**SOC 3290 Deviance**

**Overheads Lecture 10: The Functionalist Perspective**

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

**Theoretical Images:**

\* Functionalism divides phenomena into functional/dysfunctional:

- functional = positive consequences for social organization

- dysfunctional = negative consequences for social organization

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

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

- too strong = overly conformist, unable to flexibly adapt

- too weak = too loosely defined/unable to complete basic tasks

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

-universal=must be present in all or majority of societies

-necessary=a determining condition required for societal existence

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

(1) By setting moral boundaries;

(2) Strengthening in-group solidarity;

(3) Allowing for adaptive innovation; &

(4) Reducing internal societal tensions.

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

- manifest= recognized & intended

- latent= unintended consequences

\* Deviance may be manifestly condemned but latently permitted/useful

\* Examples:

-Robert Merton on corrupt city politics: maximizing benefits for all

-Kingsley Davis on prostitution: satisfying needs while

maintaining marital bonds

- Denfield & Gordon on “swinging”: releasing sexual fantasies

while maintaining sentimental bonds of marriage

**Identifying Functional Deviance:**

\* Common assumptions guide functionalist research:

- limit researchers to certain images

- deviance must be seen in relation to whole society

- organic metaphor: society made up of interrelated parts

\* Durkheim: important to separate causes from consequences (not

always practicing what he preached)

\* Two logical /conceptual problems result:

(1) *Circular reasoning* (tautology). “If something is universal, it

must be functional.” Why is it functional? Because it’s universal.”

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

\* Robert Merton’s solution: Avoid all assumptions about:

(1) The harmonious integration of parts of a system;

(2) Any relationship between the existence of a phenomena & its

contribution to the social order; &

(3) The idea that social needs can only be met by the present

phenomena.

\* These pave the way for several considerations:

- deviance may be functional for some; dysfunctional for others

- the “net balance” of positive/negative consequences

- manifest & latent functions

- alternative ways of meeting same social needs

\* Merton: five steps in a proper functionalist analysis:

(1) Specifically describe deviant phenomena/control patterns;

(2) Outline range/type of alternatives excluded in present instance;

(3) Assess their meaning for those involved;

(4) Discern motives for conforming/not conforming; &

(5) Describe patterns/latent consequences not recognized by

participants

\* Avoid above problems better in theory than in practice.

**Social Control of Functional Deviance:**

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

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

\* Parsons: systemic social needs coordinated by:

(1) Adaptation to external environment;

(2) Integration of the system’s parts (values, roles, interests,

& motives);

(3) Goal attainment;

(4) Pattern maintenance-tension reduction.

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

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

(1) Socialization;

(2) Profit;

(3) Persuasion; &

(4) Coercion.

**The Functionalist Perspective Today:**

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

\* Yet, Parsons’ work historically rooted in:

(1) The Great Depression;

(2) Wartime thinking (WWII).

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

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

\* Provided a politically safe conceptual escape:

-“system is adaptable/things will work out in time”

- avoided how system itself induces crises/disorder/unease

\* Parsons himself:

- stable/sheltered background

- insulated from Depression at Harvard

- mixed progressive/reactionary activities

- enthusiasm for cybernetics/idea of “feedback mechanisms”

- linked capitalist “management information systems” ideology,

military “hierarchy of control,” & Pareto’s biological “living

systems” ideas

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

\* 1950's “triumph of sociology as a science”:

- focus on management/organizational problems

- high-level conceptualization/attempts at prediction

- glossed over economic, racial & sexual inequalities

- 1960's conflict broke “rose-colored glasses”

\* Still, functionalist work is being done:

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

(i) Groups induce, sustain & permit deviance

(ii) Deviance functions to induce members to maintain group

equilibrium;

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

(2) Erikson (Puritans):

-Level of charges constant over time

-Sanctioning increased with threats to religious purity of group

- “Crime waves” saw group reaffirm values in different ways

- Questions arise, but still provocative/suggests society needs

deviance

**Assessment of the Functionalist Perspective:**

\* Innovates by suggesting possible positive consequences of deviance

\* Disadvantages:

(1) An overly mechanistic view of social life as a social system;

(2) Logical problems: (tautology/false teleology);

(3) Conservative political bias.