

Functionalism in the Social Sciences

Functionalism is the logic that everything has a use, or quite bluntly, a function. Just because something seems foreign or primitive, one mustn't just disregard it as just "something that culture does". The idea is very simple if looked upon shallowly, such as a knife is used to cut, but the deeper one dives into it the more complex it becomes. Functionalism has two meanings, or rather two different ways of looking at it. You can decide to concentrate on that everything MUST have a purpose or that it has a function but not a direct purpose, in the form of social organization. For example the North-American Indian "rain dance". Scientifically it doesn't actually cause nature to change and thus rain, but rather it brings the group together when they are all suffering as one in the "drought". Whether or not the drought means the lack of rain or the lack of something else, it doesn't matter because the principle is still the same.

If this is the case that everything has a purpose, does that mean war and poverty has its purpose too? To clarify this two new phrases have been made. *Dysfunctional*, meaning the negative side of functions and *Eufunctional*, meaning the opposite. But as some point out, what could be dysfunctional for one, could be eufunctional for another, for example a poor man having to work all day for the benefit of a rich man.

Changes in functions can also be observed, returning to the case of the rain dance. In the past it was used primarily for ceremonious reasons but now it's used for that but also as a form of entertainment and teaching the new generation of its past and history.

The fathers or the basic concepts of functionalism are *Bronislaw Malinowski* (1884-1942) and *Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown* (1881-1955). Although their views are different, they are still very much the same.

Malinowski was a pioneer in the 20th century for participant observation, and spent two years studying the Trobriand and believed that to properly study a culture, one must spend the absolute minimum of one year living amongst the people, Learning

the language is a very important tool which enabled him to learn more about the people, more so than if he remained just an observer. He concluded, while studying the Trobriand society that no matter how it may look to an outsider, all customs and traditions has its function and purpose. His ideas include how culture functioning also has roots in the basic drives, such as eating and reproduction. The two are essential to life, but judging by the culture, each has more taboos than the other. For example in middle-eastern cultures sex is extremely taboo compared to how we handle the idea in the western world and the eating of pork as well.

Malinowski put functionalism into three categories, each for the primary needs of life: *Biological*, *Psychological* and *Social*. In many of his books, he used this as the source of all his theories and put all of his findings into this scheme. Through his book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), he showed how something very bizarre turns out to be something satisfying basic needs, such as the kula ring of economic exchange. He was apposed to the idea that history played a part in how a society progressed and was against social Darwinism in some ways.

Radcliffe-Brown was regarded as one not well suited for ethnographic work and participant observation, but rather relied more on surveys. A reason for this could be that he was very reserved and quiet, or so go the opinions of him from his colleagues and students. His main aim was to formulate laws on how social behaviour crossed different cultures and his approach was what coined the phrase *structural functionalism*, where as Malinowski was considered just a functionalist. The main difference between the two is that Radcliffe-Brown concluded that it was impossible to study culture as it was too abstract but rather to focus on the social structure of a society. Studying the social structure is observing people in a society and determining things such as what social rank they have or what their job/function is and the relationship between all the people in the society. It is because of these two that functionalism has two real meanings, considering which side of the coin you look at.

