

The of 'function' have
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thoughts



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The concept of 'function' applied to human societies is based on an analogy between social life and organic life. The recognition of this analogy is quite old. Even during the 19th century, the analogy and the concept of and the word 'function' were used very commonly in social philosophy and sociology. But the systematic formulation of the concept of 'function' in the study of society can be said to have been made by Emile Durkheim in 1895 in his 'Rules of Sociological Method'. Definitions of Function: 1.

Durkheim's definition of function is that "the 'function' of a social institution is the correspondence between it and the needs of the social organism". (It may be noted that Radcliffe-Brown prefers to substitute for the term 'needs' the term-"necessary conditions of existence".) 2. R.

K. Merton defines function as "those observed consequences which make for the adaptation and adjustment of a given system". Radcliffe-Brown's Views Regarding 'Function': The concept of 'function' has become quite popular in modern sociology due to the contributions of Malinowski, A. R. Brown, Talcot Parsons, Robert K. Merton, and Kingsley Davis. Durkheim's views of 'function' have deeply influenced the thoughts of all these writers.

For the purpose of understanding the term 'function' as used in sociology, we shall briefly deal with Brown's views. Analogy between Social and Organic Life: Brown frankly advocated the analogy between social life and organic life. He tried to avoid Durkheim's emphasis on the 'needs' of the social organism and hence spoke in terms of "necessary conditions of existence". This was because he wished to avoid teleological implications, (such as "the notion of some 'guiding spirit' or mysterious force in social life".) As the

analogy runs, a complex organism such as a human body has a structure as an arrangement of organs, tissues and fluids. Even the single cellular organism has a structure of its own in the form of an arrangement of molecules. An organism has life which can be referred to as a 'process'. The term 'organic function' refers to the "connection between the structure of an organism and its life process".

The life processes that go on within the living human body are dependent on the organic structure. For example, it is the function of the heart to pump blood throughout the body. The continued existence of the organic structure depends on the processes that make up the total life processes. If the heart fails to perform its function the life process comes to an end, and the living structure also comes to an end. Process is dependent on structure and continuity of structure is dependent on process. In the study of social system also the concept of 'function' could be used in a scientific way as it is used in physiology. It could be used to refer to the interconnection between the social structure and the process of life. The three concepts – process, structure and function-are logically connected.

They constitute the essential aspects of the theory of human social system. Social Structure and Function: In the field of social life, we find that every community whether it is Indian or African, or Australian, has a structure of its own, the individual human beings are its essential units. They are interconnected by set of social relations. The continuity of the social structure is not destroyed by changes in the units. It means individuals may die or go out of their society; and new members may enter in.

The continuity of social-structure is maintained by the process of social life.

The ' process of social life' refers to the activities and interactions of the individuals and of the organised groups, into which they are united. The social life of the community itself is understood as the ' functioning'of the social structure. The function of any particular usage, institution, norm etc.

(such as punish- whole. It is also its contribution to the maintenance of the structural continuity. It is clear from the above explanation that according to Brown, the concept of function involves the notion of a ' structure'. Structure consists of a ' set of relations' that exists amongst ' unit entities' namely individuals and groups.

The ' continuity of the structure is maintained by a ' life process' made up of the activities of the constituent units, that is; individuals and groups.

According to Brown, the term ' function' indicates " the contribution which a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part". Thus, a social custom by means of its functioning contributes to the total social life, that is, to the functioning of the total social system. This view implies that a social system has a certain kind of unity, which Brown speaks of as a ' functional unity". This functional unity is " a condition in which all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree, of harmony or internal consistency". This idea of functional unity presupposes that the parts of the social system do not produce persistent conflicts which can neither be resolved nor regulated.

Brown made it clear that this idea of functional unity of a social system is only hypothesis which could be tested by a systematic examination of the

facts. Brown who has made use of the organic analogy for his explanation of the concept of function is quite aware of its limitations also. Firstly, as he stated, " it is possible to observe the organic structure to some extent independent of its functioning".

" But in human society the social structure as a whole can only be observed in its functioning". For example, the relations of father and son, buyer and seller, ruler and subject, cannot be observed except in the social activities, in which the relations are functioning. Thus, he states " a social morphology cannot be established independently of a social physiology". Secondly, an animal organism does not in the course of its life, change its structural type. For example, a donkey does not become horse.

But, a human society " in the course of its history can and does change its structural type without any breach of continuity". Thirdly, in the case of organic life we find that an organism may function more or less efficiently. Here, there is a special science of pathology to deal with all phenomena of dysfunction. We distinguish in an organism very clearly what we call ' health' and disease. Here, we find objective criteria by which we distinguish between ill-health and health, or between the pathological and normal.

Disease is regarded as that which either threatens the organism with death or interferes with its organic activities. As far as human societies are concerned, they do not die in the manner in which the animals die. Hence, we cannot say, that if a particular ' dysnomia' or disorder is not treated properly or checked, it would cause the death of a society; it need not.

Further, unlike the organism, the society can change its structural type, if

need arises. The Concept of Function-as a Working Hypothesis: Brown firmly believes that the concept of function constitutes a 'working hypothesis' to understand human society and its working. It helps to formulate problems for investigation. No scientific inquiry impossible without some kind of a working hypothesis such as the concept of 'function', But Brown here has cautioned us that no dogmatic assertion is made such as "that everything in the life of every community has a function".

The assumption is, it may have one, and we can reasonably seek to discover it. Further, as Brown has pointed out, it is quite likely, that "the same social usage in two societies may have different functions in the two". For example, belief in Supreme Being in a simple society is something different from such a belief in a modern civilised community. Brown is quite aware of the fact that the acceptance of the functional hypothesis or point of view as stated above may lead to the recognition of a large number of problems. But he has suggested that the solutions for these could be found by making wide comparative studies of societies of many diverse types, and also intensive studies of as many single societies as possible. He is also of the opinion that the hypothesis leads to an attempt "to investigate directly the functional consistency or unity of a social system". It also helps to determine the nature of that unity.