act as a form of social control and have both social and psychological effects.

3.1.3 'I' and 'Me'

◆ *Social self and reaction*

Mead's distinction between 'I' and 'Me' is an important concept in social psychology. The 'I' is the impulsive and self-centered part of an individual that seeks sensual pleasure and is not influenced by society. It is a cognitive aspect of ourselves that we can only understand after reflecting on our actions. When we act in our usual, habitual ways, we do so without much self-awareness. But when we consider how our actions are perceived by the generalised other, we start to form a sense of self. The self is not merely a passive reflection of this generalised other; it is an active reaction to it. Mead distinguishes between the 'me' as the social self and the 'I' as our reaction to the 'me'. The 'I' is our response to the attitudes of others and the 'me' is the organised collection of those attitudes that we adopt. In Mead's, the 'me' represents the typical, socially accepted self, while the 'I' represents our unique responses to the expectations of the generalized others.

◆ *Societal expectations and experiences*

The 'I' becomes part of our personal experience when we remember how it responded to the 'me' in the past. The 'me' represents our past and what society expects from us, while the 'I' in response to the 'me', guides our current actions and gives us hints about how the 'me' might change in the future. The words 'I' and 'me' always change in relation to each other. Our sense of self or who we are develops in a social context, influenced by language, gestures, play, games and other ways we interact with symbols. Depending on the situation, we might think more in an 'I' or 'me'.

◆ *Response to stimulus*

According to Mead, a complete self requires both the 'I' and the 'me' identities and needs both individual and communal independence. The 'I' represents the ongoing process, while the 'me' is the essential symbolic framework that allows the 'I' to act. The 'I' is our active response to the situation. Symbolic interaction is a unique way people communicate. It is different because people do not directly react to each other's actions. Instead, they interpret and define those actions based on the meaning they gave. This interpretation process acts like a medium between what they see and how



they respond.

◆ *Concept of Act*

According to Mead, the term 'Act' is a vital part of how we interact in society. Mead believed that any meaningful response to a stimulus, whether it comes from within us or from the external world, is considered an act. When a stimulus occurs, a person goes through four steps to complete an 'Act'.

- ◆ Impulse - it is the initial feeling of hunger or motivation to act.
- ◆ Perception - This step involves assessing the available options and understanding what needs to be done.
- ◆ Manipulation - It is the stage where actions are taken, such as preparing or buying food in the case of hunger.
- ◆ Consummation - This refers to actually carrying out the action, like eating.

Mead's ideas are a part of symbolic interactionism, which is a way of looking at how symbols and social interactions shape our thoughts and perceptions.

3.1.4 Erving Goffmann

In sociology, symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theoretical perspective that examines how people connect with one another in meaningful ways repeatedly to build and maintain society. The key ideas of G.H. Mead focused on the mind, one's self, and society. Now, let's examine Ervin Goffmann's contributions to interactionalism.

◆ *Self and roles*

Erving Goffman made a big impact on symbolic interactionism with his dramaturgical approach. He saw social interactions as performances where people play specific roles. His work influenced a fresh way of studying society, especially how social groups work on the individual self.

◆ *dramaturgical analysis*

Goffman was a significant sociologist in the 20th century. He wrote books and essays in the 1950s to 1970s that helped establish dramaturgical analysis as part of symbolic interactionism. Goffman was influenced by many thinkers, and his work is closely associated with the symbolic interaction school of sociology. He tried to create a qualitative sociology that could make generalizations about human behaviours. Moreover, Goffman was a major figure

in symbolic interactionism, which is a part of the Chicago school of sociological thought. He viewed humans as actors and their behavior is shaped by interactions they have with others.



Erving Goffman - (1922-1982)

Erving Goffman was born in 1922 in Manville, Alberta, Canada, to Max and Anne Goffman, who were Ukrainian Jews that had immigrated from Russia to Canada in the early 20th century. He attended St. John's Technical High School in Winnipeg and later became a student at the University of Manitoba. Instead of completing his university studies, he joined the film industry at the National Film Board of Canada, which was founded by John Grierson. During his time in the film industry, Goffman met Dennis Wrong, a well-known North American Sociologist, who encouraged him to pursue higher education. Goffman then attended the University of Toronto, earning a BA in Sociology and Anthropology in 1945. He continued his academic journey at the University of Chicago, where he obtained his MA in 1949 and his PhD in Sociology in 1953.

While studying at the University of Chicago, Goffman conducted field research in the Shetland Islands, which inspired his first major work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. After completing his studies at the University of Chicago, Goffman worked as a research fellow at the National Institute for Mental Health in Bethesda from 1954 to 1957. His participant observations during this time led to his writings on mental illness and total institutions, which contributed to his book *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Subsequently Goffman served as a professor in the Sociology department at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1957 to 1968. After his time at Berkeley, he became a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, where he remained until his passing in 1982.

3.1.4.1 Dramaturgical Approach

Dramaturgical theory says that a person's identity is continually being reshaped as a result of their interactions with others, rather than being a constant and independent psychological entity. A dramaturgical approach examines social interaction in terms of how people behave in real life, much like performers do on stage. Dramatic engagement that could be interrupted during the performance is what gives rise to the self. Just like theatrical performances, poor

◆ *Identity and psychological entity*



performances or disruptions are viewed as major risks to social interaction.

◆ *Impression management*

The methods used to stop such disturbances are what the dramaturgical approach is interested in. When people interact, they practice impression management, which involves the strategies actors use to retain particular impressions, the issues they are likely to face, and the strategies they use to address those issues. In other words, the premise is that people continually manage their “impressions” while they interact with one another in social situations. This involves trying to portray oneself and act in a way that will not make others or themselves look bad.

◆ *Theatre performance*

Goffman asserts that social life is a performance put on by groups of individuals on the front stage, back stage, and off stage, using his example of the theatre. There is a front area in every social encounter, which is comparable to the stage front in a theatrical production. Actors are perceived as being concerned with appearances, dressing up, and employing props both on stage and in social situations. The regular activities of people’s lives, such as shopping, going to work, and students’ behavior in class, are examples of front-stage behavior.

◆ *Front stage*

The front stage is the area of the performance where a situation is defined for the audience in fairly set and broad ways. Goffman further distinguished between the environment and the personal front inside the front stage. The setting is the actual situation that must be present for the performers to perform; for example, a taxi must be present for the taxi driver, and ice must be present for the ice skater. The elements that the audience associates with the artists and anticipates they will bring into the performance space make up the personal front. The personal front is further separated into manner and appearance, both of which should be congruent with one another.

- ◆ The term “appearance” refers to the items that reveal the performance’s social standing.
- ◆ The phrase “manner” relates to the way the performer conducts themselves.

In the world of theatre, it is common for performers to create an illusion that they are much closer to the audience and that their show is the most important one. This is a fundamental aspect of what happens on the front stage. To

◆ *Imperfections and audience*

achieve this, actors intentionally maintain a certain distance from their audience, so the audience does not see any flaws or imperfections in the performance. Even if some imperfections are noticed, the audience may choose to ignore them in order to maintain their idealised image of the actor. During the performance, actors strive to make the audience feel that there is something truly special about the show and their interaction with the audience. They meticulously ensure that every aspect of the performance harmonises seamlessly. A single mistake by an actor can have serious repercussions and disrupt the entire performance. For instance, a mistake by a priest during a sacred ceremony can have a more significant impact than an error made by a taxi driver in their work.

◆ *Backstage and self*

Furthermore, Goffman talked about what he called 'backstage'. This is the part of our lives where we keep information hidden from the public eye and where informal behaviors can come to the forefront. It is a separate area from the main stage of our lives. According to Goffman, the backstage is a place where we intentionally act differently from the image we project in our public performances. It is where we can be ourselves without the need for impression management, and we can drop the roles we play in public. For example, when we are with close friends, we tend to be more relaxed because we are in the backstage of our lives, away from the scrutiny of the public, and can be our authentic selves. In this way, the concept of the stage serves as a metaphor for how we adapt our behavior in different social settings.

◆ *Off stage and identity*

Then comes the 'Off stage' which is the outdoor area that does not have a clear front or back like the indoor spaces. These three areas are not completely distinct from each other. Sometimes, a single place can shift between these realms. This concept influences many aspects of our social lives. However, sometimes this distinction can blur, which can be uncomfortable and raise questions about the accuracy of our previous interactions.

3.1.4.2 Self in everyday life

The book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* written by Erving Goffman in 1959 provides a detailed exploration of how people present themselves and interact in their everyday lives. Goffman, who looks at things from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, focuses on a qualitative examination of various aspects of human interaction. He delves into the

◆ *Self and social interaction*

intricacies of human identity, social interactions, the impact of our surroundings and how information is conveyed in our day-to-day interactions through a micro sociological approach that focuses on less common topics. Goffman's viewpoint offers a fresh insight into both individual psychology and the dynamics of social interactions. He uses a 'dramaturgical approach' to describe his research, treating interaction as a kind of performance influenced by the environment and the audience aimed at creating specific impressions that align with the actor's intended goals.

◆ *Social interaction and situation*

In his view, social interactions are not purely spontaneous. Instead, each interaction involves people bringing with them a preexisting understanding of the situation, a preconceived notion of how they perceive themselves and their role in that situation, and an expectation of how others will behave. In any social setting, individuals display a part of themselves that aligns with the specific context. This implies that a single person has various aspects, each of which corresponds to the different roles people commonly take on in society.

◆ *Social behavior and experiences*

Our ability to determine the role we should assume in a given situation, as well as our expectations of how others will act, is based on our experiences in a particular society. Consequently, the initial knowledge we possess about the other participants, gained through socialisation, life experiences, or other means, is crucial for the success of an interaction. Self-conception also plays a significant role in every circumstance because everyone anticipates being treated in a way that aligns with their perceived characteristics, such as age, gender, social class, educational background and more. Any misjudgment of the situation based on these criteria can lead to a failed interaction. If expectations on either side are not met, it can result in a disconnected or unsuccessful encounter.

Two types of techniques are implemented to prevent probable social interaction breakdowns. They are:

- ◆ The Defensive
- ◆ The Protective techniques

Defensive and Protective techniques work hand in hand to shape how others perceive an individual. For instance, in social settings, people often share stories or narratives about unfortunate events, either past or potential, to provide a sense of emotional relief and make those facing

◆ *Adaptation to different roles*

embarrassing situations feel less alone. Goffman explains social life in a drama and introduces some key concepts: an 'encounter' involves all the interactions within a group; a 'performance' encompasses all actions aimed at influencing others; 'routines' are when performances follow a repeated pattern; and a 'part' refers to the various roles people assume in different situations. This perspective highlights how people switch roles in their daily lives, adapting to the demands of various social contexts, such as a politician becoming a husband and father when spending time with their family.

◆ *The symbolic of human behavior*

In conclusion, the core focus of symbolic interactionism lies in the profound influence of meanings and symbols on human behavior and interaction. It differentiates between human social action involving a single individual and social interaction, which entails two or more people engaged in mutual social action, with the key distinction being the role of meanings and symbols. In these interactions, people communicate meanings symbolically, and the other participants interpret and respond based on their understanding of these symbols. Each person employs an interpretive process to navigate the symbols they encounter, leading to the continual modification and management of these meanings. This dynamic interplay of symbols and meanings is at the heart of how humans engage with one another in the complex web of social life.

Summarised Overview

Symbolic interactionism, primarily embraced by American Sociologists is a non-positivist approach to understanding society. It focuses on the idea that shared symbols like language shape social structures. Symbolic interactionism, a micro level theory delves into the meaning behind both verbal and nonverbal human interactions and symbols. It suggests that communication and the exchange of meaning through words and symbols are how individuals connect with their social environments. It has enriched various subfields of sociology, contributing to the understanding of socialisation, deviance, medicine and organizations. It marks a departure from psychological behaviorism, which generalised animal behavior to humans. In short, George Herbert Mead proposed that humans understand each other by 'taking the role of the other', a process crucial for the development of consciousness. Symbolic interactionism has gained followers in sociology and social psychology, but it remains somewhat abstract, making it challenging to apply to real life situations and define human behavior effectively.



Goffman's sociological theory is built upon three key ideas- dramaturgy, symbolic interaction and impression management. He was a Canadian American sociologist who closely examined everyday human interactions to develop insights into how people behave and how society operates. Goffman's approach known as the dramatic method, builds on the foundations of symbolic interactionism. He emphasised that meaning is not inherent in behavior and society does not naturally organise itself. Instead, meaning is assigned to behaviors based on social norms and their significance. In social interactions, people not only present themselves but also actively manage the impressions they create of others. Goffman highlights the importance of direct communication in this process, revealing how our interactions are shaped by our understanding of social roles and the meanings we attach to them.

Assignments

1. Describe Mead's significant book, *Mind, Self, and Society*.
2. Do you believe that Mead's symbolic interactionist approach is still relevant today? If so, give instances to exemplify.
3. Critically evaluate Erving Goffman's understanding on 'front stage' and 'back stage'. Examine its relevance in contemporary society.
4. Write a review of the work 'Presentation of self in everyday life'.

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Suggested Readings

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



SGOU



Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explore the frameworks of phenomenology and ethnomethodology to understand social realities
- ◆ make aware of about Schutz's theory of life world of life to understand daily lives experience
- ◆ explain sociology of knowledge and social construction of reality in social sciences

Background

Phenomenology is the study of the formal frameworks of actual social existence as they emerge from and are made accessible by the analytical description of purposeful conscious activities. Such an investigation aims to understand the meaningful lived world of daily existence. On the other hand, ethnomethodology is the study of techniques used by individuals to perceive and shape the social order in which they live. In general, the idea looks to offer a different perspective from traditional sociological methods. In this lesson, we'll talk about the phenomenological contributions of Alfred Schutz and Karl Mannheim as well as the ethnomethodological contributions of Harold Garfinkel.

Schutz believed that social research is distinct from physical science because it involves people making sense of the world. In social interactions, we try to understand how others are making sense of things. Karl Mannheim considered as a key figure in shaping sociology into well organised field of study. He believed that sociology, as a science, could help address the conflicts in society through a 'sociology of knowledge'. He was influenced by the works of Georg Lukacs and Max Weber. Mannheim's contributions significantly impacted political sociology, sociology of education and understanding contemporary social structures. He emphasised that our perception of the world is shaped by our cultural background, social position and the time we live in. Mannheim is recognized as the founder of the sociology of knowledge and a highly influential early sociologist.



Keywords

Typification, Commonsense, Multiple realities, Everyday life, Sociology of knowledge, Intersubjectivity

Discussion

As a learner, you are now aware of their fundamental contributions to the symbolic interactional perspective, and on the basis of that background, we will start this unit's sections on phenomenology and ethnomethodology.

◆ *The meaning of social world*

Phenomenological and ethnomethodological sociology focus on understanding social life by delving into the perspectives of individuals. Instead of emphasising historical or functional aspects of social behavior, these approaches aim to uncover the meaning people attribute to their world, explore the motives behind their actions, and examine their relationship with others. Phenomenological sociologists particularly delve into the subjective consciousness of individuals in everyday life, highlighting the personal reflections that form the foundation of their experiences.

◆ *The technical meaning of phenomenology*

Phenomenology is a research method started by a mathematician named Edmund Husserl in 1900. The main idea is to use specific techniques like 'bracketing' and 'reduction' to uncover the important aspects of things that people are aware of or can imagine. When applied to a person's thoughts and feelings, these techniques help to reveal the basic conditions and processes of human subjectivity. Husserl went on to develop different forms of phenomenology, all in an effort to understand the fundamental foundations of the sciences.

◆ *Concept of Ethnomethodology*

Ethnomethodology is basically a close look at how people make sense of and give meaning to their own and others actions. Researchers in the field study how individuals embedded in society use methods like talking and coordinated actions to create and maintain social structures. The key idea is that order in social situations is connected to the ways people locally produce and explain it. Garfinkel, who came up with the term, focused on understanding the rational aspects of everyday actions and expressions in the ongoing flow of life.

◆ *Existence of consciousness*

Husserl's phenomenological method is built on a fancy philosophical concept called transcendental phenomenology. It explores our experiences and shows that they go beyond our mental structures. Consciousness is a big deal in this thinking, and Husserl believes it has its own unique existence. His method involves observing, describing and classifying to reveal natural patterns, challenging the usual experimental ways of doing things. Husserl, the German philosopher, is considered the modern founder of phenomenology, aiming to make philosophy a super precise science.

3.2.1 Phenomenology

◆ *actions*

Phenomenological sociology, largely influenced by Alfred Schutz, centers around the idea that in our actions, we rely on assumptions about society and use a basic understanding to predict other's actions. According to Schutz, our actions are considered 'meaningful' not because of our intentions but because other people interpret our actions as having symbolic importance. This perspective aligns with the interpretive approach initiated by Max Weber and taken to the extreme by phenomenological sociology.

◆ *Concept of lifeworld*

According to this, our reality is made up entirely of meanings. So, in Sociology, that task is to uncover the meanings behind actions and behaviours and nothing else. Alfred Schutz, drawing on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, critiques Max Weber's methodology. Schutz argues that Weber did not adequately explain how actions are formed, emphasizing the importance of shared social concepts, symbols and meanings in constructing actions. Phenomenological sociology is all about examining the formal structures of actual social existence by analysing intentional consciousness. The focus is on understanding the meaningful lived world of everyday life, also known as the 'life world'. Alfred Schutz develops this perspective to suggest that successful individual actions occur when everyone shares the same set of meanings.

Schutz believed that social research is distinct from physical science because it involves people making sense of the world. In social interactions, we try to understand how others are making sense of things. What sets the social sciences apart is that the researcher takes on the role of a disinterested observer, not personally involved in the lives of those being observed. The focus is on cognitive interest rather than practical interest. Unlike Weber's model, which



◆ *Making sense of the world*

prioritized individual subjective experiences, Schutz emphasises the importance of shared meanings and common knowledge in the social sciences.



Alfred Schutz - (1899 - 1959)

Alfred Schultz was born in 1899 in Vienna, Austria. He completed his studies at the University of Vienna, where he earned his doctorate in law in 1923. But in 1939, because of fear of Nazi atrocities, he was forced to immigrate to America.

In order to support himself, Schultz accepted a job during the day at a bank in New York City. In the evenings, he taught social philosophy seminars at the New School for Social Research. He joined the faculty of the New School for Social Research after four years, where he climbed to the position of Professor of Sociology and Philosophy in 1952 and remained until his passing in 1959.

While his main methodological contribution was an attempt to link phenomenological concepts to Max Weber's sociology, Schutz's primary philosophical work included applying Edmund Husserl's phenomenology to the issues of social reality. As a result, Schutz's writings, starting with *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1932), take the reality of everyday life as a point of separation and as a subject for in-depth examination. Schutz's point of view was that the task of the phenomenological thinkers concerned with social reality is to identify, describe, and analyse the essential features of their everyday environment.

Major Works

- ◆ On Phenomenology and Social Relations
- ◆ Phenomenology of the Social World.
- ◆ Collection of Papers II: Studies In Social Theory.
- ◆ The Structures of The Life-World-Vol. 1

3.2.2 Intersubjectivity

◆ *The concept of intersubjectivity*

Intersubjectivity is the main emphasis of Schultz's phenomenological sociology. Intersubjectivity research aims to provide answers to issues like these: How are other minds known to us? Different selves? How is it possible to have reciprocity of known to us? Different selves? How is it possible to have reciprocity of perspective? How can we communicate with and comprehend one another? The philosopher Edmund Husserl is credited with coining the word "intersubjectivity," which is most easily defined as the exchange of conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings between two people, or "subjects," made possible by empathy.

◆ *Communication and experience*

A common intersubjective environment is not limited to any single individual. It exists because we coexist as humans, connected through shared influence and collaboration, comprehending others and being understood by them. The 'vivid present', where we communicate and actively listen, is where this intersubjectivity takes place. When engaging with others, we inhabit the same moment and physical space. The simultaneous experience is the core of intersubjectivity, suggesting that while living in our own thoughts, we also understand the perspectives of others.

◆ *The social structure of the life world*

Thus, Schultz redirected phenomenological philosophers' attention from a primary focus on consciousness to an outward concern for the intersubjective, social world. Intersubjectivity, according to Schutz, was a crucial component that provided the life-world structure from its inception. It serves as the cornerstone upon which all social relationships are constructed since it is a common experience that has been created in the life-world.

◆ *Meaning of Social Life*

Schutz says that our shared understanding of meanings is what forms the basis for social life. He explains it in two ways:

- ◆ The first layer is about individual thoughts and awareness, the basic sense of meaning.
- ◆ The second layer involves the meanings that come up when people interact directly. In the social world, when individuals connect with each other, it creates a whole new level of meaning.

Schutz believes that when studying society, we should



◆ *Meaning of societal experiences*

understand how individuals create meaning in their own experiences. He is curious about how people grasp each other's thoughts while still having their own. When two people share an experience, he calls that shared meaning 'inter subjective'. He explores how the levels of anonymity in social interactions shape the structure of our social world. Schultz uses concepts like 'we and they' relationships and 'face to face relationships' to analyse these social systems. He emphasises that intersubjectivity is rooted in subjectivity, where personal perspectives and beliefs play a crucial role, making it all open to interpretation.

He pointed out three crucial components of everyday social order:

- ◆ **Common sense** - refers to a shared body of information about how to understand and behave in our own unique community or social group.
- ◆ **Typification's** - standard methods of categorizing people (home), things (man), and emotions (hate, dream), which accumulate into "stocks of knowledge."
- ◆ **Reciprocity** is the widely held belief that other people share our perspective on the world.

A) Common sense

◆ *Reinterpretation of everyday life*

Schutz talks about different ways of thinking in our everyday world. The most important one is our shared commitment to social life and society. Even though we actively live life, our everyday knowledge is always changing and needs to be reinterpreted and fixed because it is never set in stone. This common sense, the unspoken knowledge we all have, develops gradually from birth like knowing 'my mother is older than me'. According to Schutz, we should focus on practical things like time and space patterns that guide us toward our goals, shaping our cultural and personal past toward a future we build together.

◆ *The reality of social order*

Schutz wanted to understand the basic ideas that shape our everyday lives the common ways we organise our routines, lifestyles and common knowledge to interact and live with others. People think there is a shared reality, and they use this idea to navigate and understand the world. They believe everyone sees and understands things the same way, and because of this, our shared perspectives and

the way we naturally approach life help support social order.

B) Typification

◆ *Social
constriction of
things*

Typification is the process of categorizing people and situations based on socially accepted definitions. It includes all recurring social situations, essentially the process of making typical social constructions based on common assumptions. Schutz describes it as the way we abstract and formalise things, like calling objects 'tables' or 'cars'. It is a way of simplifying and representing complex things, like using symbols to represent river deltas on maps. In the social world, people constantly use typification's to understand and engage with others. Schutz believes that individuals categorize everything to better understand it in the context of society. We often make decisions based on types we have formed from past experiences.

◆ *Language and
recipes*

Typification, however overlooks unique characteristics and focuses on general traits. This can lead to stereotyping, where we generalise about others or even ourselves. Schutz emphasises that we use language as a major tool for typing, considering it the 'typifying medium par excellence'. Typification is deeply linked to language and is prevalent in society, picked up and retained throughout our lives. While individuals may develop some typifications, many are already established and come from a larger culture. Schutz sometimes uses 'recipes' interchangeably with typifications. While typifications often refer to people, recipes deal more with situations. Just like following a recipe in cooking, we manage our daily lives using cultural customs and unquestioning formulas, reducing our activities to routines and habits.

C) Reciprocity of Perspectives

◆ *Perspectives on
everyday life*

Schutz's general theory talks about how people understand and share perspectives with each other. There are two main ideas; first, that we can switch viewpoints with others, and second that different ways of seeing things can work together harmoniously. The theory suggests that we all create a common reality by perceiving things similarly. Schutz highlights how individuals give meaning to their daily experiences, and he emphasises that people define their own situations. He also talks about the 'reciprocity of perspectives', which refers that the meanings we give to situations can be shared with others. The theory suggests



that, in interactions, people share and infer meanings; and decisions are made based on assumptions about reality.

◆ *Perspectives on multiple reality*

Alfred Schutz has two key ideas – multiple realities and relevance structures. Multiple realities mean that our lives are made up of different perspectives or attitudes, each with its own way of existing. Schutz suggests that human experiences happen in distinct ‘provinces of reality’, each with a unique cognitive style that shapes how events are perceived. These provinces have their own characteristics, like a specific awareness, sense of self, social interactions and perspectives on time. Schutz gives examples like the practical world of social activity, dreams, religious experiences and scientific theorizing to illustrate these different provinces of reality. He believes that understanding his ideas about social scientific theorizing and its connection to social action requires exploring various realities. Essentially, Schutz’s concepts help us grasp how different viewpoints and ways of experiencing the world coexist in our everyday lives.

Schutz underscores the importance of distinguishing between subjective and objective meanings. The subjective meaning context is individually constructed, while the objective meaning context is shared by the collective and is of interest to scientific sociology. Schutz criticizes Weber for not making this distinction clear.

3.2.2.1 Life World

◆ *Subjectivity of everyday life*

Alfred Schutz’s work revolves around the concept of ‘life world’, referring to the world as we directly experience it in our daily lives, in contrast to the objective worlds studied by the sciences. His phenomenological sociology, influenced by Husserl, explores the essential characteristics of consciousness and its connection to the social sciences. According to Schutz, the social world of everyday life is always inter subjective, shared with others who interpret it similarly. The everyday reality is considered the most important, and we select aspects of it based on personal goals and interests. Schutz delves into how people both construct social reality and are constrained by preexisting social and cultural frameworks. He identifies three types of knowledge – knowledge of skills, useful knowledge and habitual knowledge that contribute to our understanding of the accepted reality of daily existence.

Schutz also distinguishes between close, face to face relationships and ‘they relations’ and ‘we relations.’ ‘Face to

◆ *Intimacy in relationships*

face relationships' or 'pure we relations' involve a high level of intimacy based on awareness of each other's life histories. Schutz emphasises reciprocity and constant adjustment in such relationships. Additionally, Schutz explores the idea that people modify their behavior and ideas about others based on interactions. He highlights the importance of typification and recipes acquired in social interactions, which people continuously adjust to fit different situations.

◆ *The nature of reality*

Schutz criticizes Max Weber's methods and popularize the idea that reality is made up of meanings. He emphasises the need for sociologists to understand the meanings behind people's actions and behaviors. The discussion also touches on the challenges of defining the end of face-to-face situations, and the shifting nature of relationships. Schutz acknowledges the impact of dreams, anxieties and desires in driving human actions and projects. In short, Schutz's phenomenological sociology provides a philosophical framework for understanding the nature of social action, emphasising the importance of meanings and the complexity of human interactions.

3.2.2.2 Schutz's Analysis of Social world

◆ *Types of social reality*

Alfred Schutz proposed four realms of social reality, each characterised by different levels of immediacy and determinability. The first two realms are 'umwelt' (directly experienced social reality) and 'mitwelt' (indirectly experienced social reality). The other two realms, 'folgewelt' (the future) and 'vorwelt' (the past), were of lesser interest to Schutz. He emphasised the significance of 'umwelt' and 'mitwelt'. In 'umwelt', individuals engage in face-to-face relationships with a high degree of intimacy, gaining insight into each other's subjective experiences. This immediate interaction allows for a constant adjustment of actions and understanding within social relationships. On the other hand, 'mitwelt' involves dealing with general types of people or social structures rather than specific individuals. This realm is characterised by less direct interaction and more anonymity, making it easier to study scientifically. Schutz described various levels within 'mitwelt' with decreasing anonymity as relationships become more important. Schutz's framework distinguishes between the immediate personal interactions of 'umwelt' and the more distant structured relationships of 'mitwelt' highlighting the importance of face-to-face experiences in shaping social understanding and Behavior.

◆ *Scientific study of relationships*

Schutz's idea of 'mitwelt' which refers to our experiences of social reality indirectly, can be thought of as a layered world with different levels of anonymity. As we move through these layers, relationships become more suitable for scientific study because they involve less direct interaction. The levels in the 'mitwelt' include people we have met face to face in the past, those known by people we know, and even larger groups or meanings created by contemporaries without direct interactions. As we navigate through these levels, connections become less personal, guided by anonymous classifications and established patterns. In 'they relations' within the 'mitwelt', interactions involve impersonal contemporaries rather than close friends, and negotiations are not possible. The origins of these classifications trace back to 'we relations', where solutions were initially based on personal perspectives but evolved into more standardized and anonymous aspects, eventually becoming integral components of our cultural understanding.



Karl Mannheim - (1893-1947)

Karl Mannheim, born in Budapest in 1893 to a German mother and Jewish Hungarian father, played a crucial role in shaping sociology. Growing up in a time of political and cultural change in Hungary, Mannheim was exposed to a society divided by class and striving for transformation. Budapest's middle class, aiming for cultural and economic progress, sought inspiration from the West, particularly Austria and Germany. Mannheim engaged in sociological society, dedicated to introducing Western sociological concepts to Hungary.

During World War I, Mannheim, influenced by thinkers like Lukacs, believed that the West was facing a profound cultural crisis, marked by a sense of isolation. He emphasised the growing gap between external culture and the human spirit, leading to heightened feelings of alienation.

Mannheim, became a professor of Sociology at the University of Frankfurt at a young age, but when the Nazis came to power in 1933, he was forced into exile. Settling in London, he held positions at the London School of Economics and the London Institute of Education until his death in 1947. Mannheim challenged the traditional focus of philosophers, urging them to consider broader perspectives beyond their own ideas and histories. His life and work left a lasting impact on the development of sociology, especially in understanding societal dynamics and the influence of culture on human perception.

Major works

- ◆ Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction (1940)
- ◆ Diagnosis of Our Time (1943)
- ◆ Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning (1950)
- ◆ Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology (1953)
- ◆ Systematic Sociology (1958)

3.2.3 Sociology of Knowledge

◆ *The social context of knowledge*

Karl Mannheim believed that the ideas and knowledge people have, including those of social scientists, are influenced by their specific social context and historical circumstances. He argued that ideological knowledge is relative to the situation and is often shaped by social structures and historical processes, especially in terms of status or class divisions.

◆ *Different ways of thinking*

The term 'Sociology of Knowledge' was first coined in 1924 by another German Sociologist Max Scheler. This field, a new branch of Sociology, explores the connection between knowledge and existence through theories and historical sociological research. It examines how the relationship between knowledge and life has evolved throughout human history. The sociology of knowledge emerged to specifically study the social connections between different theories and ways of thinking, especially during the crisis of modern thought. Essentially, it focuses on understanding how our ideas are shaped by the social context and historical conditions in which they arise.

◆ *Impact of social interaction*

Sociology is all about understanding how people interact in social settings and the impact of their actions. It covers a wide range of topics, including race, gender, entertainment, emotions, social institutions and movements. The goal is to establish practical standards for connecting thoughts and behaviours. Sociology also aims to create theories that explain the significance of non-theoretical factors in shaping our understanding of the world. The fundamental principle is that certain ways of thinking can only be understood when we identify their social foundations. In essence, sociology recognises that our capacity for thought is deeply intertwined with our social context.

The idea of a collective mind that goes beyond individual



◆ *Historical context of human thoughts*

thoughts does not exist in metaphysics. However, it is also incorrect to think that everything a person thinks and feels is solely rooted in their own experiences. The sociology of knowledge does not start by looking at an individual and their thoughts in isolation. Instead, it seeks to understand how people think within the specific historical and social context they find themselves in. Individuals in groups develop a shared way of thinking in response to common events, rather than having completely independent thoughts. It's not accurate to say that one person thinks entirely on their own; rather, they build upon what others have thought before them. Growing up in a society influences individuals in two ways; they inherit a set scenario and within that scenario, they discover pre-existing patterns of thought and behavior.

◆ *Collective action and surroundings*

The sociology of knowledge approach does not separate the way people think from the social actions through which they understand the world. When individuals live in groups, they do not exist separately or think in isolation. Instead, they interact with the world and each other through both cooperative and competitive behaviors. People in groups work together to change or maintain their social and natural environment based on the goals of their groups. The thoughts, ideas and concepts that emerge are shaped by this collective activity. The context of collective action influences how people perceive their surroundings, and logical analysis that isolates individual minds from this group context also separates thought from action. In some areas of knowledge, the desire to act may be what allows individuals to understand the world around them. Removing this volitional factor could potentially lead to the loss of concrete content in concepts and the organising principles that enable intelligent problem solving.

◆ *Maxweber's view on social class interaction*

Max Weber showed how people from different social classes can experience the same religion in diverse ways. In societies with rigid castes or ranks, limited social mobility can either keep distinct world views isolated or, for those sharing a common religion, lead to varied interpretations based on individual life contexts. This prevents cognitive processes of different social classes from merging into a single understanding, avoiding conflicts. However, a significant shift happens in a society's development when previously segregated groups start interacting, creating social circulation. The crucial moment occurs when the

thoughts and experiences that were once separate blend into a unified awareness, making people realise the conflicting nature of opposing worldviews.

◆ *Theory of ideology and sociology*

The sociology of knowledge tackles the challenge of understanding how our social background shapes what we know. It is like trying to figure out how society influences our thoughts and ideas and making this a scientific study. The goal is to get closer to the truth about the impact of our social surroundings on what we believe. The theory of ideology and the sociology of knowledge are related. While both are interested in how social factors influence our beliefs, ideology focuses more on deliberate deceptions by interest groups like political parties. The sociology of knowledge is more concerned with how our surroundings naturally shape our thinking. This leads to different ways our brains are structured because of diverse social and historical contexts. It can be both a theory and a way of doing research. One side is all about looking at real examples and describing how social ties affect our minds. The other side dives into deeper questions about the validity of what we believe based on these social interactions.

3.2.3.1 World View

◆ *Concept of World view*

Karl Mannheim talks about 'world view', which means the way people see and understand the world. He uses the German term 'Weltanschauung' to describe this. Mannheim suggests that when people form their own unique worldviews, they use various tools and categories. He points out that it is often challenging for individuals to shift from one social position to another.

◆ *Ideological relationism*

The main idea of Mannheim's argument is that our ways of thinking are shaped by the social groups we belong to. He says that the different ideas and perspectives held by major social groups lead to social conflict, especially due to class differences. Mannheim introduces the concept of 'relationism', explaining how our beliefs are deeply embedded in larger systems of thinking. He argues that thought patterns evolve into complete thought systems, or ideologies. Ideologies, according to Mannheim, include both spiritual and intellectual ideas of social groups. The spiritual core of a group's ideology is expressed in its world view, and this shared way of seeing things brings a community together. Whether its regular folks or those with deep insights, everyone's understanding is influenced by this shared historical way of looking at the world.



3.2.3.2 Ideology and Utopia

◆ Ideas and conflicts

Karl Mannheim is known for exploring ideas about how societies work, particularly ideologies and utopias. Ideologies are the beliefs that different groups have, and Mannheim disagrees with Marx. He thinks conflicts in society come from the diverse ideas held by various groups due to differences in social classes. Mannheim believes that how a group thinks is only somewhat related to its interests, and thoughts are shaped by social backgrounds, not just classes.

◆ Concepts of utopia

Mannheim sees ideological knowledge, including what social scientists think, as relative because it is embedded in specific social and historical contexts. He is not trying to find the ultimate truth, but he wants to understand how people see and understand the world. Ideology, according to Mannheim, is a way to keep things as they are by creating a false sense of awareness. He also talks about utopians, which are hopeful ideas motivating groups to change society completely. In his book, *Ideology and Utopia* Mannheim expands the definition of ideology. He talks about how ideologies might intentionally hide the truth and introduces the idea that everyone's opinions, even those of social scientists, are shaped by the environment they grew up in.

Mannheim makes a distinction between culture, which is about how individuals interpret reality, and ideology, which is linked to ideas about reality and involves the role of intellectuals, a group of deep thinkers.

3.2.4 Ethnomethodology – Harold Garfinkel

◆ Construction and interpretation of meanings

Ethnomethodology, considered a cutting-edge approach in sociology, delves into the study of everyday practices within society. It criticizes traditional sociology for imposing its perspectives on social reality rather than understanding and analyzing human behavior. Ethnomethodologists argue against viewing people as 'cultural dopes' merely following societal norms, instead emphasising individuals as thoughtful beings who analyse and interpret situations based on surroundings and circumstances. Pioneered by Harold Garfinkel, ethnomethodology roots itself in phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, exploring how people construct shared meanings through interaction. It challenges the conventional focus on an external social order, prioritising the process of meaning creation in routine face to face interactions. Ethnomethodology's main goals

involve examining specific social situations using methods common to the population and investigating alternative occurrences in daily life. It underscores the importance of understanding how individuals form a common sense understanding of the world through ordinary conversation, offering a unique perspective in sociological research.



Harold Garfinkel – (1917 - 2011)

Harold Garfinkel, a prominent American sociologist, played a key role in shaping the field of ethnomethodology during the 1960s, sparking intense debates about the purpose and relevance of sociological methods. Born in Newark, New Jersey, on October 29, 1917. Garfinkel pursued his PhD at Harvard University, completing his degree in 1952.

Early in his professional journey, he conducted research at the University of Chicago and taught at Ohio state, laying the groundwork for ethnomethodology. By the end of the 20th century, Garfinkel became a professor emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA], where he spent the majority of his career. His influence made UCLA become a hub for the development of ethnomethodologists. He passed away on April 21, 2011 at the age of 93.

3.2.4.1 Fundamental ideas of Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology, a research approach, involves several key concepts:

◆ *Reality and perspectives*

1. Reflexivity- This concept centers on how people engage while assuming they are guided by a specific reality. Reflexive actions are those an individual does to themselves often to uphold a particular worldview. Human relationships are reflexive, interpreting cues and information to support their beliefs. Ethnomethodological research explores the theories and principles governing reflexive behaviors in different circumstances.

2. Indexicality – Indexicality involves understanding a situation based on contextual reality. Signals and communication have meaning within their context, and misreading them is possible without understanding that

◆ *Misreading of reality*

context. Indexical characteristics form the foundation for ethnomethodological investigation, focusing on the use of codes, grammar or vocabulary in specific contexts.

◆ *Expecting conversations and reality*

3. Sanctioned properties of common Discourses- This concept relates to the expectation that everyday speech is understood uniformly, ensuring smooth conversational activities. Approved features include understanding the inconsistency of statements, the ambiguous nature of connections, and the retrospective prospective feeling of current events. Garfinkel's experiments demonstrate these properties, revealing how people navigate ordinary conversations.

◆ *Understanding of interpretations*

4. Sense in senseless situations - Garfinkel explored how senses can be derived in seemingly nonsensical settings. When subjects stop believing in the meaning of their surroundings, they can understand how that meaning was initially constructed. This involves creating meaning from an event and explaining it in everyday language, as demonstrated by Garfinkel's experiments in partially meaningless environments.

In ethnomethodological inquiry, reflexivity and indexicality are crucial. The focus is on the strategies actors use to construct, preserve or change their view of reality, rather than the broader context of the 'life world'. According to Garfinkel, ethnomethodology investigates the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent accomplishments of organised practice in everyday life.

3.2.4.2 Folk methods or General Interactive methods

Ethnomethodology, a sociological approach explores how people generally construct their world through folk methods or general interactive methods. The folk methods include

1. Looking for the Normal Form: In uncertain situations, individuals make gestures to guide others back to what is typical in their contexts, promoting normal interactions.

2. Practicing reciprocity of perspectives: Actors assume that if roles were switched, experience would

◆ *Common interactive methods*

be the same. They actively convey this idea through gestures, fostering a reciprocity of viewpoints.

3. Applying the 'Et Cetera' Principle: In real world interactions, much remains unspoken. The 'et cetera' concept involves filling in meanings without disrupting the conversation, a shorthand communication method.

Additional ethnomethodological techniques include:

◆ *Interpretation of human behaviour*

1. Breaching experiment: Researchers intentionally act inelegantly in public to test social norms without participant's awareness. This aims to reveal assumptions about what is real and how people interpret daily experiences.

2. Documentary method: This technique seeks an identical underlying pattern in various expressions of meaning. It involves treating appearances as documents of assumed patterns, continuously used by people to interpret each other's behavior and search for underlying patterns.

◆ *Understanding everyday life experiences*

In essence, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology prioritises understanding how individuals within society manage meanings locally. It emphasises the strategies people use to make their understandings locally applicable. Unlike symbolic interactionism, which explores how meanings are assembled, ethnomethodology delves into the local production of understandings, emphasizing sociological practical reasoning focused on specific situations. Garfinkel's ethnomethodology offers a unique perspective, highlighting the active role of individuals in shaping social reality.

Summarised Overview

Phenomenology is a branch of social science that explores significant aspects of our daily experiences. Even though philosophers like Hegel and Husserl have influenced this tradition, Alfred Schutz, a supporter of phenomenology adapted it by considering how individuals shape social reality and navigate inherited cultural norms. In the realm of social sciences, phenomenology stands out as a crucial 20th century philosophical movement. Its impact extends to various fields such as sociology, psychology, education and health sciences. Many schools of thought emphasizing the importance of understanding the meaning people attribute to their actions are rooted in phenomenological principles.

The sociology of knowledge, as described by Karl Mannheim, is a theory of focusing on how social and existential factors influence cognition. Mannheim argues that every thought and piece of information is situated within the social structure and historical processes. This perspective led to the development of the sociology of knowledge, examining the relationship between knowledge and its social context. According to Mannheim, ideological knowledge, including that of social scientists, is situationally relative and often tied to specific social structures. Ideas are constrained by social frameworks typically related to class or status. The sociology of knowledge encompasses the entire spectrum of knowledge, including informal and formal knowledge to understand how power structures based on knowledge shape organizations and groups.

Assignments

1. Critically evaluate Schutz's understanding of the social world's structure.
2. What approaches do phenomenologists take to understand the "Social World"?
3. Discuss major contributions of Alfred Schutz.
4. Compare and contrast Karl Mannheim's ideology with Karl Marx.
5. Critically evaluate the relevance of ethno- methods in social science research.

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Suggested Readings

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU



The Interpretation of Cultures

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the concept of cultural interpretation and its significance in sociology
- ◆ explore the contribution of Clifford Geertz to interpreting diversified cultures
- ◆ make aware of the need for an the in-depth analysis of each cultural pattern

Background

Sociology is both constructive and critical, combining theory and empirical evidence, concepts and practical applications. It requires linguistic skills, a keen eye for the extraordinary, an understanding of the past, and statistical rigor. As the most interdisciplinary and open of the social sciences, sociology systematically explores, describes and interprets the complex collective self-shaped by modernity. It is both comparative and historical, dedicated to spreading knowledge and promoting public reasoning.

Clifford Geertz is an influential anthropologist known for his pioneering work in the field of cultural anthropology. Throughout his career, he conducted extensive fieldwork in Morocco and Java, Indonesia, contributing significantly to the understanding of symbolic meanings and cultural interpretation. He described culture as a system of inherited beliefs expressed through symbols, which individuals use to communicate, propagate and enhance their understanding of life. Geertz's work continues to shape the way scholars approach the study of culture, emphasising the importance of understanding the symbolic dimensions that underlie human behavior.



Keywords

Culture, Symbolic anthropology, Detachment, Resignation, Power, Dominance, Authority

Discussion

Clifford Geertz (1926-2006)



Clifford Geertz was an influential American anthropologist known for his pioneering work in the field of cultural anthropology. Born in San Francisco, Geertz received his PhD from Harvard University in 1956. Throughout his career, he conducted extensive fieldwork in Morocco and Java, Indonesia, contributing significantly to the understanding of symbolic meanings and cultural interpretation.

Clifford Geertz was a significant figure in the field of anthropology, and his ideas have had a big impact. He is known for helping us understand how symbols and meanings shape cultures and societies. He came up with the concept of “thick description,” which means looking closely at the context and deeper meanings of cultural practices. Geertz believed that culture is like a text filled with meanings and that symbols are not just random signs; they represent important things in a society. To truly understand a society, we need to understand these symbols and what they mean. Geertz also stressed that we can not make sense of people’s behavior without considering their cultural background. Understanding what things mean to them is crucial. His work has influenced not only anthropologists but also sociologists and scholars in various fields. His ideas have been used to study a wide range of topics like religion, politics, and economics.

3.3.1 Anthropological Imagination of Clifford Geertz

Clifford Geertz introduced the concept called “anthropological imagination,” which has been a big deal in anthropology ever since. The idea is about being able to see the world from the perspective of another culture. It’s not about watching what they do; it is about understanding why

◆ *Cultural differences in perspectives*

they do it and what it means to them. The anthropological imagination is like a creative way of looking at different cultures, where you put aside your own biases to appreciate how rich and complex other cultures can be. Geertz thought of anthropology as both a science and an art. It is not just about gathering facts but also using your imagination to make sense of those facts. It's like seeing the world as a collection of symbols and understanding how different cultures use those symbols.

◆ *Understanding diverse culture*

The anthropological imagination is like a special tool for anthropologists. It helps them look beyond their own cultural biases, allowing them to understand the world from different points of view. This is important because it helps them make sense of the complexities of various cultures and come up with theories to explain it all. According to Geertz, this way of thinking is not just useful for anthropology; else, it is good for society as a whole. It encourages people to appreciate diverse cultures, fostering understanding and tolerance among different groups. In a nutshell, the anthropological imagination is a key idea in Geertz's work, reminding us that to truly grasp other cultures, we need to see the world through their eyes and appreciate the beauty and complexity of what they do and believe.

◆ *Accumulation of different cultures*

Clifford Geertz, in his article *The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man*, emphasises that understanding the idea of culture is crucial for understanding what it means to be human. He argues that culture is not just something added to humans but is a fundamental part of who we are. As humans evolved, culture played a big role in their development, affecting the way they lived and survived. Geertz explains that culture gradually grew and changed, providing an advantage to individuals who could make the most of it those who were effective hunters, persistent gatherers skilled toolmakers, and resourceful leaders. This gradual accumulation of culture transformed small-brained protohumans into large-brained, fully human beings like Homo sapiens.

Geertz highlights that culture is the link between what humans are capable of becoming and what they actually become. Without culture, humans would lack useful instincts, recognizable sentiments, and intellect. Culture, according to Geertz, is a crucial factor in shaping humanity. To understand what it means to be human, Geertz suggests that we need to understand the diversity among individuals and the specific



◆ *Diversified cultural and human patterns*

cultural patterns that shape them. Being human, for Geertz, is not just about breathing but controlling one's breath to hear the literal voice of God. It is not just about talking, but using the right words in the right social situations with the appropriate tone. It's not just about eating, but having preferences for certain foods and following specific table etiquette. Feeling as a human involves experiencing distinctly cultural emotions, like "patience," "detachment," "resignation," and "respect."

◆ *Impact of culture*

Geertz emphasizes that the concept of culture significantly impacts our understanding of what it means to be human. To truly comprehend humanity, we must recognize the essential character of various cultures and the diverse individuals within each culture. The journey to understanding, like any genuine quest, involves navigating a complex path, considering physical evolution, the nervous system, social organization, psychological processes, cultural patterns, and how these factors interact with each other.

3.3.2 Symbolic Anthropology of Geertz

◆ *Cultural anthropology and symbols*

Symbolic anthropology is special part of cultural anthropology that focuses on studying symbols and what they mean in society. It is a way of looking at cultures that zooms in on understanding the deeper meanings people give to their actions and beliefs. In this branch, symbols can be anything with a special meaning, like an object, a gesture, a word, or even an image. Geertz's version of interpretative anthropology stresses how crucial it is to grasp the symbolic meanings people attach to what they do and believe if we want to really get what their culture is about.

◆ *Symbolic anthropology and cultural meaning*

Geertz had this idea that cultures are like languages made up of symbols, kind of like how words make up sentences. He said these symbols are the basic building blocks of a culture, and people use them to understand the world around them. Instead of just watching what people do, Geertz thought it was important to focus on these symbols and figure out what they mean to the people using them. He believed that by studying these symbols and the meanings people give to their actions, anthropologists could really understand how cultures shape people's lives. Symbolic anthropology is like searching for the hidden meanings in everyday things like objects, gestures, words and pictures that are part of a culture. It is like peeling back the layers to uncover the deeper meanings beneath what might seem normal,

revealing the complex network of social meanings that affect how people experience life. By studying symbols, like flags, anthropologists can really understand what's happening in a society-the cultural, social, and political forces at play - and see how people make sense of their world.

3.3.3 Interpretative Anthropology

◆ *Concept of Interpretative anthropology*

Evans Pritchard applied interpretivism in his anthropological writings about Nuer Religion, but the approach truly came to the forefront with the work of Clifford Geertz. Geertz consistently embraced this interpretive tradition in all of his writings, representing a notable shift in anthropological discourse. This change was evident with Pritchard, but it became more prominent with Geertz's ideas and contributions. Geertz's significant work, 'The Interpretation of Culture,' emerged 19 years after Pritchard's passing, becoming a landmark in the field of interpretive anthropology. Geertz's work is often seen as a reaction to the limitations of Levi Strauss's focus on cultural differences rather than their meanings.

◆ *Geertz approach to analyse culture*

Clifford Geertz suggested a way of studying culture by using interpretive analysis, which means trying to understand the deeper meanings and connections in a culture. He borrowed the idea of "Thick Description" from Gilbert Ryle, who used the example of "Twitching and Winking" to explain how to study cultural phenomena more clearly. Geertz wanted anthropologists to draw big conclusions from detailed facts and make broad statements about how culture shapes collective life by looking closely at specific details. This approach is not only in his paper about a puppet show in Java but also in all his other writings. One of his most famous works is about a Balinese Cockfight, which he connected to the social hierarchy, tensions within and between societies, and family bonds. Geertz discovered that the word 'Sabung' used for a cock, has various meanings in society, symbolizing a hero, warrior, tough guy, lady-killer, and more. In his essay 'Deep Play,' he linked a man making irrational efforts to free himself to a rooster in a cockfight that's about to die.

He extensively discussed how people take care of their roosters, connecting the rooster's well-being to the owner's image. He delved into the money aspect of cockfighting, including the primary and secondary debts, and described how fights vary based on the amount of money and prestige involved. Geertz highlighted the connection between



◆ *Cultural impacts and Balinese cock fighting*

social status and roosters, explaining how a hierarchy is established based on participation and the prestige of the fights. In Balinese society, those participating in higher-stake bets hold the highest social status, influencing their importance in other social matters. Conversely, those at the bottom of the hierarchy, like the poor, women, and children, either start or do not participate in low-stake gambling. Geertz emphasized that the hierarchy is so strong that men avoid it at the lowest social level. He also discussed the role of these fights in resolving tensions between groups, both within and between them. While some see it as a matter of prestige, Geertz pointed out that for many, it is a way to make money. Geertz drew conclusions from Balinese cockfighting, suggesting that themes like gambling, status hierarchy, and aesthetic excitement are all linked to emotions like rage and fear. These fights, governed by rules, symbolically represent social ties, with close friends and family at the center of individual bets and alliances formed between villages when the fight is between them. Following Geertz, the approach gained popularity in anthropology, and many other scholars started using this method.

3.3.4 Thick Description

◆ *In-depth analysis of culture*

Clifford Geertz introduced the term “thick description”. A thick description means giving a detailed account of a culture or society that includes a lot of information about the context and social background to explain why people behave the way they do. Geertz had two main ideas about thick description. First, when someone is asked to write a “thick description,” they’re not just supposed to say what they see but also figure out the context that explains what they see. Second, Geertz believed that to really understand social behavior, you need to dig deep. That means realizing that people’s actions are tied to a lot of social and cultural factors, and if you want to paint an accurate picture of a society, you need to consider all of these factors.

Geertz believes that the job of anthropology is to explain cultures through detailed descriptions that include many specifics, conceptual structures, and meanings. This is different from “thin description,” which is a simple factual account without interpretation. According to Geertz, a thin description not only lacks information about a culture but can also give the wrong idea. He thinks that ethnographers, who study and describe cultures, need to provide thick

◆ *Uncovering the structural facts*

descriptions. These thick descriptions do not just include facts but also commentary, interpretation, and interpretations of those interpretations. The goal is to uncover the layers of meaning that make up a culture. Geertz believes that a straightforward factual account would not cut it because the meaning structures in a culture are complex and layered on top of each other. Each fact can have multiple interpretations and it is the job of ethnography to study these.

Geertz introduced the idea of thick description in his important work called *“Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.”* In this work, Geertz outlines four things that a good thick description and cultural study should have:

1. Anthropology is about interpreting symbols and meanings. Just collecting facts is not enough to create a thick description of a culture.
2. The study of culture should focus on understanding how people give meaning to things through their social interactions.
3. The data collected and interpreted should come from what people express outwardly. The thickest descriptions are based on what people openly show about their culture.
4. Ethnographic findings describe specific local behaviors and truths. They are like a small, detailed snapshot of a culture.

Geertz’s concept of “thick description” had and still has a big impact in anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, sociology, and other social sciences.

Summarised Overview

In this unit, Clifford Geertz highlights the profound impact of symbols on human actions. He conceptualises culture as a system of inherited beliefs expressed through symbolic forms, functioning to communicate, perpetuate and enhance understanding of life. Geertz pioneered interpretive social science, emphasising the importance of interpreting cultural behaviours and symbols rather than just describing them. He introduces the concept of 'thick description', urging a nuanced understanding of cultural context. Geertz underscores that culture plays a crucial role in providing context and making the world comprehensible. His exploration of religion in the context of cultural interpretation posits it as both a 'model of' reality and a 'model for' moral behavior, emphasising the dual role of religious symbols in guiding human actions and depicting the nature of events. 'The Interpretation of Cultures' remains a classic in the field influencing the study of culture and interpretation.

Assignments

1. Write a note on the significance of anthropological imagination in understanding the social world.
2. Critically evaluate the work 'The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man' by Geertz to understand diversified cultural patterns.
3. Elaborate on the concept symbolic anthropology and its focus on studying symbols.
4. Evaluate the interpretive tradition and its shift in anthropological discourse.
5. Critically evaluate 'Thick Description' and its relevance in cultural study.

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Suggested Readings

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

STRUCTURALISM

BLOCK-04





Structural Linguistics

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the significance of structuralism to shape human experiences, language and culture.
- ◆ explore the contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure towards structural linguistics analysis.
- ◆ make awareness about the role of Levi Strauss to examine the human interaction and social behavior

Background

Structuralism is more abstract and focuses on the logical structures of the human mind, which are common to all humans, making it context-free. In contrast, social structure theory, like the sociology of Durkheim, deals with social behaviours and relationships in specific cultures. So, while structural functional analysis studies entire cultures, structuralism looks at isolated cultural elements and takes a more generalised and comparative approach.

Structuralist approaches to literature challenge traditional beliefs about how we understand books. Before, people thought the author's opinions and feelings were the heart of a literary work and that books told us truths about life. However, Structuralists suggest that the author doesn't matter, and a literary text doesn't have to convey any truth. They believe authors mix and rearrange existing writings. Structuralists aim to find the codes that give meaning to a text. Instead of asking what a text means, they focus on how it assembles meaning.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist; laid the foundation for the structuralist approach to understanding language. He argued that language is a system governed by rules and relationships, where words and sentences work together. Saussure also emphasised that the connection between a word and its meaning is arbitrary. Later in the 1950s and 1960s, Claude Levi - Strauss extended Saussure's linguistic ideas to narrative discourse. He believed that language, as a fundamental aspect of human interaction, held the key to understanding both



cultural phenomena and the establishment of various forms of social behaviour. In essence, structuralism sees language as the core structure that shapes culture and social relationships.

Keywords

Structure, Linguistics, Signs, Language, Symbols

Discussion

4.1.1 Structural Linguistics

◆ *Structuralism in various domain*

Structuralism is a significant theory in the study of culture and folklore. It originally came from linguistics but extended into literary criticism, sociology, aesthetics and folklore. In structuralism, the focus is on relationships between things rather than the things themselves. It looks at the connections and patterns that exist in a system, rather than individual elements in isolation.

Structuralism became prominent in the 1960s in France, and its followers applied its concepts to various human sciences, aiming to establish a more systematic approach. They used holistic analysis, which means they explained things by considering how parts relate to the whole. It was influenced by Emile Durkheim, an anthropologist who argued that our thinking shapes our observations and that our social and cultural ideas stem from universal human cognition. Claude Levi Strauss, considered the founder of Structuralism, expanded on these ideas, emphasising that the human mind tends to follow rules, uses giving and receiving to form social bonds, and that giving gifts creates lasting social connections. He believed that these social structures mirror how our minds work.

◆ *Links between structures and relations*

Structuralism seeks to uncover the deeper meanings in human behaviour such as language, rituals and clothing, and it suggests that our minds often operate through contrasting opposites. These oppositions can vary from one society to another, requiring anthropologists to decipher these rules to understand specific cultures. This way of thinking can be traced back to the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure



and was popularised by scholars like Ronald Barthes, Claude-Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Maurice Godelier and others. In essence structuralism helps us understand how our minds and cultures function by examining these underlying patterns and rules, making it applicable to various fields of study, including philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, history, sociology, and political theory.

◆ *Rules and relationships*

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, started the structuralist approach to studying language. He believed language is a system of rules and relationships, focusing on how words and sentences work together. He said the connection between a word and its meaning is arbitrary. Saussure also made a distinction between the overall language system and individual speech acts. He looked at language without considering its history. Other scholars like Noam Chomsky, expanded on these ideas discussing the structure of sentences and the difference between knowing language rules and using language performance. In simple structuralism studies language as a system of rules and relationships that help us understand how words and sentences work together.



Ferdinand De Saussure (1857-1913)

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and the founder of modern structuralism, had a significant impact on our understanding of language. His key work, *Course in General Linguistics*, was published posthumously and was based on his lectures in Geneva between 1906 and 1911.

Saussure considered language as a social fact, influenced by the thinking of Emile Durkheim, who viewed social facts as related to morality and collective representations. Antoine Meillet, a contemporary French linguist who studied under both Saussure and Durkheim, highlighted the influence of Durkheim's sociology on Saussure's language theory. Saussure embraced Durkheim's methodological collectivism, distinguishing between language and speech (*parole*). He saw language as a collective representation, an abstract system of linguistic rules that governed concrete language use. Saussure rejected reductionist explanations of language, arguing against historical, psychological and casual approaches. Language, as a social fact, imposed constraints on individuals and existed independently of them. It was a structured system, much like a legal system, influencing people's actions and making its concrete forms meaningful only within the context of its overall structure as a collective representation.

◆ *Structuralism in linguistics*

4.1.1.1 'Langue and Parole'

Structuralism has its roots in linguistics, with a significant contribution from Ferdinand de Saussure. He revolutionised our understanding of language by distinguishing between 'langue' (structural language) and parole' (spoken language). 'langue' is the organised, rule-based system of language, while 'parole' refers to actual spoken language used by people. According to Saussure, language and speech are closely connected and interdependent. He believed that language was a combination of well-structured thought and sound, creating forms rather than substances. Any misunderstandings about languages stem from mistakenly thinking it must have a physical substance. Saussure emphasised that language existed beyond the physical properties of words, and a word's existence was through its meaning and function as a linguistic form, where an idea is connected to a sound, and the sound becomes a symbol for that idea.

4.1.1.2 Signs/Signifier/Signified

The ideas of signs, signifier and signified has in-depth interpretations and to understand it let us begin with a simple example.

◆ *Signs is dependent on the social context*

Let us examine the word 'cool' as the 'sign'. When we take 'cool' as the 'signifier'; the 'signified' aspect of it could be 'temperature'. But wouldn't we use the term 'cool' to denote the appearance of being 'popular' or stylish' in the contemporary context? In such context the 'sign' of 'cool' goes beyond its textual or sound level. The connection between signifier and signified varies according to the social context. It is important to note that 'signs' are encoded, understood and interpreted in context. For the word 'cool' the connection between signifier and signified is made significant/meaningful based on the social context.

◆ *Signs have fluid meaning*

Similarly, the word 'banana' signifies 'fruit', but to my neighbour or any other person, it might mean a yellow fruit with brown spots. That means perceptions are symbolic; not concrete. In case of common terms like banana, dog, pencil etc.; we don't need to think too much about what signs/signifier mean because the common groundwork has already been laid. Hence, we can understand words like 'banana' without a lot of effort, because society has already agreed on what it represents. It is not the same with the case of complex terms like border, flag, turban, gate etc. Ferdinand de Saussure believed that language is made up of building blocks called 'signs. These signs consist of a mental image (signifier) and an idea (signified).



◆ *Signs are arbitrary convention*

Analysing another example; when we read the word 'Gate', the sound we make is the signifier, and the conceptual meaning of GATE is the signified. Saussure thought that these signs combine to create larger units in language. The basic elements of the language are these 'signs. He called the combination of a concept and a sound image a 'sign'. The meaning of each sign comes from how it relates to other signs within the language system. Saussure also argued that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is entirely arbitrary. There is no inherent reason why those four marks in the word 'GATE' mean a gate, except for cultural or historical convention. It's because a specific group of people decided that these marks represent the concept of a gate. Hence, according to Saussure, the relationship between a signifier and the signified, as well as the relationship between a sign and what it refers to (like a physical 'gate'), is arbitrary. He separates the sign into its two components. First, there is the part that you can see or hear, which the most common forms of signs are. Saussure calls these 'verbal' signs because they involve words and language. The visible or audible part of a verbal sign is its sensible part., the one that you can perceive with your senses. This is the signifier. The meaning that this signifier holds for you is the signified.

4.1.1.3 Binary Opposition

◆ *Difference in words and perceptions*

Ferdinand Saussure believed that language is essentially a system of differences, and it doesn't have inherent meanings on its own. Instead, the meaning of a word is determined by how it's different from other words. For example, the word 'hot' only makes sense because it's different from 'cold'. This challenges the idea that words have a direct connection to the things they represent. Saussure argued that we can't directly perceive differences, but they are what make language work. So, the distinctions between words like 'apple', 'banana', 'mango' and 'orange' given them meaning. This view suggests that the structure of language shapes our understanding of the world and even influences how we think and interact in society. In essence, Saussure's ideas reveal that language is built on differences between words, and these differences play a significant role in shaping our perceptions of reality.

Saussure's ideas about language are pretty groundbreaking. He said that in language, what's important are the differences between words, not the words themselves. This means that language doesn't just reflect the real world; it actually helps shape how we see and experience reality. So, language isn't just a tool for representing things; it's an active system that shapes how we understand the world.

◆ *Opposites
create meaning
together*

Aforesaid, binary opposites are a pair of connected concepts which possess opposite meanings. Just try out with the word 'up'. It has a binary opposite 'down'. For 'youth' there is an 'old age', for 'sunrise' there is 'sunset'. Let us make it more interesting by placing it in media. A film has a binary opposites of 'hero' and 'villain'. It has interpretations of 'good' and 'evil'. The binary of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' also do exist. The binaries are understood well by the relationships between them; rather their connection becomes meaningful because of the binary existence. 'Life' becomes meaningful because of 'death'. 'Bravery' becomes acceptable because of the shamefulness involved in 'cowardice' isn't it? Saussure added that binary pairs were crucial to all human signifying social structures. Binary opposites constitute basic structure of all human cultures and all human ways of thinking.

Saussure's influence can be seen in anthropology and literary analysis. People like Claude Levi Strauss and Mary Douglas used his ideas to look at cultural norms and practise a system of differences. Roland Barthes also applied Saussure's linguistics to analyse things in popular culture, from ads to eating habits.



Claude Levi Strauss – (1908-2009)

Claude Levi Strauss was born in Brussels, Belgium on November 28, 1908, and lived until October 30, 2009. He initially studied law at the University of Paris and later became a teacher's assistant. In 1934, he became a sociology professor in Brazil at the University of Sao Paulo and began studying Brazilian Indigenous peoples.

Throughout his life, Levi - Strauss was dedicated to teaching and even spent time as a visiting professor in New York from 1941 to 1945. His academic journey started with law and philosophy, but in 1935, he and his wife went to Brazil for their professor roles. While there, his wife Dina, was doing research on the native people of Mato Grosso and the Amazon Rainforest. However, due to an injury, she couldn't finish her work, so Levi Strauss had to complete it himself. This experience marked the beginning of his career as an anthropologist.

Levi Strauss is known as the founder of structuralism, a way of thinking that suggests certain cultural aspects are universal because of underlying

structural factors. For example, he believed that all human cultures tend to organise things into pairs of opposites, like left and right, black and white or hot and cold. His influence extended to future structural anthropologists like Edmond Leach and post structuralist philosophers like Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida. Levi Strauss made a significant impact on the way we understand and study cultures and their underlying structures.

Major Works

- ◆ The Elementary Structures of Kinship (1967 ed)
- ◆ A Word on the Wane (1955)
- ◆ Structural Anthropology (1961)
- ◆ The Savage Mind (1963)
- ◆ Totemism (1962)
- ◆ Mythologies- The Raw and the Cooked (1964)
- ◆ From Honey to Ashes (1966)
- ◆ The Origin of Table Manners (1968)
- ◆ The Naked Man (1971)
- ◆ The Way of the Masks (1975)
- ◆ The View from Afar (1983)

4.1.2 Claude Levi Strauss – Structuralism

◆ *Exchange system of relationship*

Claude Lévi-Strauss is known for the concept of structuralism. Unlike most sociologists, who see society as a network of relationships, he saw it as a system of exchange between groups, with marriage or the exchange of women as a central part. However, in structuralism, the focus shifts to understanding how people in a society use a system of binary symbols to interpret their world. When Levi-Strauss talks about “structure,” he isn’t referring to the obvious, visible social structures but the hidden, abstract, and unconscious patterns that underlie them. These patterns can only be understood by analysts and are not directly accessible to the people within the society.

Structuralism is a way of studying society that sees it as a system of logical structures. It’s heavily influenced by psychology and linguistics. In linguistics, it’s not concerned with what people consciously say, but with hidden rules and grammar of language. This idea of hidden rules in language

◆ *Structural linguistics*

comes from Ferdinand de Saussure, who coined the term “Structuralism.” He said that people can speak a language perfectly without consciously knowing its rules. Similarly, in culture, people follow unwritten rules without knowing why. So, anthropologists using structuralism aim to uncover these hidden rules beneath the surface of a culture to understand how it works.

◆ *Cultural elements and social unity*

Lévi-Strauss believed that our minds understand things by comparing them to their opposites, like light and dark, fast and slow. He also borrowed some ideas from Hegel. Levi-Strauss thought that you can understand elements of a culture, like myths, by breaking them down into opposing parts. He disagreed with the idea that cultural elements exist to create social unity and believed they transmit messages that help people understand the world. These messages are not specific to any one culture but are part of how all humans think, by creating opposites to make sense of the world.

◆ *Comparison of cultural elements*

Structuralism is a type of theory that claims to be useful for understanding many different aspects of culture and can be applied universally. People who follow structuralism use it to analyse various cultural elements and make comparisons between them. The main idea in structuralism, as advocated by Levi-Strauss, is to use a scientific approach that involves comparing things objectively as if you were an outsider looking in. This method is a fundamental part of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism.

4.1.2.1 Concept of Culture

◆ *Culture as exchange*

Levi-Strauss believed culture was a way for people to communicate and exchange meanings. Everything we consider part of culture, like myths, stories, rituals, and beliefs, served as vehicles for transmitting these meanings. He contrasted the structure of the human mind with the structure of cultural artefacts, and he saw culture as a system of exchange that holds society together. Levi-Strauss also believed that the transition from nature to culture was driven by the incest taboo, which turned biological mating into the cultural institution of marriage in human societies.

◆ *Marriage as cultural strategy*

Levi-Strauss believed that the most basic way groups exchange and come together is through marriage, particularly by exchanging women between groups. In simple societies, this happened because a rule against incest means some groups can’t marry their own women, so they have to get women from other groups. This creates alliances

between groups. Levi-Strauss believed that the prohibition of incest isn't just a psychological or natural rule; it's a cultural strategy that enables the existence of society, involving cultural practices and beliefs.

◆ *Aboriginal society and kinship groups*

In Australian Aborigine society, the fundamental units are kinship groups, and they're connected by a rule that prevents members from marrying within their own group. People in this society are quite similar except for their age and gender. The different kinship groups are identified by the totems associated with them, which are believed to share qualities with their common ancestor. However, women are considered equivalent across groups and can marry into different groups, helping to create and maintain social bonds.

◆ *Totemism and caste system*

Totemism and Caste system are both differentiated by Levi-Strauss. In a caste society, various groups specialise in different tasks, creating cultural divisions. Unlike totemism, where women are naturally similar and can be exchanged to maintain social bonds, in the caste system, cultural differences are emphasised. Caste groups are endogamous, meaning they marry within their own group, and these differences are based on culture, not nature. Levi-Strauss believed that both totemism and the caste system serve the same purpose, marking differences between groups so they can exchange either women or services. In both cases, cultural coding creates differences that might not actually exist. Levi-Strauss viewed culture as a system of codes that send messages to the mind, rather than just a way of life or a set of behaviours. This approach focuses on the common structure found in all cultures and takes away the uniqueness of specific cultural content.

◆ *Structure of myth*

4.1.2.2 Concept of Myths

Levi-Strauss explains that myths serve to make sense of real-life contradictions. To understand a myth, you break it down into basic parts, which are like opposites. These basic parts are organised in a specific way, forming a structure that needs analysis. The structure is the overall form of the myth, while the details are the content. For instance, 'sacrifice' is a behaviour category, and the specific details are the ethnographic information. When studying a myth, we focus on the form, not the content. This is different from a Marxian way of thinking and more like Hegelian thinking, where an initial idea leads to its opposite, resulting in a new synthesis.

Levi-Strauss studied many myths. He broke myths

◆ *Myths and transformation rules*

into opposing categories and transformed them to find similarities with other myths. He believed that our minds can only recognise a limited number of structural patterns due to cognitive limits. Understanding comes from seeing similarities or differences. He used “transformation rules” to connect these limited patterns on various myths, showing how one myth could transform into another within a set.

4.1.2.3 Totemism and Mind

◆ *Myth and mind's creativity*

Levi-Strauss was deeply curious about how the human mind operates, and he saw anthropology as a way to study the mind. He thought that by confirming his theory about how the brain works, especially in distinguishing things through binary opposition, we could understand how culture is expressed. His books “*Totemism*” and “*The Savage Mind*” aimed to reveal the fundamental principles of human thinking and show that there's no real difference between the minds of so-called “primitive” people and sophisticated westerners. As his research progressed, he turned his attention to areas like myth classification, where there were fewer limitations on the mind's creativity. This led to his “*Mythologies*” series, consisting of four books, such as “*The Raw and the Cooked*” (1964), “*From Honey to Ashes*” (1966), “*On the Origin of Table Manners*” (1968) and “*The Naked Man*” (1972) which explore how the human mind functions by studying myths.

◆ *Totems as social*

Levi-Strauss discusses totemism, where groups name themselves after plants or animals. They do this not because they think they are these creatures, but because it's a way to represent the distinct differences between these groups. This naming is like recognising a “class structure” in nature that's applied to society. Additionally, they don't name themselves after animals for their practical value but because these creatures are “good to think”. Totems serve as symbols for social categories, not just economic use. They help people express and capture differences, as our minds naturally work by noticing contrasts and oppositions. So, totems help mediate between opposing qualities and resolve or suspend contradictions.

Structuralism is an important approach in social sciences and folklore studies. Claude Levi-Strauss focused on things like kinship, totemism, and myths to uncover the universal underlying structures of human thought. Structuralism



is said to be historical, meaning it applies across time and cultures, but this has drawn criticism. A good method, according to critics, should consider both time and space.

Summarised Overview

Structuralism is a way of understanding human behavior and culture by looking at the underlying patterns and meanings. It believes that the mind works in terms of opposites like night and day, and these opposites can vary from one society to another. For example, what's good 'or 'bad' can be different in different cultures. Anthropologists study these rules to make sense of a culture.

Ferdinand De Saussure's structural linguistics is a theory that redefined the study of language. He introduced the idea of synchronic analysis, using scholars to examine language as a static, simultaneous structure rather than a historical evolution. Saussure distinguished between 'langue' the abstract structure of a language, and 'parole' individual speech acts, emphasising the primacy of understanding the system of 'langue'. Saussure's emphasis on language as a human constructed system with its own internal rules continue to shape our understanding of communication and culture today.

Claude Levi Strauss played a big role in developing structuralism by showing how different cultural systems are interconnected and suggesting that there is a hidden reality behind what people think is the order of their lives. He also proposed the idea that totemism, where people associate with specific symbols or totems, is a way of classifying and connecting natural and cultural aspects of life. The key was not how one totem related to one clan but how relationships between totems reflected the relationships between different social groups.

Assignments

1. Elaborate on the significance of structural approach to studying language.
2. Evaluate the contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure to understand structural linguistics.
3. Examine the relationship between signs, signifiers and signified in the language system.
4. Critically evaluate Levi Strauss's concept of culture as a system of exchange.
5. Discuss the structural analysis of myth to understand the social structure of a society.

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SGOU



Structuralist Marxism

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the difference between the perspective of Structural Marxism and traditional Marxism
- ◆ explore the role of Nicos Poulantzas and his contributions to sociological theories
- ◆ make awareness of the role of state and power through the theoretical understanding of structural Marxism

Background

In the 1960s, there was a movement called Structural Marxism that brought about significant changes in traditional Marxist ideas. This movement challenged conventional Marxist beliefs and introduced a new concept called 'theoretical humanism'. Unlike traditional Marxism, Structural Marxism argues that history does not have a predetermined purpose or a guiding force. Instead, it suggests that history unfolds without a clear plan, and human beings merely play roles as carriers of structural functions in this historical process.

Louis Althusser, a French philosopher who drew inspiration from the structuralist ideas of Jacques Lacan, played a crucial role in this movement. He believed that true Marxism involved a radical departure from many commonly attributed elements of Marx's work, such as the idea of the proletariat as the historical driving force, the dialectical method and the base end superstructure model.

Structuralist Marxism was a unique version of structuralism that became very popular in France and other parts of the world, and the thinkers were Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, and Maurice Godelier. Structural Marxists agreed that society consisted of economic, political, and ideological levels, but they rejected the idea that the economic level always served as the foundation for the others.



Keywords

Structure, Power, Social class, State, Capitalist, Economy

Discussion

◆ *Althusser and Structuralism*

Structuralists believe that our individual experiences and actions are heavily influenced by the larger social structures in society. Althusser, in particular, argued that our actions are not purely based on our free will, but they are always shaped by the dominant ideas of the state. He thought that individual agency is overpowered by historical processes and society's influences. Althusser also rejected the idea of history progressing towards a specific goal and believed that a society's structure is influenced by the ruling class and the mode of production. This perspective is often called Marxist Structuralism. Both structuralists and Althusser emphasise how society's structures significantly impact our actions and that history doesn't follow a single predetermined path.

◆ *Poulantzas Marxism*

4.2.1 Structuralist Marxism - Poulantzas

Poulantzas had a unique approach to understanding society. He combined ideas from Marxism and Louis Althusser's views on how society works. Poulantzas believed that the conflict between different social classes is a significant force in shaping history. He placed the concept of social classes in between the overall structure of society and the government (state). So, according to Poulantzas, the government is influenced by two things. First, it's influenced by the structure of society as a whole, which determines its role and function. Second, the government's actions are also influenced by the ongoing conflicts and struggles between different social classes, which are in part, shaped by the structure of society as well.

◆ *Meaning of Structural Theory*

Poulantzas focused on understanding how the government works within this framework. This focus was guided by structural theory, which basically explains how different parts of society work together. Structural theory helps us understand how the different parts of society function and how they relate to each other. So, it's like looking at how the pieces of a puzzle fit together in a society.

◆ *Concept of Political*

Poulantzas defines “the political” as the part of the state that deals with laws, rules, and government functions. But it’s important to note that “the political” is not the same as the state itself. Instead, it’s about what the state does in society. The state has a specific job, which is to hold society together and maintain its balance. It does this by regulating various aspects of society, including the economy, the ideas and beliefs in society (ideology), and the purely political matters like making and enforcing laws. The way the state does its job can change depending on which aspect (economic, ideological, or purely political) it’s focusing on. But all these aspects are ultimately tied to the state’s main goal of keeping society united and balanced. Sometimes, one of these aspects can become more important than the others, but this usually reflects the importance of different parts of society. So, the state’s actions are influenced by different aspects of society, but its core purpose remains the same: to maintain the unity and balance of the social system.

◆ *Capitalist and ruling*

In capitalism, the government has specific roles, like making and enforcing laws, to maintain social order. These political functions are separate from economic matters because, in capitalism, people don’t own what they produce. This setup allows the government to appear to be serving everyone, even though it mainly benefits the capitalist class. The government’s job is to keep society in order without meddling in economic distribution.

◆ *State and economy*

Poulantzas’s view is that the government (the state) has two important roles in the economic part of society. First, the state helps organise how work is done to make it more efficient, aiming to increase the productivity of labour. This means the government gets involved in how things are made and done to make the economy better. Second, the state is also involved in setting up the rules for how businesses and individuals exchange goods and services. This includes the legal and judicial systems that ensure fair and orderly business interactions. So, the government plays a technical role in making production more efficient, and it also creates the rules that allow businesses to operate smoothly.

In Marxism, the government doesn’t have to control production for the capitalist class to dominate. This is because the power of capitalists comes from a process called valorization, which affects not just production but also distribution, circulation, and consumption. In essence,

◆ *Valorisation*

capitalism itself, not the government, shapes how business and trade work. The government's relative independence is a result of the historical development of capitalism, where economic and political powers have become separate over time.



Nicos Poulantzas - (1936-1979)

Nicos Poulantzas was born in Athens in 1936. He initially studied law in Greece but got into philosophy. He and other young Greek intellectuals turned to Marxism through Jean Paul Sartre's writings because they couldn't easily access original Marxist texts due to their country's history of Nazi occupation, civil war, and anti-communist government. After some legal studies in Germany, Poulantzas moved to Paris, where he became a law professor and mingled with the editors of 'Les Temps Modernes'. He began publishing early works on law and the state and engaged with British and Italian Marxists, including Antonio Gramsci. His 1964 doctoral dissertation was influenced by Georg Lukacs, Lucien Goldmann, and Sartre's existentialism, blending with the Hegelian Marxism popular in France.

Poulantzas, a notable student of Louis Althusser, expanded Althusser's structuralist approach to create a Marxist theory of the state. He was politically active in Greece after the military dictatorship was overturned, supporting various left-wing groups and advising the new government on education. Poulantzas believed understanding the capitalist state was crucial for a strategy of democratic socialism. He tried to combine revolutionary ideas with defending parliamentary democracy against 'authoritarian statism'. His approach resonates with today's socialists, who seek to use the capitalist state strategically without falling into past electoral failures and realignment strategies. Recent interest in Poulantzas's work, with his books being republished in French and English, reflects the ongoing debate about whether just ousting the wealthy elite from power and restoring fairness is enough or if a more profound reform of the state is required. Poulantzas's thinking mirrors the internal conflicts within the leftist movement.

4.2.2 Poulantzas's Theory of Class

Poulantzas's theory of class distinguishes between the structure of society and the actual actions people take. In the structure, the relationships are technical, not social; they're about how things are made and who owns what. This difference mirrors the separation between how things are produced (technical) and how they are distributed in society (social). In Poulantzas's theory, social classes are

◆ *Class and structure*

defined by a combination of their roles in production along with political and ideological factors. This means classes are not determined solely by production relationships, as in traditional Marxism, but by their functions in production as well as social and political factors. This view connects the theory of class to the theory of structure, emphasising that classes are more about how things are distributed extremely to production based on their technical roles.

◆ *Relations of production*

“Social relations of production” are about how different groups share what they produce. It’s not just about their incomes but where their money comes from, which is tied to their roles in production. Poulantzas argues that how things are shared isn’t only based on people’s jobs (the “technical division of labour”) Ideological and factors, the “social division of labor,” also influence class relationships, even in capitalism. It’s especially noticeable in non-capitalist societies, where politics strongly shapes resource distribution. In capitalism, you can’t define social classes solely by money; political and ideological factors matter too.

Poulantzas’s theory of social classes differs from the Marxist view. In Marxism, classes are about fundamental production relationships, not just sharing resources. In capitalism, earnings depend on various factors, not fixed shares. Workers pay relates to their labour value, while capitalists’ income is tied to productivity. In this system, class interests aren’t necessarily in direct conflict since total output depends on the effort put in, not fixed portions.

4.2.3 Poulantzas’s Theory of the Capitalist State

◆ *State as Power*

Poulantzas’s theory of class and society aligns closely with structural-functional theory, particularly regarding the relationship between class and the state. There are two key levels of analysis. On one level, the state’s primary role is to ensure the continued existence of the social order. If one class dominates this order (though Poulantzas doesn’t explain how this dominance is achieved), the state is essentially the representative of that dominant class, regardless of the composition of political or ideological representatives in the state. In this context, the state is the clear political power of the dominant classes or fractions.

On the other level, which is the focus of much of Poulantzas’s work, class representation through political parties or institutions at the state level is merely a part of the

◆ *State function and structure*

state's function in maintaining the overall structure. Here, class power and interests are defined within the framework set by the existing structure. The concept of "conjuncture" illustrates the limits of what classes can achieve in a particular conflict, and it's largely determined by the given structure. Ultimately, political practice within a specific conjuncture can shape how the structure evolves, but this evolution is constrained by the structure itself.

◆ *Class and power*

Poulantzas's analysis suggests that class relations within a conjuncture are essentially power relations, with power being an outcome of the structure in class interactions, not an inherent property of the structure. Class power is defined by its ability to achieve its objectives within the current situation, and these objectives are limited by the structure itself. This perspective implies that practice is mostly subservient to the structure and is bound to preserve the existing social order.

◆ *State protects class power*

Poulantzas believed that the main role of the state was to protect the power of social classes. However, he argued that the capitalist state does this in a more subtle way than traditional Marxist theories suggest. It's not just a political institution representing the unity of individuals in a 'civil society', as liberals believe, or a simple tool of class dominance, as in base- and - superstructure Marxism. According to Poulantzas, the capitalist state uses liberal concepts like individual rights and popular sovereignty to appear as a representative of the people's interests. Its skilled at managing the interests of the capitalist class while pretending to speak for the general population. By distancing itself from the more self-serving and opportunistic elements within the capitalist class, who tend to prioritise their personal gain over the overall well being of the dominant classes, the state can negotiate with the 'dominated classes' to legitimise the social order.

◆ *Reconceptualizing class struggle*

Poulantzas redefined the concepts of 'class' and 'class struggle' as he shifted his focus from the conflict between capital and labour. He argued that classes are politically constructed based on how they organise and exert pressure on the political system. They also emerge from the typical economic disputes over wages, working hours and conditions. Poulantzas believed that in a capitalist society, politics significantly shapes and influences other forms of class struggle. The legal system, which allows the capitalist state to represent the interests of the dominant classes, also

weakens the dominated classes. This is because it recognises individuals as isolated entities, disregarding their economic positions. The capitalist state separates the political and economic aspects of class conflict, even if the actual disputes have already been resolved through the functioning of the political system.

◆ *Marxist critique*

In the late 1960s, many thinkers, including Poulantzas and Ralph Miliband, recognised the need for Marxist theory to evolve. They aimed to reveal what many on the left already suspected: that the prevailing liberal ideas of the time were misleading and didn't show the true nature of the new technocratic Keynesian State. Shortly after Poulantzas's book, Ralph Miliband published *The state in Capitalist Society*, where he provided empirical evidence that the shift from an interventionist, managerial state to a more constrained liberal state hadn't diminished the power of the ruling class. Miliband showed that different elites shared common social backgrounds, education and mindsets, and even those who appeared to be exceptions were subtly encouraged to conform to the established rules. This finding was similar to what American Sociologist C. Wright Mills had explored in 'The Power Elite' in 1956. In essence, despite making certain concessions to the working class, the capitalist state continued to serve as a tool for the dominant classes.

◆ *Critique of capitalism.*

Both Miliband and Poulantzas shared some common ground when it came to their views on the capitalist state. They both critiqued the communist perspective, which saw the state as a neutral structure corrupted by those in power. Poulantzas argued that, in reality, it didn't matter who held authority because the capitalist state was inherently designed to maintain class dominance. This wasn't just a theoretical debate; it had significant strategic implications. Poulantzas believed that those on the left were in for a rude awakening if they thought they could simply take control of the state and guide it towards socialism. He pointed to Lenin's idea that to achieve state power for socialism, you had to dismantle the existing governmental apparatus.

Summarised Overview

Nicos Poulantzas was a key figure in the development of Structural Marxism, which was a significant intellectual movement in the 1960s. This movement challenged traditional Marxist ideas. Poulantzas brought some unique insights to Marxism. He emphasised the role of the state in class struggle. Unlike traditional Marxism, which saw the state as a tool of the ruling class, Poulantzas argued that the state had a certain degree of independence. This meant that the state could sometimes act in ways that weren't solely in the interests of the ruling class. He believed that understanding this autonomy of the state was important for accepting how power and class relations work in capitalist societies. He also stressed the significance of the state's various parts and how they function to maintain the existing social order. He suggested that there were different structures that interacted and influenced each other. This was a departure from the traditional Marxist idea that the economy was the only thing that really mattered. To conclude, Nicos Poulantzas Structural Marxism added new ideas to Marxist thinking. He focused on the role of the state, how different parts of society interact, and how power and class dynamics function in complex ways in capitalist societies. His work continues to be influential in modern discussions of politics and society.

Assignments

1. Discuss Poulantzas unique theoretical approach to understand society.
2. Examine Poulantzas concept of 'Political'.
3. Elaborate on 'Social Relations of Production' by Poulantzas.
4. Evaluate Poulantzas structural functional theory on class and society.

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സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം
ശ്രദ്ധപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കുതിരുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം
ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം
ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ
ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണേ

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