

## **PREFACE**

With its grounding in the "guiding pillars of Access, Equity, Equality, Affordability and Accountability," the New Education Policy (NEP 2020) envisions flexible curricular structures and creative combinations for studies across disciplines. Accordingly, the UGC has revised the CBCS with a new Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes (CCFUP) to further empower the flexible choice based credit system with a multidisciplinary approach and multiple/lateral entry-exit options. It is held that this entire exercise shall leverage the potential of higher education in three-fold ways - learner's personal enlightenment; her/his constructive public engagement; productive social contribution. Cumulatively therefore, all academic endeavours taken up under the NEP 2020 framework are aimed at synergising individual attainments towards the enhancement of our national goals.

In this epochal moment of a paradigmatic transformation in the higher education scenario, the role of an Open University is crucial, not just in terms of improving the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) but also in upholding the qualitative parameters. It is time to acknowledge that the implementation of the National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NHEQF) and its syncing with the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) are best optimised in the arena of Open and Distance Learning that is truly seamless in its horizons. As one of the largest Open Universities in Eastern India that has been accredited with 'A' grade by NAAC in 2021, has ranked second among Open Universities in the NIRF in 2024, and attained the much required UGC 12B status, Netaji Subhas Open University is committed to both quantity and quality in its mission to spread higher education. It was therefore imperative upon us to embrace NEP 2020, bring in dynamic revisions to our Undergraduate syllabi, and formulate these Self Learning Materials anew. Our new offering is synchronised with the CCFUP in integrating domain specific knowledge with multidisciplinary fields, honing of skills that are relevant to each domain, enhancement of abilities, and of course deep-diving into Indian Knowledge Systems.

Self Learning Materials (SLM's) are the mainstay of Student Support Services (SSS) of an Open University. It is with a futuristic thought that we now offer our learners the choice of print or e-slm's. From our mandate of offering quality higher education in the mother tongue, and from the logistic viewpoint of balancing scholastic needs, we strive to bring out learning materials in Bengali and English. All our faculty members are constantly engaged in this academic exercise that combines subject specific academic research with educational pedagogy. We are privileged in that the expertise of academics across institutions on a national level also comes together to augment our own faculty strength in developing these learning materials. We look forward to proactive feedback from all stakeholders whose participatory zeal in the teaching-learning process based on these study materials will enable us to only get better. On the whole it has been a very challenging task, and I congratulate everyone in the preparation of these SLM's.

I wish the venture all success.

**Professor Indrajit Lahiri**

Authorised Vice-Chancellor  
Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU)

**Netaji Subhas Open University**  
**Four Year Undergraduate Degree Programme**  
**Under National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NHEQF) &**  
**Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes**  
**Course Type : Honours in Sociology (NSO)**  
**Course Title : Sociological Theories (Classical Theories)–1**  
**Course Code : 6CC - SO - 05**

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**Netaji Subhas  
Open University**

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(NSO)**

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# **Unit - 1 □ The Nature and Task of Sociological Perspectives**

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**1.1 Objectives**

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After going through this unit, you can understand

- the meaning of sociological perspective and why there is plurality of perspectives in sociology.
- the meaning, features and basic elements of sociological theory and various scholarly debates relating to the development of such theories.
- different types of and different schools of sociological theory.

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**1.2 Introduction**

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Sociology, defined as the scientific understanding of society (i.e. the web of human interrelationships arising out of human interactions), strives to analyze, explain and understand social phenomena- ranging from the occurrence of unit interaction to the vast array of social change- in a systematic way that allows for every single social occurrence to be understood with all-round satisfaction in its light. Sociologists are also interested in developing a systematic way or schema of approaching social phenomena through the process of thought that inculcates variety of information in a rigorous and objective way so as to create a synthesized view of society. This synthesized view of society, developed by a particular way or schema of approaching social phenomenon, is called sociological perspective. Since the emergence of the discipline it has been the centre of concern, ambiguity and dispute. However, the eternal spring of challenge, creativity, and innovation on the other hand is still there. The sociological perspective may be defined as an approach to understand human behaviour by placing it within its broader social context.

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**1.3 Why is there a plurality in sociological perspective?**

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The history of the emergence of sociology as an academic discipline entails that the discipline was born as an answer or solution to the resultant necessity aroused at the confluence of



two dialectical intellectual forces that had been swaying the intellectual sphere in Europe, namely the Enlightenment Philosophy of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the Counter-Enlightenment Philosophy (Romantic Conservative Philosophy) of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy of Enlightenment offered reason and empiricism (importance of fact, proof, evidence) to be the twin pillars of knowledge; advocated strong arguments in favour of individual freedom and liberty; emphasized on human capability in controlling the world around them and strived for seeking true knowledge in every sphere by mastering the skill and methods of natural sciences. As was promised by the French Revolution, in the post-revolution scenario man was to develop a secular society based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. In reality it was evident that men through their struggle had indeed succeeded in disheveling the older form of society that had been fettered by monarchy and religious orthodoxy; but the emerging society not only appeared non-conforming to the design they had dreamed of, but proved also to be out of their control.

According to Gouldner (1977:13-17), the new society appeared to be a world of contradictions: a world created by man, but not the creator's world, i.e. man could no more control the emerging shapes, forms, features and processes that the society continued to display. Hence, the concepts of society and culture, which form the foundation of the emerging academic social science called 'sociology', developed as ambiguous conceptions, as being creations of man and as having lives and histories of their own- life independent of the men who create, embody and enact them. In sociological analyses the concepts of culture and society were continued to be expressed as autonomous things-independent and existing for themselves (*sui generis* meaning 'in and of itself'). They came to be viewed as any other 'natural' phenomena having laws of their own, and the discipline that studied them came to be viewed as 'natural' science. Man accepted defeat in his effort to control the social world and this defeat was expressed in the duality of ambivalence that featured into the 'objectivity' of the emerging academic social science, nay, sociology: i) man's effort to accommodate to alienation, and ii) expression of his muted resentment towards this alienation. While the assumption of the autonomy and uncontrollability of society and culture as normal and natural condition generated the core of the repressive component of sociology, the feature of suppressed resentment allowed for the liberating potential of the discipline. Sociology thus develops a total conception of man that promoted the distinctiveness of the discipline, featuring a unique contradiction which constituted the core of the concept: man as the controlled product of society and culture (the dominant focal view), and man as the maker of society and culture (the subsidiary but promising view).

The ambivalence or contradictions inherent in the domain assumptions- Man, Society and Culture- led to the development of different perspectives and different schools of Sociology; and shaped the basic charter of Sociology as an academic discipline.

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### **1.4 Sociological Theory: Definition and Features**

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Development of theory lies at the core of any study of science. For a scientific study of society sociology should develop theories like other scientific disciplines. Now, what is a theory? According to Turner (1974), “theory is a mental activity. It is a process of developing ideas that can allow us to explain how and why events occur.” A theory is a set of propositions that provide an explanation by means of a deductive or inductive system and its major functions are description, explanation and prediction based on hardcore empirical facts. In the case of Sociology, a theory is a set of interrelated concepts used to describe, explain, and predict how society and its parts are related to each other. Theories are sets of interrelated concepts and ideas that have been scientifically tested and combined to clarify, and expand our understanding of people, their behaviours, and their societies.

The basic characteristics of a scientific theory are: i) it aspires to transcend the time and space limit, and hence generic, timeless and universal in character; ii) it is stated in neutral, objective, and unambiguous terms so that the theory means the same thing to all who examine it; and, iii) it is designed to be repeatedly and systematically tested with replicable methods against the facts of particular empirical settings.

Sociological theory is a set of assumptions, assertions, and propositions, organized in the form of an explanation or interpretation, of the nature, form, or content of social action. Sociological theory is defined as a set of interrelated ideas that allow for the systematization of knowledge of the social world. This knowledge is then used to explain the social world and make predictions about the future of the social world.

Therefore, the important characteristics of sociological theory are as follows

- i. Sociological theories are abstract generalizations.
- ii. Sociological theories are logical propositions.
- iii. Sociological theories are conceptualizations regarding social phenomena.
- iv. Sociological theories are empirical generalizations.
- v. Sociological theories are factual.

- vi. Sociological theories are provisional in nature.
- vii. Sociological theories are verifiable.

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## 1.5 Building Blocks of Sociological Theory

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As we have already discussed, the history of its very emergence led to different and varying perspectives or approaches in understanding social organization, development of theory in sociology also led to various arguments and debates among the sociologists relating to its nature, scope and levels of analysis. Nevertheless, all the theories have been following four common elements which are considered the building blocks of sociological theories: concepts, variables, statements and formats.

**Concepts:** Generally, concepts denote phenomena. A concept describes the aspects of the social world that are considered essential for a particular purpose. Concepts are constructed from definitions. A *definition* is a statement or system of terms used to express the meaning of a word or word group or a sign or symbol; a statement expressing the essential nature of something that allows visualizing the phenomenon that is denoted by the concept. It enables all investigators universally and instantaneously to point at the same thing and to understand what it is that is being studied. Thus, concepts that are basic elements for building theory must strive to communicate an uniform meaning to all those who use them. However, since concepts, especially used in social sciences, are frequently articulated with the words of everyday language, it is difficult to avoid words that may suggest varied meanings—and hence point to different phenomena for varying groups of people. It is for this reason that many concepts in natural sciences are expressed in technical or more neutral languages, such as the symbols of mathematics. In sociology, expression of concepts in such special languages is sometimes not only impossible but also undesirable. Hence the symbols (words/terms) used to develop a concept must be chosen and defined as precisely as possible so that they point to the same phenomenon unambiguously and universally. It is hard to reach a perfect consensus in defining a concept with conventional language, a body of theory rests on the assertion that researchers will ultimately define concepts unambiguously.

The concepts of theory are of two types: concrete and abstract. Some concepts relate to concrete phenomena at specific times and places. Other, more abstract, concepts depict phenomena that are not related to concrete times or places. For example, in the context of small-group research, *concrete concepts* would refer to the persistent interactions of particular individuals (e.g. 2<sup>nd</sup> semester undergraduate students of a particular department of a particular

college under the University of Calcutta in the year 2019), whereas an *abstract* conceptualization of such phenomena would refer to those general properties of face-to-face groups that are not tied to particular individuals interacting at a specified time and location. Whereas abstract concepts are not tied to a specific context, time and space, concrete concepts are.

Although it is important that some of the concepts of theory go beyond specific times and places, it is equally critical that there be procedures for making these abstract concepts pertinent to observable situations and occurrences. The utility of an abstract concept can be demonstrated only when the concept is brought to analyze some specific empirical problem encountered by researchers. As a formal procedure for attaching abstract concepts to observable events, some argue that the abstract concepts should be accompanied by a series of statements known as *operational definitions*, which are sets of procedural instructions telling researchers how to go about discerning phenomena in the real world that are denoted by an abstract concept. Others argue, however, that the nature of our concepts in sociology precludes such formalistic training. At best, concepts can be only devices that must change with the changes in society, and so we can only intuitively and conditionally apply abstract concepts to the actual analysis.

**Variables:** While building theory, two general types of concepts are used: (1) those that simply label phenomena (e.g. social group, social class etc.) and never reveal the ways in which the concepts may differ in terms of properties like size, volume, weight, age etc in reality; and (2) those that refer to phenomena with their variable properties so as to attribute them with certain ability to respond to the wide differences found in social world. Concepts that denote properties as size, weight, density, velocity etc. refer to differences in degree among phenomena. This second type of concepts is called variables, which aims at describing varying states of particular events denoted by concepts. According to Turner (1974), if Sociology is to follow the path of other natural sciences, concepts are to be translated into variables so that they can help visualize how variation in one phenomenon is related to variation in another phenomenon. However, Sociologists, who are hardly interested to view the discipline on the same boat with natural sciences, are more interested in making the concepts more sensitizing, more alert and concerned towards grasping the dynamic nature of important social processes than in converting each and every concept into variable, i.e. into some measurable metrics.

**Statements and Formats:** The concepts of theory must be connected to one another and these connections among concepts constitute theoretical statements. These statements not only identify the way in which events denoted by concepts are interrelated, they also provide an understanding of how and why events should be connected. When these theoretical statements are grouped together, they constitute a theoretical format (Turner 1974). As there are ample disputes among sociologists regarding the scientific status, degree of subjectivity and objectivity in sociology, there are dramatic debates relating to the structure of theoretical statements and their organization into formats. There are five basic approaches in sociological theory for generating theoretical statements and formats: (1) meta-theoretical schemes, (2) analytical schemes, (3) discursive schemes, (4) propositional schemes, and (5) modelling schemes. Concepts are constructed from definitions; theoretical statements link concepts together; and statements are organized into five basic types of formats. However, these five formats can be executed in a variety of ways. So, in reality, there are more than just five strategies for developing theoretical statements and formats. Moreover, these various strategies are not always mutually exclusive; rather in executing one of them, we are often led to another as a kind of next step in building theory. Yet—and this point is crucial—these various approaches are often viewed as antagonistic. Moreover, even within a particular type of format, there is constant battle over the best way to develop theory. This rancour represents a great misfortune because in a mature science—which, sad to say, sociology is not—these approaches are viewed as highly compatible. Before pursuing this point further, we need to discuss in more detail each of these approaches.

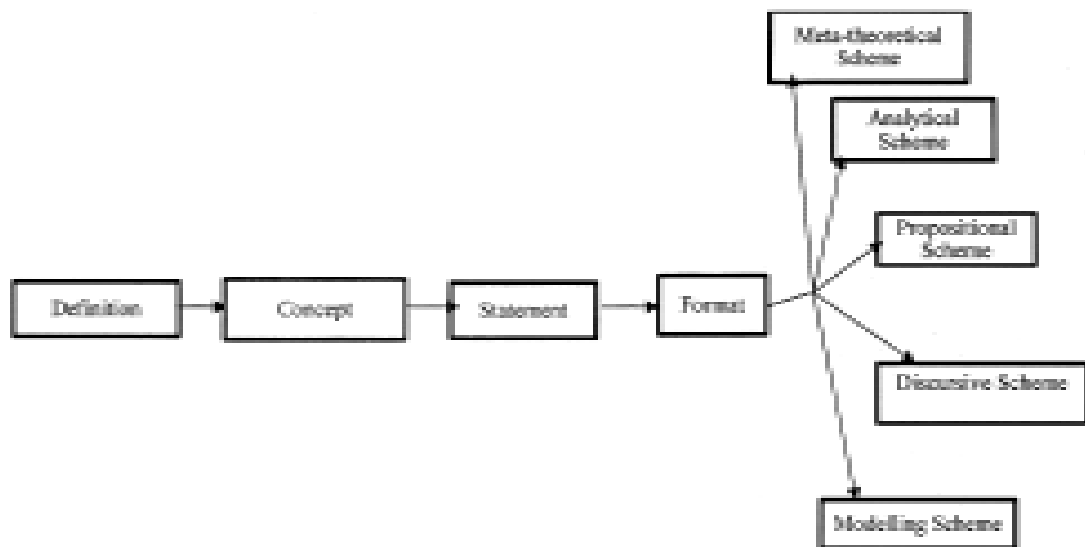
### 1.5.1 Issues and approaches in Sociological Theory

- 1) **Meta-theoretical schemes** deal with the basic issues that a theory must address. In many sociological circles, meta-theory is considered a crucial precondition to adequate theory building. Some of the basic questions that the meta-theoretical scheme seeks answer to are:
  - i. What is the basic nature of human activity about which a theory must be developed?
  - ii. What is the appropriate way to develop theory and what kind of theory is possible?
  - iii. What is the critical problem that the theory in Sociology must concentrate on?

The philosophical debates like idealism versus materialism, induction versus deduction, causation versus association, subjectivism versus objectivism, and so on are re-evoked and

analyzed with respect to social reality. A great deal of theories studied in sociology is, in fact, meta-theoretical activity.

Fig.1.1 Elements of theory in sociology



- 2) **Analytical Scheme** is a classification scheme that denotes the key properties, and interrelations among these properties, in the social universe. There are many different varieties of analytical schemes, but they all share an emphasis on typologizing, i.e. classifying basic properties of the social world. Explanation of an empirical event comes whenever a place in the classificatory scheme can be found for that empirical event. There are two basic types of analytical schemes: (1) *naturalistic schemes*, which try to develop a tightly knitted system of categories that is supposed to capture the way in which the invariant properties of the universe are ordered and (2) *sensitizing schemes*, which are more loosely assembled categories of concepts intended only to sensitize and orient researchers and theorists to certain critical processes.
- 3) **Discursive Schemes** are typically easier to understand than those that are more formal, but the weakness is that the variables and forces highlighted and the dynamic relations among them are vague and imprecise. Even with certain vagueness in language, it is still possible to recognize the basic theoretical argument and convert it into a more formal format like an analytical model or propositional scheme.

- 4) **Propositional Scheme** is a theoretical statement that specifies the connection between two or more variables. It tells us how variation in one concept is caused by or related to variation in another. Propositional Schemes vary perhaps the most of all theoretical approaches. They vary primarily along two dimensions: (1) the level of abstraction and (2) the way propositions are organized into formats. Some are highly abstract and contain concepts that do not denote any particular case but all cases of a type. By using these two above mentioned dimensions, several different types of propositional schemes can be isolated: (a) axiomatic formats, (b) formal formats, and (c) empirical formats. We shall examine each of these schemes below:
- a) **Axiomatic Formats:** An axiomatic organization of theoretical statements includes a set of concepts some of which are highly abstract in nature; others, more concrete. Second, there is always a set of existence statements that describe those types and classes of situations in which the concepts and the propositions that incorporate them apply. Third, propositional statements are stated in a hierarchical order. At the top of the hierarchy are axioms, or highly abstract statements, from which all other theoretical statements are logically derived. The axioms should be consistent with one another, although they do not have to be logically interrelated. The axioms should be highly abstract; they should state relationships among abstract concepts. These relationships should be law-like in that the more concrete theorems derived from them have not been disproved by empirical investigation.
  - b) **Formal Formats:** Formal theories are loose versions of axiomatic schemes. The idea is to develop highly abstract propositions that are used to explain some empirical event. Some highly abstract propositions are seen as higher-order laws, and the goal of explanation is to visualize empirical events as instances of this covering law. Deductions from the laws are made, but they are much looser, rarely conforming to the strict rules of axiomatic theory. Moreover, there is recognition that extraneous variables cannot always be excluded, and so the propositions have a condition that if other forces do not interfere, then the relationship among concepts in the proposition should hold true.
  - c) **Empirical Formats:** They consist of generalizations from specific events, in particular empirical contexts. They are too tied to empirical contexts, times, and places. In fact, they are generalizations that require a theory to explain them. There are other kinds of empirical generalizations also, which are often termed as middle-range theories, because

i) they are more abstract than a research finding, and ii) their empirical content pertains to variables that are also found in other domains of social reality.

- 5) **Analytical Modelling Scheme** is a diagrammatic representation of social events. The diagrammatic elements of any model include: (1) concepts that denote and highlight certain features of the universe; (2) the arrangement of these concepts in visual space so as to reflect the ordering of events in the universe; and (3) symbols that mark the connections among concepts, such as lines, arrows, vectors etc. The elements of a model may be weighted in some way, or they may be sequentially organized to express events over time, or they may represent complex patterns of relations and other potential ways in which properties of the universe affect one another.

In sociology, most diagrammatic models are constructed to emphasize the causal connections among properties of the universe. That is, they are designed to show how changes in the values of one set of variables are related to changes in the values of other variables. Sociologists generally construct two different types of models, which are known as analytical models and causal models. Analytical models are more abstract and tend to highlight more generic properties of the universe, and they portray a complex set of connections among variables. In contrast, causal models are more empirically grounded and provide for a more detailed interpretation of an empirical generalization.

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## 1.6. Elements in Sociological Theory

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In view of the century long enormous debate and discussion among scholars regarding how theory should be developed in sociology to grasp the dynamics of social world comprehensively, Tom Bottomore suggests examining sociological theory as it has developed up to the present time, under three headings: A) Types of generalization, B) Basic Concepts and schemes of Classification, and C) Explanatory Theories.

### 1.6.1 Types of Generalization:

Following M. Ginsberg, Bottomore suggests six types of generalizations in social science:

- i. Empirical relationship between concrete phenomena (e.g. urban life and rate of divorce).
- ii. Generalizations formulating the conditions under which institutions or other social formations arise (e.g. various accounts of the origin of capitalism).
- iii. Generalizations asserting that changes in a given institution are regularly associated with changes in other institution (e.g. Marx's theory of changes in class structure and changes in different institutions)



- iv. Generalizations asserting phase-sequence of various kinds (e.g. attempts to distinguish the 'stages' of economic development by Bucher, Schmoller and others).
- v. Generalizations describing the main trends in the evolution of humanity as a whole (e.g. Comte's law of the three stages, Marxist theory of development from primitive society to communist society etc.).
- vi. Laws stating the implications of assumptions regarding human behaviour ( e.g. some laws in economic theory).

These types of generalizations are diverse in range and level and there are disputes regarding the extent to which they can be regarded as validated. However, sociological theorizing should, from the empirical correlations which have been established, be increasingly committed to the construction of broader generalizations, which then can be open to test by further research. Thus the discipline may reach nearer to cumulative theory construction like other sciences. The sociologists will get a device to curb the harmful propensity for fresh departures and choosing specific facts while curbing out others in order to favour a particular generalization or theory.

### **1.6.2 Basic Concepts and schemes of Classification:**

Concepts serve two purposes: i) they distinguish and help denoting phenomena which had not until then been considered as forming separate classes; and ii) they serve as shortened description of phenomena and as instruments for further analyses and study. Construction of a strong conceptual framework was emphasized by the founding fathers of sociology, like Durkheim (social fact) and Max Weber (ideal types), who introduced and defined concepts, while writing their explanatory theories.

In the field of classification we find the following schemes in sociological theorizing:

- i) Various attempts to classify societies (e.g. Karl Marx's attempt on the basis of economic criteria, attempt of Comte and Hobhouse against the criteria of the level of intellectual development etc.)
- ii) Classification of social groups on the basis of their size, structure, pattern of interaction, duration, recruitment of members and so on.
- iii) Classification of social relationships ( e.g. Hobhouse's distinction between three broad 'types of social union' based respectively upon kinship, authority and citizenship, Durkheim's distinction between two types of social solidarity: mechanical and organic,

distinction between community and society made by Tonnies, Von Wise's distinction of social relationships on the basis of their tendency towards association , or dissociation, towards their diminishing or increasing the social distance between individuals.etc.)

- iv) Classification in terms of social action originated by Max Weber
- v) There is a new trend of classifying phenomena with the character of industrial societies and with the changes in the economically underdeveloped societies.

### **1.6.3 Explanatory Theories:**

Generally speaking, explanatory theories are meant to answer the question “why?” This may take two forms: i) causal explanations which is of the kind “because of.....” , and ii) teleological explanations which are of the kind “in order that.....”. The later kind may be further differentiated into: explanation in terms of purpose and explanations in terms of end-states. According to many of the classical sociologists, as a generalizing science sociology should aim at establishing causal connections and causal laws. But explanations of human individual behaviour at first appearance fall in the category of teleological, in terms of purposes. Hence, there is a significant dispute between scholars regarding whether the discipline should take shape as an ‘interpretative science’ or continue as a ‘natural science of society’. However, the effort of classical sociologists and their followers to develop grand all-encompassing theories of society has been failed as the grand schemes (Functionalism of Durkheim and Radcliff Brown, Conflict theory of Karl Marx) faced rigorous criticism for serious reasons, from scholars advocating for ‘interpretative science’, the trend of building all-embracing explanatory theory has lost its pace. It is a hopeful sign that attention is being paid to theories that keep close to the empirical data, and thus to verification. But sociological theory still suffers from an excessive specialization which has separated theory and research, and from some misinterpretation about the nature of scientific theory.

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## **1.7 Types of Sociological Theory**

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### **1.7.1 Speculative Theories vs. Grounded Theories**

Speculative theories are abstract, impressionistic and rooted in a philosophical system. The founding fathers of sociology, Comte and Spencer, have synthesized the findings of a variety of disciplines to derive a formidable collection of theoretical statements to explain social processes and organizations. These are essentially theories generated by logical deduction

from a priori assumptions. They are based on certain methodological and philosophical assumptions and generate theoretical entities and conceptual schemes.

Grounded theories, on the other hand, are based on the findings of empirical research and they are appropriate to their specific uses. They produce specific sociological laws, principles and empirical generalizations. Grounded theory is partly a theoretical framework and partly research methodology. It combines theory and research and serves as a guide for many social science researchers in their projects. Grounded theory is an attempt to develop theories from an analysis of the patterns, themes, and common categories discovered in empirical research. It emphasizes research procedures when developing theories.

### **1.7.2 Grand Theory vs. Miniature Theory**

A grand theory is a broad conceptual scheme with systems of interrelated propositions that provide a general frame of reference for the study of social processes and institutions. However, it is different from speculative theory. The grand theory is rooted in the empirical world - however loosely, whereas speculative theories are based on philosophical systems. The grand theory is a comprehensive formulation. It provides a master scheme of general sociological orientations. Grand theories are full of jargon and intuitive statements. The system theory of Talcott Parsons and Sorokin's theory of socio-cultural dynamics are examples of grand theories.

Miniature theories are what Merton called as Middle range theories, i.e., theories intermediate to the minor working hypotheses evolved during the day-to-day routines of research, and the all inclusive speculations comprising a master speculative scheme from which it is supposed to derive a very large number of empirically observable uniformities of social behaviour. The miniature theories are partial, more specific and their frame of reference is considerably limited. They are less pretentious than the grand theories. Merton's theory of reference groups is an example of such a theory.

### **1.7.3 Macro Theories vs. Micro Theories**

Macro theories are broader in scope and encompass an array of laws while micro theories have a narrower frame of reference. Macro theories are concerned with total societal patterns. Theories of society, culture and institutions constitute the tradition of macro sociology. Micro sociology is concerned with interactions among the units of society. Small group theories represent the micro tradition in contemporary sociology. The distinction between the two types of theories is based on the size of the unit of analysis rather than the level of analysis. Macro theories deal with society as a whole. Micro theories deal with the subsystems that

constitute the whole. System theory of Talcott Parsons is macro whereas Homan's exchange theory is an example of micro-level theory. Macro theories belong to the grand theory category; Micro theories come under miniature theories.

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## **1.8 Major schools of sociological thought and their basic assumptions**

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### **1.8.1 Functionalism**

Functionalism is a sociological theory that attempts to explain social institutions as collective means to meet social needs. The basic concern of functionalism is to explain the apparent stability and internal cohesion of societies necessary to ensure their continued survival over time. Many functionalists argue that social institutions are mutually interdependent and interconnected to form a stable and coherent system and that a change in one institution will inculcate change in other institutions. Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and essentially relational constructs that function like organisms, with their various parts or social institutions working together to maintain and reproduce them. The various parts of society are assumed to work for the overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as being functional in the sense of working together to achieve this stable unified state. These components are then primarily analysed in terms of the functions they play. A function is the contribution made by a phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part, in order to maintain the unity of the system.

Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements—norms, customs, traditions, institutions and so on. The founding fathers of Sociology, like Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Herbert Spencer etc. were the great advocates of Functionalist theory of society. Later Functionalist trend of theorizing was developed by social anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown; and eminent sociologists like Talcott Parsons, and Robert K. Merton were other two important figures in the functionalist school of Sociology. A common analogy, popularized by Herbert Spencer, presents these parts of society as “organs” that work toward the proper functioning of the “body” of society as a whole.

### **1.8.2 Structuralism**

Another important theoretical approach to the concept of social structure is structuralism (sometimes called French structuralism), which studies the underlying, unconscious regularities

of human expression—that is, the unobservable structures that have observable effects on behaviour, society, and culture. French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss derived this theory from structural linguistics, developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. According to Saussure, any language is structured in the sense that its elements are interrelated in non-arbitrary, regular, rule-bound ways; a competent speaker of the language largely follows these rules without being aware of doing so. The task of the theorist is to detect this underlying structure, including the rules of transformation that connect the structure to the various observed expressions. In structuralism all elements of human culture, including literature, are thought to be parts of a system of signs. The major propositions of Structuralism are listed below:

- i. The underlying elements of the structure remain constant, and it is the varying relationships between them that produce different languages, systems of ideas, and types of society.
- ii. There is the proposition that what appears to us as solid, normal, or natural, is in fact the end result of a process of production from some form of underlying structure.
- iii. Structuralism transforms our commonsense notions of individuals. Individuals are seen as the product of relationships, rather than as the makers of social reality.
- iv. Structuralism holds the view that history is discontinuous and marked by radical changes.

### **1.8.3 Conflict Theory**

Whereas the functionalist perspective views society as composed of different parts working together to maintain social solidarity and stability, the conflict perspective views society as composed of different groups with varying interests competing for power and resources. Conflict Theory claims that society is in a state of perpetual conflict and competition for limited resources. Marx and Weber were the major proponents of conflict theory. Conflict Theory assumes that those who have wealth and/power perpetually try to increase their resources at the expense and suffering of others (majority) in a society. It is a power struggle which is most often won by wealthy elites and lost by the common people of common means. Power attributes its owner the ability to get what s/he wants irrespective of and insensitive to the will of others. When power is legitimized either by tradition or by charismatic qualities of certain individuals or by rational legal institutions it is transformed into authority. The origins of the conflict perspective can be traced to the classic works of Karl Marx. Ralph Dahrendorf, Lewis Coser etc. are other proponents of conflict perspective in sociological theory. The following are three principal assumptions of conflict theory:

- i. Competition over scarce resources is at the heart of all social relationships. Competition rather than consensus is characteristic of human relationships.
- ii. Inequalities in power and reward are built into all social structures. Individuals and groups that benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained.
- iii. Change occurs as a result of conflict between competing interests rather than through adaptation. Change is often abrupt and revolutionary rather than evolutionary.

#### **1.8.4 Interactionism**

Interactionism – or Symbolic Interactionism- is a broad sociological perspective. It is a micro action theory and is interpretative rather than objective in nature. Associated with George Herbert Mead and Max Weber, it is a perspective that views society as the product of human interactions, and the meanings that individuals attach on those interactions. Instead of trying to explain human behaviour in the context of large social structures or fundamental conflicts in society, they look on a smaller level, suggesting that human beings have agency and are not always swayed by the forces outside their control; and they can create their own meanings. Weber recognized that both the small-scale interactions and social structures influenced human behaviour. It is a theoretical perspective that derives social processes (such as conflict, cooperation, identity formation etc.) from human interactions. It is the study of how individuals act within society. This perspective in sociology has grown in the latter half of the twentieth century and has become one of the dominant sociological perspectives in the world today. Interactionism was first linked to the work of James Parker. George Herbert Mead, as an advocate of pragmatism and the subjectivity of social reality is considered a leader in the development of interactionism. Herbert Blumer expanded on Mead's work and coined the term "Symbolic Interactionism".

Symbolic Interactionism is a theoretical approach to understand the relationship between humans and society. The basic notion of Symbolic Interactionism is that human action and interaction are understandable only through the exchange of meaningful communication or symbols. In this approach, humans are portrayed as acting as opposed to being acted upon. The main principles of Symbolic Interactionism are:

- i. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them
- ii. These meanings arise from social interaction
- iii. Social action results from a fitting together of individual lines of action

The focus of Symbolic Interactionism lies on the concrete details of what goes on among individuals in everyday life. It studies how individuals in society use and interpret symbols not only to communicate with each other, but also to create and maintain impressions of themselves, to create a sense of self, and to create and sustain what they experience as the reality of a particular social situation. From this perspective, social life consists largely of a complex network of countless interactions through which life takes on shape and meaning.

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## 1.9 Conclusion

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In this module, you have learned about how different theoretical paradigms are used in sociology to understand the social world. A paradigm is a broad viewpoint, perspective, or lens that permit social scientists to have a wide range of tools to describe society, and then to build hypotheses and theories. Paradigms are also considered as guiding principles or belief systems. In the sociological texts, the word ‘paradigm’ is used interchangeably with perspective, theory, or approach.

We have already discussed here three main perspectives that we find in sociology: the functionalist perspective, the conflict perspective, and the Symbolic Interactionist perspective. However, we do not suggest that they are all inclusive; there are others and more specific topic-based variations of each of the aforementioned three theories.

In order to provide you with a better understanding of the pluralistic nature of sociological understanding, in this concluding part of the module, I am presenting a very common every day event in our life- food consumption- as viewed from different sociological perspectives.

Eating, i.e. food consumption is a very common daily occurrence in human life all over the world. We eat for meeting physical need; we also eat to celebrate important moments in our lives. Eating may be individual action; may involve sharing; it may be group activity. Eating habits, i.e., the items we eat, the way we eat, the manner we process our food may be source of similarity and difference among human beings. If viewed from a larger context, i.e., the context of society, the condition of food system in our country is at the core of numerous social movements and policies, political issues, and economic debates. Now, let us explore the event of food consumption as analyzed from the three main sociological perspectives mentioned above:

From the perspective of **structural-functionalism**, a researcher may find interest in the role of agriculture (basis of food production) in the national economy and its evolution through ages from the most primitive era of manual farming to contemporary mechanized production.

Another study may focus on the interconnectedness and interdependence between various functions (for example, farming, harvesting, packaging, marketing and mass consumerism) that take place in food production. This may further lead to the examination of how the entire process of production, distribution and consumption of food in a particular society is functioning to maintain social solidarity and equilibrium through the elaborate system of division of labour and mutual interdependence among different groups of people in modern society.

**Conflict perspective** may invoke interest of scholars in studying variation in the pattern of food consumption between different social classes, in order to reflect the severe presence of inequality within society that reveals the difference of nutrition among different classes due to differential access to nutritious food in capitalist society, and therefore, differential access to basic life chances predominating in modern capitalist society. Another study may reveal interest in how power differential in contemporary society plays its role in the regulation of food, and how people's right to information comes into conflict with corporation's thrust for profit, and government's role in mediating the two opposing interests.

**Symbolic Interactionism** inspires micro-level studies. Hence a sociologist may study how particular food items carry symbolic meaning in religious rituals; or how homogeneity in food consumption forms an important part of identity for a particular group, while evoking hostility to another group as the latter consumes a particular kind of food which the former considers to be a taboo; or, role of food in the interaction of people in social gatherings (wedding ceremony, family dinner, picnic etc.).

Hence the numerous events in the laboratory of sociologists, i.e., our society, await the sociological minds to explore and understand them from multiple angles, varied perspectives and pluralistic viewpoints; and thus to enhance knowledge and widen their understanding in order to develop a critical, inclusive and sympathetic science of human society.

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## 1.10 Summary

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We have introduced our learners to our approach to sociology. The diversity in such perspectives have been explained. We tried understanding the primary block of sociological theory as well as its types. Major schools have been discussed along with their assumptions.



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## 1.11 Questions

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### A. Answer briefly (6 marks)

- i. What do you understand by sociological perspective?
- ii. Why are there different perspectives in Sociology?
- iii. What is sociological theory? What are its main features?
- iv. How are variables important in sociological theorizing?
- v. Write a short note on conceptualization and classification in sociological theory.
- vi. Write the differences between: (a) speculative theory and grounded theory ( b) grand theory and miniature theory (c) macro theory and micro theory in Sociology.
- vii. What do you understand by Symbolic Interactionism?
- viii. What are the basic assumptions of conflict perspective in sociology?

### B. Answer in detail (12 marks)

- i. Discuss the basic building blocks of sociological theory.
- ii. Following Bottomore, analyse the development of sociological theory.
- iii. Discuss in detail different schools of sociological thought.
- iv. Following Gouldner, discuss the ambivalence or contradictions inherent in the domain assumptions in Sociology.
- v. How statements are organized into formats in sociological theory?
- vi. Define sociological theory. Discuss its features and types.

### C. Essay Type Question (20 marks)

- i. How did different perspectives develop in Sociology?
- ii. Write an essay on the development of theory in Sociology.
- iii. Discuss critically how different perspectives in Sociology attempt to understand social reality.

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## 1.12 References

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- Bottomore, T. B. (1971). *Sociology: A Guide to Problems and Literature* (Chapter 2 pp.29-47), London: Allen and Unwin
- Gouldner, A. (1977). Sociology's Basic Assumptions. In Thompson, Kenneth and Jeremy Tunstall (eds.). *Sociological Perspectives*. (Pp. 13-17). New York: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Turner, J. H. (1974). *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Dorsey series in sociology, USA: Dorsey Press
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## 1.13 Suggested Readings

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- Abraham, M.F. (1982). *Modern Sociological Theory- An Introduction* (pp. 1-38). NY: Oxford University Press.
- Wallace, R. A. & Wolf, A. (2006). *Contemporary Sociological Theory- Expanding the Classical Tradition* (pp. 1-24). New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/>
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## 1.14 Glossary

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- Sociology** The scientific understanding of society, i.e., the web of human interrelationships arising out of human interactions
- Sociological perspective** A broad viewpoint, or lens that permits social scientists to have a wide range of tools to describe society, and then to build hypotheses and theories. There are different perspectives in sociology to understand social phenomena. These are also considered as guiding principles or belief systems. In the sociological texts, the word 'perspective' is used interchangeably with paradigm, theory, or approach.
- Enlightenment** An intellectual movement in 18th century Europe. The Enlightenment Philosophers offered reason and empiricism (importance of fact, proof, evidence) to be the twin pillars of knowledge; advocated strong arguments in favour of individual freedom and liberty; emphasized on human capability in controlling the world around them and strived for seeking true knowledge in every sphere by mastering the skill and methods of natural sciences.

<b>Theory</b>	A theory is a set of interrelated concepts used to describe, explain, and predict how society and its parts are related to each other. Sociological theories are sets of interrelated concepts and ideas that have been scientifically tested and combined to clarify, and expand our understanding of people, their behaviours, and their societies.
<b>Concept</b>	Concepts denote phenomena. A concept describes the aspects of the social world that are considered essential for a particular purpose. Concepts are constructed from definitions. It enables all investigators universally and instantaneously to point at the same thing and to understand what it is that is being studied. The concepts of theory are of two types: concrete and abstract.
<b>Definition</b>	A statement or system of terms used to express the meaning of a word or word group or a sign or symbol; a statement expressing the essential nature of something that allows visualizing the phenomenon that is denoted by a concept.
<b>Variables</b>	Concepts that denote properties as size, weight, density, velocity etc. refer to differences in degree among phenomena. This type of concepts is called variable, which aims at describing varying states of particular events denoted by concepts.
<b>Statement</b>	The concepts of theory must be connected to one another and these connections among concepts constitute theoretical statements. These statements not only identify the way in which events denoted by concepts are interrelated, they also provide an understanding of how and why events should be connected.
<b>Format</b>	When these theoretical statements are grouped together, they constitute a theoretical format. . There are five basic approaches in sociological theory for generating theoretical statements and formats: (1) meta-theoretical schemes, (2) analytical schemes, (3) discursive schemes, (4) propositional schemes, and (5) modelling schemes.
<b>Speculative Theories</b>	Speculative theories are abstract, impressionistic and rooted in a philosophical system. These are essentially theories generated by logical deduction from a priori assumptions. They are based on certain methodological and philosophical assumptions and generate theoretical entities and conceptual schemes

**Grounded Theories**

Grounded theories, on the other hand, are based on the findings of empirical research and they are appropriate to their specific uses. They produce specific sociological laws, principles and empirical generalizations. Grounded theory is partly a theoretical framework and partly research methodology.

**Grand Theory**

A grand theory is a broad conceptual scheme with systems of interrelated propositions that provide a general frame of reference for the study of social processes and institutions. The grand theory is rooted in the empirical world and provides a master scheme of general sociological orientations.

**Miniature Theory**

Miniature theories are what Merton called as Middle range theories, i.e., theories intermediate to the minor working hypotheses evolved during the day-to-day routines of research, and the all inclusive speculations comprising a master speculative scheme from which it is supposed to derive a very large number of empirically observable uniformities of social behaviour.

**Macro Theories**

Macro theories are broader in scope and encompass an array of laws while micro theories have a narrower frame of reference. Macro theories are concerned with total societal patterns. Theories of society, culture and institutions constitute the tradition of macro sociology.

**Micro Theories**

Micro sociology is concerned with interactions among the units of society. Small group theories represent the micro tradition in contemporary sociology

**Function**

A function is the contribution made by a phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part, in order to maintain the unity of the system.

**Functionalism**

Functionalism is a sociological theory that attempts to explain social institutions as collective means to meet social needs. The basic concern of functionalism is to explain the apparent stability and internal cohesion

of societies necessary to ensure their continued survival over time. Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and essentially relational constructs that function like organisms, with their various parts or social institutions working together to maintain and reproduce them. The various parts of society are assumed to work for the overall social equilibrium

**Structuralism** An important theoretical approach to the concept of social structure is structuralism, which studies the underlying, unconscious regularities of human expression—that is, the unobservable structures that have observable effects on behaviour, society, and culture.

**Conflict theory** The conflict perspective views society as composed of different groups with varying interests competing for power and resources. Conflict Theory claims that society is in a state of perpetual conflict and competition for limited resources. Change occurs as a result of conflict between competing interests and it is often abrupt and revolutionary rather than evolutionary

### **Symbolic**

**Interactionism** It is a micro action theory and is interpretative rather than objective in nature. It is a perspective that views society as the product of human interactions, and the meanings that individuals attach on those interactions. Instead of trying to explain human behaviour in the context of large social structures or fundamental conflicts in society, they look on a smaller level, suggesting that human beings have agency and are not always swayed by the forces outside their control; and they can create their own meanings.

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## **Unit - 2 □ Functionalism: General Arguments**

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### **Structure**

- 2.1 Objectives**
- 2.2 Introduction**
- 2.3 Structural Functionalism**
- 2.4 Functionalism Defined**
- 2.5 General Arguments**
- 2.6 Conclusions**
- 2.7 Summary**
- 2.8 Questions**
- 2.9 References**
- 2.10 Glossary**

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### **2.1 Objectives**

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Helping students to understand:

- The meaning and importance of the concept 'function' in sociological theory
- Background and Development of functionalism as a theory
- Basic assumptions and features of Functional theory
- Development of Structural Functionalism- its basic features
- How functional theory views society
- Importance of Functional theory in sociology

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### **2.2 Introduction:**

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Theories in sociology offer different perspectives which allow the readers to view our social world and human behaviour in it from different aspects. A perspective is simply a way of looking at the world. A theory is a set of interrelated propositions or principles designed to answer a question or explain a particular phenomenon; and it comes out with a perspective. Sociological theories help us to explain and predict the social world in

which we live. Functionalism or Functional perspective is the oldest and till date, one of the most dominant perspectives in sociology, as other perspectives in the discipline emerged either as a challenge to or in support of it. Abandoning the numerous partial explanations and deterministic theories (e.g. of classical economic theory: man as economic being-rational and utilitarian pursuing his self-interest and social order emerging out from open competition in free markets), when social science was looking for a more comprehensive theoretical and methodological tool for the analysis of various social phenomena and their interrelatedness, functionalism emerged in the tradition of great sociological theories deliberating its own orientation to that great convention while continually developing them (Eisenstadt 1976:181). It offers sociology a new and powerful paradigm to explain a wider variety of social events; and the nature of its investigation involves: i) examining the role that any social phenomenon (institution, activity, event, behaviour and so on) plays in society and the way it is related to other social phenomena; and ii) explaining it in essentially social terms (Davis 1959:757772). The functionalist perspective sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation and broadly focuses on the social structures that shape society as a whole. The functionalist perspective is based largely on the works of Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert Merton.

Functionalism views society as a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. According to this approach, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society. As for example, family provides a context for reproducing, nurturing, and socializing children; education offers a way to pass on a society's skills, knowledge, and culture to its younger generation; politics offers a means of governing members of society; economics contributes in the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services; and religion stands to provide moral guidance and an outlet for worship of a higher power, thus promoting solidarity.

The quest for social order (or how society remains relatively stable) led the classical sociologists (who were also the early functionalists) like Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim etc. to borrow heavily from the Biological Sciences, especially the extension of the many analogies between society and organism (Spencer's organismic analogy and social evolutionism, Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity etc.), and offer the view that: i) society is more than the summation of its parts (primarily institutions); ii) it is independent and existing of itself (*suigeneris* meaning 'in and of itself'); iii) each of the

constituent parts of society is organized to meet different needs and each has particular consequences for the form and shape of society; and iv) it is the parts, which being mutually interdependent and interconnected to each other, contribute to the maintenance of the social whole which they belong to. Thus functionalism is simply a view of society as a self-regulating system of interrelated elements with structured social relationships and observed regularities. Functionalism is often named as a consensus theory as it is characterized by the idea that society requires shared norms and values in order to function properly. Institutions in society (such as the family, education, the media, etc.) have clear social functions, which ensure there is a broad consensus about the norms and values of society and which enable organic and orderly social change. Functionalists often use the human body or organic analogy to explain how the different aspects of society are all interconnected and interdependent and problems in one area of society might be symptoms of dysfunction elsewhere.

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### **2.3 Structural Functionalism**

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This perspective is often called “structural functionalism”, as it focuses, firstly, on the functional requisites, or “needs”, of a social system that must be satisfied for the survival of the system as a whole; and secondly, on the relating structures that meet these requisites. Functionalism perceives the task of sociological analysis as to look for and study the social structures that perform the tasks that are necessary requisites for the sustenance of the social system. Over the years, functionalism manifests itself in a great variety of approaches so as to influence and in return being flourished by the field of social anthropology as well (e.g. B. Malinowski’s individualistic functionalism which treats social and cultural systems as collective responses to fundamental biological needs of individuals modified by cultural values; and R. Brown’s emphasis on structured social relationships which focuses on the function of each element in the maintenance and development of a total structure); and two major theorists of this perspective, namely Robert K. Merton and Talcott Parsons have often been referred to as structural Functionalists.

The uniqueness of the structural functional model also lies in the fact that its origin and development can be traced from a variety of authors and their intellectual theoretical writings. In 1945, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore published a famous paper, which was a short summary of their theses on social stratification; and that is considered as one of the important contributions in the realm of structural functionalism. Robert Merton is another well known social anthropologist, who provided some important structural functional theoretical statements. Including Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton, all of these theorists



pursued their academic career mostly in the United States; and hence, this approach is often associated with sociology in the United States.

Wallace and Wolf (2006) have mapped out the path of development of structural functionalism from the writings of classical sociologists like, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Durkheim, who were of European origin. Later, the functional approach was developed from the 1930s through the 1960s in the United States. Parsons studied Durkheim and Weber, and translated some of their writings into English. Parsons thus became a major interpreter of these European theorists in America, and his interpretation may be considered to have developed the influence of these writers in a particular way. Although a liberal within the American context, Parsons used concepts and models from Weber and Durkheim to establish a sociological approach which countered the Marxian view.

It was the sociological approach that dominated entire American sociology from the 1940s through to the early 1970s so strongly that without a few exceptions, Marxian concepts and approaches were almost entirely absent from sociology textbooks. While this approach was not conservative in the sense that it never called for return to an earlier society, it also did not advocate for or offer support to any radical change. Politically, it was harmonized with the cold war liberal and pluralist political approach that became dominant in American universities during this period. Part of this was also aimed at countering any influence of communism, socialism, or Marxism.

In the 1960s, the structural functional approach started encountering multiple attacks from theoretical and political stances and ultimately was discredited. It was unable to explain a number of features of American society, such as poverty, social change, dissent, and the continuing influence and political and economic power of the wealthy. As sociologists began to read more of Weber and Durkheim, it became clear that the structural functional interpretation missed much of the subtlety of these writers. Marxist analysis of social structure and social change also attracted scholars of social science. Further, feminist approaches debated continuously against functionalism, arguing that the structural functionalists provided a rationalization for male privilege and ignored the past and potential contributions of women.

Functionalism was not as influential among Canadian sociologists as in case of the sociologists of the United States. Sociology in Canada was influenced by some of the British and European approaches. The structural functional model also did not seem to have the same applicability here as in the U.S. partly because equality of opportunity and individualism were not as highly developed here. The different ethnic groups and their history have also

been considerably different in Canada than in the United States. When Canadian sociology did develop, some of the political economic approaches were incorporated into Canadian sociology to create a somewhat different discipline than in the U.S.

As a consequence of challenges and disputes in the 1970s, structural functionalism became unpopular in the realm of sociology. However, it is still an important model in the study of sociology. First, outside sociology itself, structural functional approach received growing acceptance. In addition, some of the structural functional arguments are used by those in power to justify inequalities and explain the value of their contribution to society. This is a consensus model, one which can be used to support the social order.

Second, it may be regarded as the sociological equivalent of many economic models of inequality. In particular, it fits well with the human capital model of education and the economy and complements some models of liberalism in the political sphere. For example, the notion of equality of opportunity should be a crucial part of this model.

Third, even though it may provide an inadequate model of explanation, it may be useful as a model for description. Much of the quantitative information concerning the structure of society has been developed by sociologists working in the functionalist perspective. While the exact connection of these quantitative studies to the structural functional approach may not be clear, much quantitative analysis makes many of the same assumptions as do functionalists. Some of these have provided very useful data for understanding society and investigating the nature of social inequality.

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## 2.4 Functionalism Defined

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What is functionalism? A Modern Dictionary of Sociology defines functionalism as,

“The analysis of social and cultural phenomena in terms of the functions they perform in sociocultural system. In functionalism, society is conceived of as a system of interrelated parts in which no part can be understood in the isolation from the whole. A change in any part is seen as leading to a certain degree of imbalance, which in turn results in changes in other parts of the system and to some extent to a reorganization of the system as a whole.” (Theodorson and Theodorson 1969:167)

The functionalist perspective highlights the interconnectedness of society by focusing on how each part influences and in return, is influenced by other parts. For example, the increase in single-parent and dual-earner families has resulted in less availability of parental care to children’s homework and study, which in turn contributed to the number of children who are failing in

school. As a result of changes in technology, colleges are offering more vocational training programs, and many adults are returning to these educational institutions to learn new skills that are required in the workplace. The increasing number of women in the workforce has led to the formulation of policies against sexual harassment and job discrimination.

Functionalism is concerned with the overall features of social structure and the general nature of social institutions; hence it falls under the category of macro-sociological theory. In functionalist theory, the different parts of society are primarily composed of social institutions, each considered to fulfil different needs. Family, government, economy, media, education, and religion- all institutions are important to the understanding of this theory. According to functionalism, an institution only exists because it serves a fundamental role in the functioning of society. If it no longer serves a role, an institution will die away. When new needs evolve or emerge, new institutions will be created to meet them. Functionalists use the terms functional and dysfunctional to describe the effects of social elements on society. Elements of society are functional if they contribute to social stability and dysfunctional if they disrupt social stability. Some aspects of society can be both functional and dysfunctional. For example, crime is dysfunctional in that it is associated with physical violence, loss of property, and fear. But according to Durkheim and other functionalists, crime is also functional for society because it leads to heightened awareness of shared moral bonds and increased social cohesion. Following the above stated definition, we can define function as any act or event or process that is contributing for the maintenance of the whole. Accordingly, the act or event which is not contributing to the maintenance of the whole, and/or which is interrupting or contrary to the maintenance of the stability of the whole is referred to as dysfunction; and these ultimately leads to reorganization of the parts in order to bring back social stability. Thus, while focusing primarily on social order, stability and equilibrium, functionalism recognizes and provides answer to social change as well. Functionalism emphasizes the harmony and order that exist in society, focusing on social stability and shared community values. From this perspective, disorganization in the system, such as deviant behaviour, leads to change because social components must adjust to attain stability. When one part of the system is dysfunctional, it affects all other parts and creates social problems, prompting social change.

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## 2.5 General Arguments

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Sociologists have further identified two types of functions: manifest and latent (Merton 1968). Manifest functions are consequences that are intended and commonly recognized. Latent functions are consequences that are unintended and often hidden. For example, the manifest function of education is to spread knowledge and skills to society's young generation. But pre-primary schools also serve as babysitters for parents engaged in different works, and

colleges offer a place for young adults to grow political orientations. The baby-sitting and political functions are not the intended or commonly recognized functions of education; hence they are latent functions. (Mooney, Knox, and Schacht, 2007)

The basic assumptions of functionalism are as follows:

- i. The parts of a social system are mutually interrelated and interdependent.
- ii. A social system tends to retain a 'normal' state of affairs, or state of equilibrium, comparable to the normal or healthy organism.
- iii. There is a way by which all parts of a system tend to reorganize in order to maintain the state of equilibrium. That means, if all goes well, the parts of society produce order, stability, and productivity. If all does not go well, the parts of society then must adapt to recapture a new order, stability, and productivity.
- iv. Social consensus, order and integration are key beliefs of functionalism as this allows society to continue and progress because there are shared norms and values that mean all individuals have a common goal and have a vested interest in conforming and thus conflict is minimal.
- v. Some basic features of structural functionalism that became popular from the 1930s as the dominant theoretical approach in American Sociology are as follows:
  - i. The theorists coined pivotal concepts, such as 'role', 'norms', and 'social systems' that came to form the basic building blocks of contemporary sociology. Moreover, a few concepts used by the theorists, such as 'role model' and 'self-fulfilling prophecy', have entered our colloquial vocabulary as well.
  - ii. It is most well known not for the specific concepts that it introduced but rather for the meta-theoretical framework on which it is based.
  - iii. It envisions society as a system of interrelated parts, and it emphasizes how the different parts work together for the good of the system. The classic structural functionalist image of society is as an organism such as body, with different parts working together in an interdependent way.
  - iv. In addition, structural functionalism emphasizes 'systems within system'. For instance, while a College can be considered its own self contained 'system' or unit, it is also a component of the University to which it is affiliated; the University is the component of the Higher Education system of a state; again the Higher Educational system is one component of the whole Education system of the state; as well as the Administrative system, Legal system, Judicial system, Economic system etc. are components of a larger social system as a whole, the State.
  - v. It typically emphasizes how the various systems and sub systems work together.

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## 2.6 Conclusion

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We have tried introducing you to the concept of function in sociological theory. We have traced the emergence and development of functionalism as a theory. We tried outlining the general arguments of functional theory. We also traced the development of structural functionalism as well as briefed you about its features. Therefore, functionalism is a theory that attempts to explain the apparent stability and internal integration of society as well as to create and restore equilibrium.

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## 2.7 Summary

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We spoke here about functionalism in general and as well as structuralism. We explained their in general arguments and characteristics

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## 2.8 Questions

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### A. Answer briefly (6 marks)

- i. What do you understand by functionalist perspective in sociology?
- ii. Write a short note on importance of the concept of function in sociology.
- iii. What do you understand by structural functionalism? What are its main features?

### B. Answer in detail. (12 marks)

- i. How is Functionalism related to Biology? -Explain in detail.
- ii. Discuss the path of development and importance of Structural Functionalism in Sociology.
- iii. Discuss the nature of investigation offered by functional perspective in Sociology.

### C. Essay Type Question. (20marks)

- i. Explain in detail how functionalism as a theory and methodology views society.
- ii. Critically evaluate the importance of functional perspective in Sociology.

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## **2.10 Glossary**

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**Sociology**                      The scientific understanding of society, i.e., the web of human interrelationships arising out of human interactions

**Sociological perspective**                      A broad viewpoint, or lens that permits social scientists to have a wide range of tools to describe society, and then to build hypotheses and theories. There are different perspectives in sociology to understand social phenomena. These are also considered as guiding principles or belief systems. In the sociological texts, the word ‘perspective’ is used interchangeably with paradigm, theory, or approach.

**Enlightenment**                      An intellectual movement in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The Enlightenment Philosophers offered reason and empiricism (importance of fact, proof, evidence) to be the twin pillars of knowledge; advocated strong arguments in favour of individual freedom and liberty; emphasized on

human capability in controlling the world around them and strived for seeking true knowledge in every sphere by mastering the skill and methods of natural sciences.

**Theory**

A theory is a set of interrelated concepts used to describe, explain, and predict how society and its parts are related to each other. Sociological theories are sets of interrelated concepts and ideas that have been scientifically tested and combined to clarify, and expand our understanding of people, their behaviours, and their societies.

**Concept**

Concepts denote phenomena. A concept describes the aspects of the social world that are considered essential for a particular purpose. Concepts are constructed from definitions. It enables all investigators universally and instantaneously to point at the same thing and to understand what it is that is being studied. The concepts of theory are of two types: concrete and abstract.

**Definition**

A statement or system of terms used to express the meaning of a word or word group or a sign or symbol; a statement expressing the essential nature of something that allows visualizing the phenomenon that is denoted by a concept.

**Variables**

Concepts that denote properties as size, weight, density, velocity etc. refer to differences in degree among phenomena. This type of concepts is called variable, which aims at describing varying states of particular events denoted by concepts.

**Statement**

The concepts of theory must be connected to one another and these connections among concepts constitute theoretical statements. These statements not only identify the way in which events denoted by concepts are interrelated, they also provide an understanding of how and why events should be connected.

**Format**

When these theoretical statements are grouped together, they constitute a theoretical format. . There are five basic approaches in sociological theory for generating theoretical statements and formats: (1) meta-theoretical schemes, (2) analytical schemes, (3) discursive schemes, (4) propositional schemes, and (5) modelling schemes.

**Speculative Theories**

Speculative theories are abstract, impressionistic and rooted in a philosophical system. These are essentially theories generated by logical deduction from a priori assumptions. They are based on certain methodological and philosophical assumptions and generate theoretical entities and conceptual schemes

**Grounded Theories**

Grounded theories, on the other hand, are based on the findings of empirical research and they are appropriate to their specific uses. They produce specific sociological laws, principles and empirical generalizations. Grounded theory is partly a theoretical framework and partly research methodology.

**Grand Theory**

A grand theory is a broad conceptual scheme with systems of interrelated propositions that provide a general frame of reference for the study of social processes and institutions. The grand theory is rooted in the empirical world and provides a master scheme of general sociological orientations.

**Miniature Theory**

Miniature theories are what Merton called as Middle range theories, i.e., theories intermediate to the minor working hypotheses evolved during the day-to-day routines of research, and the all inclusive speculations comprising a master speculative scheme from which it is supposed to derive a very large number of empirically observable uniformities of social behaviour.

**Macro Theories**

Macro theories are broader in scope and encompass an array of laws while micro theories have a narrower frame of reference. Macro theories are concerned with total societal patterns. Theories of society, culture and institutions constitute the tradition of macro sociology.

**Micro Theories**

Micro sociology is concerned with interactions among the units of society. Small group theories represent the micro tradition in contemporary sociology

**Function**

A function is the contribution made by a phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part, in order to maintain the unity of the system.



**Functionalism****Functionalism**

is a sociological theory that attempts to explain social institutions as collective means to meet social needs. The basic concern of functionalism is to explain the apparent stability and internal cohesion of societies necessary to ensure their continued survival over time. Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and essentially relational constructs that function like organisms, with their various parts or social institutions working together to maintain and reproduce them. The various parts of society are assumed to work for the overall social equilibrium. An important theoretical approach to the concept of social structure is structuralism, which studies the underlying, unconscious regularities of human expression—that is, the unobservable structures that have observable effects on behaviour, society, and culture.

**Conflict theory**

The conflict perspective views society as composed of different groups with varying interests competing for power and resources. Conflict Theory claims that society is in a state of perpetual conflict and competition for limited resources. Change occurs as a result of conflict between competing interests and it is often abrupt and revolutionary rather than evolutionary

**Symbolic****Interactionism**

It is a micro action theory and is interpretative rather than objective in nature. It is a perspective that views society as the product of human interactions, and the meanings that individuals attach on those interactions. Instead of trying to explain human behaviour in the context of large social structures or fundamental conflicts in society, they look on a smaller level, suggesting that human beings have agency and are not always swayed by the forces outside their control; and they can create their own meanings.

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## **Unit - 3 □ Contributions of Talcott Parsons and R. K. Merton**

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### **Structure**

- 3.1 Objectives**
- 3.2 Introduction**
- 3.3 Theory of Functionalism by Talcott Parsons**
  - 3.3.1 Theory of Action**
  - 3.3.2 Theory of Social System**
  - 3.3.3 The Pattern Variables**
  - 3.3.4 The functional system problem- AGIL**
- 3.4 Criticism of Parsons' functionalism**
- 3.5 Contribution of Talcott Parsons: An Overview**
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- 3.7 Contribution of Merton in Functionalism**
  - 3.7.1 Concepts of Dysfunction and Manifest vs. Latent Functions**
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- 3.8 Protocol for Executing Functional Anylsis**
- 3.9 Illustrating Merton's Functional Strategy**
- 3.10 Conclusions**
- 3.11 Summary**
- 3.12 Questions**
- 3.13 References**
- 3.14 Suggested Readings**
- 3.15 Glossary**

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### 3.1 Objectives

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Helping students to understand:

- The life and works of Talcott Parsons and R.K. Merton
  - Influence and inspiration behind the theoretical contributions of Parsons and Merton
  - Concept of social action, system and sub-systems of society, integration between social action and social system and the problem of functional integration in the system model as depicted by Parsons
  - The importance and influence of the Functional theory developed by Parsons in the realm of social science
  - Robert King Merton's propagation of middle range theory as an alternative to grand theories of society as given by Parsons and his predecessors
  - Merton's paradigm for analysing society while criticizing his predecessors' emphasis on the unity, universality and indispensability of functional items
  - Some new concepts introduced by Merton in the realm of functionalism and importance of Merton's work in development of functional perspective
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### 3.2 Introduction

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Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), an American sociologist, born and brought up in a Colorado Spring liberal household, in which morality, modern industrial system, economic individualism and exploitation of labour were topics of concern, received his formal education in the natural sciences, particularly biology, as well as philosophy and social sciences. He graduated from London School of Economics in the year 1924. In 1927 he was awarded a doctoral degree from Hiedelberg University. He began his teaching at Harvard University in 1927 and taught there until his retirement as a professor emeritus in 1973. His important works include:

- a. *The Structure of social action* (1937)
- b. *Theory of social and economic organizations* (1947) with A M Henderson; translation of the original work by Max Weber.
- c. *Essays in sociological theory* (1949)
- d. *Family : Socialization and Interaction Process* (1955)
- e. *Politics and Social Structure* (1969)

- f. *The System of Modern Societies* (1970)
- g. *The Evolution of Societies* (1977)

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### 3.3 Theory of Functionalism by Talcott Parsons

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Parson's sociology was highly influenced by the works of classical European sociologists like Durkheim and Weber. Concepts such as order, solidarity and integration, which dominate his theoretical writings, are clear indication of Durkheimian tradition. The contribution of Weber in Parsons is also apparent in several ways:

First, Weber was concerned with (i) analysis of social structures as a whole; and (ii) social action. Parsons refers to his own theory as action theory and his theoretical approach as a general theory of action system. He argues that social phenomena must be understood in terms of individual meaning, but also must be examined at the "level of collective action among groupings of actors." (Turner 1974: 47). Like Weber, Parsons is concerned with the question, "how do the subjective states of actors influence emergent patterns of social organization, and vice versa?" (Turner 1974: 47).

Second, Parsons develops many concepts and elaborates conceptual schemes that resemble the Weberian scheme of ideal types. These concepts are built to emphasize important features of social systems, and of the type that Parsons considers to be important for purposes of his analysis of social integration; and serve in different contexts as important means of comparing concrete situations, to see the extent to which the concrete data conform or deviate from these ideal types. (Turner 1974: 47-8).

Parson's contribution in functionalism can be discussed under four broad headings: A) Theory of action, B) Theory of social system, C) The pattern variables, D) The functional system problems- AGIL.

#### 3.3.1 Theory of Action

In his *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Parsons states that action must not be viewed in isolation. Society, which is affected by environments, heredity and culture on the one hand and religious, metaphysical and political systems on the other, embraces the entire social field of man; it covers and touches all relationship, and thereby all interactions of man with man. According to Parsons, actions are not empirically discrete but occur in constellations that we call systems. He defined social action as a process in the actor situation system which has motivational significance to the individual actor or in the case of collectivity, its component individuals. Social actions are concerned with organism (actor/

s), actor's relations with other persons, and social institutions. Parsons used the term "unit act" to refer to a process involving: i) a hypothetical actor, motivated to spend energy for reaching ii) a desirable goal as defined by the cultural system s/he belongs to, in iii) a hypothetical situation including means (facilities, tools or resources available) and conditions (obstacles that may arise in the path) and iv) the normative standards of the social system (the most important element in Parson's theory of action), which regulates all the three aforementioned elements. Instead of constructing action in terms of something concrete Parsons conceptualized action systems as a means for analyzing social phenomena.

Parsons (1937) and later, Parsons and Shils in *Towards a General Theory of Action* (1951) further maintain that actions are organized into three modes or realms: social systems, personality systems and cultural systems. These systems are analytically rather than empirically distinct; and these systems are not physically separate entities but rather a simplified model of society that Parsons and Shils (ibid) use to explain the organization of action. However, for Parsons, the three systems: social systems, personality systems and cultural systems are intertwined to encompass all actions of the behavioural organisms and thereby all social life.

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Fig. 2.1 Theory of Action

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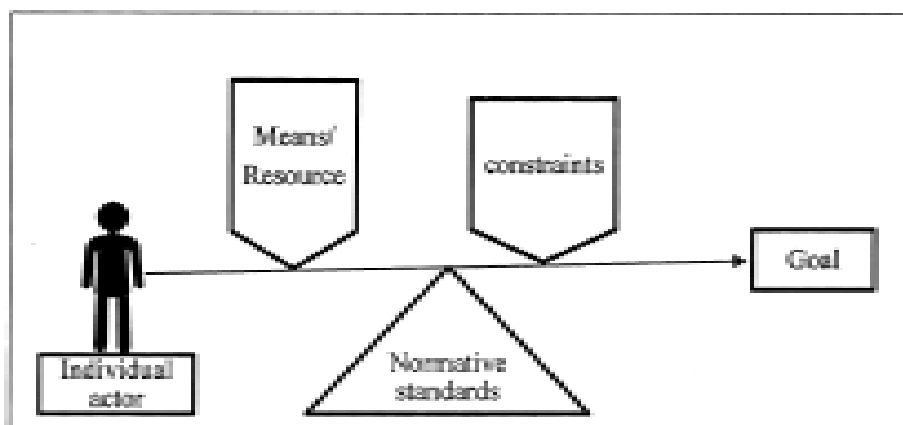


Fig. 2.1 Theory of Action

### 3.3.2 Theory of social system

The concept of social system lies at the core of any discussion of Parsonian theory. In *The Social System* he shifts his emphasis from 'unit acts' to institutional orders and the system becomes the primary unit of analysis. For Parsons, there are many systems or action systems. A system is something that has a boundary, so that there is an inside and an outside to the environment comprising the system. Examples of systems are the social, cultural, and personality systems (Wallace and Wolf 2006: 28). Systems have interdependent parts, order or equilibrium, and a tendency to maintain the boundaries and relations of the parts to the whole. These could be the society as a whole, structures or institutions within society (economy, legal system, religious institutions), or smaller subsystems (family or individual) that form part of society. These are action systems in the sense that they involve social action, and each system has certain needs or conditions that are necessary for the survival and continued operation of the system. Systems also have goals that may be created as a result of needs and desires of members of these systems.

However, Parson's concept of 'social system' is an analytical conceptual framework; not an empirical referent. As stated earlier, the general theory of action, in which Parsons offers the overall picture of how societies are structured and fit together, includes four levels of system: the cultural system, the social system, the personality system and the behavioural organism as a system.

The cultural system: the basic unit of analysis at this level is 'meaning' or 'symbolic system' (e.g. language, national flag, national values etc.). At this level, Parsons focuses on the shared values. According to him, cultural traditions are made up of shared symbolic systems. A key concept here is socialization, the process by which societal values are internalized by the members of a society; and they grasp the values as their own. For Parsons, socialization is the powerful integrative force for maintaining social control and holding a society together (Wallace and Wolf 2006:26)

The social system: In his scheme, Parsons has elaborated this level the most. Here the basic unit is 'role interaction'. According to Parsons, "a social system consists in a plurality of social actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of tendency to the 'optimization of gratification' and whose relations to the situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols." (Parsons 1951:5). Thus a social system can be made up of two people interacting with each other to the relationship within a nation, where the actors are members of a nation. The relationship between the cultural and social systems is apparent from the reference to "culturally structured and shared symbols" that defines the way actors interact.

The personality system: Here the basic unit is individual actor, the human person. At this level Parsons focuses on individual needs, motives, and attitudes, which are referred to as the “tendency to the ‘optimization of gratification’” in his definition of social action.

The behavioural organism: in this fourth system level the basic unit is the human being in its biological sense, i.e., the physical aspect of the human person, including the organic and physical environment in which the human being lives. Parsons here referred explicitly to the organism’s central nervous system and motor activity. (Parsons 1971:5)

Parson’s view of socialization helps illustrating the interrelatedness of these four systems. At birth a human being is simply a behavioural organism; as s/he develops among other actors (human beings) s/he gains any personal identity. Through the process of socialization s/he internalizes the values of the society, i.e., s/he makes the social values of the cultural system her/his own by learning from other actors in the social system what is expected from her/him. Thus s/he learns role expectations and becomes full participant in the society. Therefore, we find that the values come from the cultural system; the normative or role expectations are learned from the social system; the individual identity comes from the personality system; and the biological equipment comes from the behavioural organism.

### 3.3.3 The Pattern Variables

In *Toward a General Theory of Action* (1951), Parsons and Shils develop a set of concepts called the pattern variables. The pattern variables are a dichotomous set of five-fold choices that categorizes expectations and structure of relationships; and is applicable not only to the individual level but to the collective level as well. They refer at once to the variant normative priorities of social system, the dominant modes of orientation in personality systems, and the patterns of values in cultural systems.

Parsons defines a pattern variable as a dichotomy, one side of which must be chosen by an actor before the meaning of a situation is determinate for him, and thus before he can act with respect to the situation. It describes alternatives of action between which each person (and group) has to choose in every situation. The actions are shaped by the three systems: personality, cultural, and social. Following are the five-fold pattern variables described by Parsons:

1. Affectivity/ Affective-Neutrality: It concerns the amount of emotion or affect that is appropriate in a given interaction situation. For example, a mother is expected to express a great deal of emotion in her interaction with her baby; but a teacher

examining answer sheets of students, or an employee in a bureaucratic organization is expected to be emotionally “neutral”.

2. **Self-orientation/Collectivity-orientation:** It denotes the extent to which action is to be oriented to self-interest and individual goals or to group interest or goals. For example, a person buys from a market objects of his/her own need, interest and choice (Self-orientation); whereas, a person donates a good sum or offers a good deal of own labour for the preparation of community festival (Collectivity-orientation).
3. **Universalism/Particularism:** It points to the problem of whether evaluation and judgment of others in an interaction situation is to be applied to all actors or should all actors be assessed in terms of the same standards. For example, the rights, duties and obligation of a doctor to his/her patients are same irrespective of the caste, creed, race, nationality, gender and religion of the doctor and the patient and it is the illustration of Universalism; whereas, a person offering special support and care to his/her ailing friend is an instance of Particularism.
4. **Ascription/Achievement:** It deals with the issue of how to assess an actor, whether in terms of his/her performance or on the basis of his/her qualities attributed to him/her at birth (e.g. age, sex, race, caste, family status etc.). For example, being eligible for casting vote depends on attaining a specified age (Ascription); whereas, being eligible for a job position or receiving an academic degree depends on a person's performances (Achievement).
5. **Specificity/Diffuseness:** it denotes the problem of how far reaching obligations in an interaction situation are to be. Should the obligations be narrow and specific, or should they be extensive and diffuse? For example, clerk/customer role-relations and Teacher/student role-relations which have narrowly and clearly defined criteria for interaction (specificity); whereas, a group of students becoming friends with a teacher go beyond the clear boundaries of teacher/student relation (Diffuseness).

Parsons' conceptualization of pattern variables was inspired by a renowned dichotomy first formulated by the German theorist Ferdinand Tonnies, who distinguished between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (purposive association). Emile Durkheim's conceptualization of “mechanical” versus “organic solidarity” also had a profound influence on Parsons. According to these classic dichotomies, modern societies are based on individualistic “purposiveness” and functional interdependence, whereas traditional societies are rooted in collectivistic “sameness” (or community) and an intense feeling of community.



Though, both the choices in each set of pattern variables are perceptible in contemporary society at all three levels (social, cultural and personality), the dichotomy lies in the fact that while one choice of each set matches more to the values of pre-modern societies (e.g. affectivity, ascription, specificity etc.) the other (e.g. affective-neutrality, achievement, diffuseness etc.) suits more with the values of contemporary modern society.

In *The Social System*, Parsons illustrates pattern variables as value orientations that encompass the norms of the social system and the decisions of the personality system. Thus, the structure of the personality and the social system is considered by Parsons, as a reflection of the dominant pattern of value orientation in culture. Parsons, in his later works, explicitly emphasizes on the impact of cultural patterns on regulating and controlling other systems of action.

Integration among systems and action:

Parsons now returns to the vital question which has guided all his subsequent theoretical formulation: How do social systems survive? Why do institutionalized patterns of interaction persist? More specifically, how do systems resolve the problem of integration? Parsons emphasizes on the equilibrating tendencies of social systems, which leads to severe criticisms against him by scholars of different sociological perspectives. However, at the most abstract level Parsons conceptualizes two mechanisms that integrate personality into social system: i) mechanisms of socialization, and ii) mechanisms of social control.

Mechanisms of socialization, are viewed by Parsons as the means through which cultural patterns- values, beliefs, languages, and other symbols- are internalized into the personality system, thereby circumscribing its need structure (Turner 1974:67). They also provide stable and secure interpersonal ties which help in reducing much of the strain, anxiety, and tensions associated with acquiring proper motives and skills.

Mechanisms of social control involve the ways in which status roles are organized in social systems to reduce strain and deviance. The numerous control mechanisms of the social system are: a) institutionalization that makes role expectations clear and unambiguous (e.g. bureaucracies, tradition etc.), b) interpersonal sanctions and gestures, c) ritual activities, d) safety-valve structures (e.g. Policing, administrative system, legal institutions etc.) e) re-integration structures (e.g. correctional institutions) f) institutionalization in some sectors the capability to use power and coercion (e.g. Policing, Judiciary etc.).

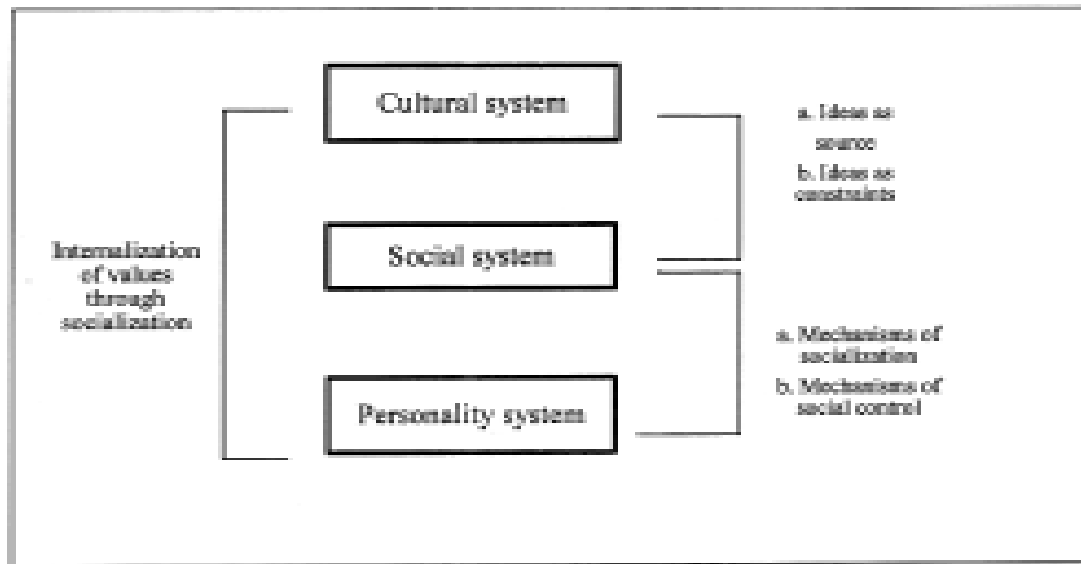


Fig. 2.2 Conception of Integration of systems of action (Turner 1974:67)

### 3.3.4 The Functional System Problem- AGIL

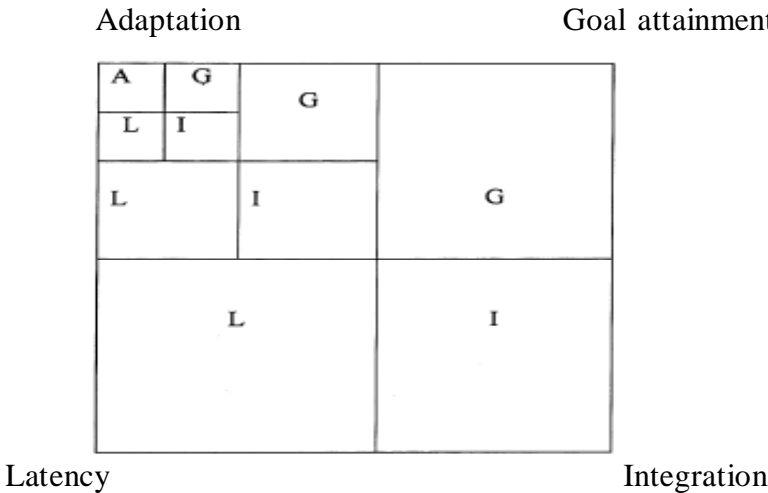
W. B. Canon's idea of homeostatic stabilization of physiological processes and his own exposure to Biology at Amherst inspired Parson's interest in equilibrium model of society; and consequently, led him to develop a functionalist model of society as interdependent and self-equilibrating system. Parson argues that, in case of society, certain institutions and structures maintain equilibrium by fulfilling needs and solving recurring problems. In his analysis of system problems, Parsons offers his view on what any action system needs to achieve equilibrium.

According to Parsons, all action systems face four major problems or have four major needs: adaptation; goal attainment; integration; and pattern maintenance or latency ('latent pattern maintenance- tension management' as he later renamed it). Parsons pictures the society or social system as a large square which is further divided into four equal square parts representing the four functional survival requirements/problems, represented by AGIL (see Fig. 2.3).

- 'A' stands for adaptation, which involves the problem to secure from the environment sufficient facilities/ resources and then to disburse the facilities throughout the system.
- 'G' stands for goal attainment that refers to the problem of establishing priorities among system goals and mobilizing system resources for their attainment.

- 'I' stands for Integration, which points to the problem of coordinating and maintaining viable interrelationships among system units.
- 'L' stands for latency, which embraces two related problems: pattern maintenance and tension management.

Fig. 2.3     Parsons' Functional Imperativist View of Social Systems (Turner 1974:71)



Introduction of AGIL, however, made a shift in the focus of analysis from structure to function. Structures are now viewed explicitly in terms of their functional consequences for meeting the four requisites. Now, in Parsons' conceptual scheme, social systems are divided into sectors, each corresponding to a functional requisite- that is, A, G, I, L. Any sub-system can be divided into these four functional sectors; and then each of these sub-systems can be divided into four functional sectors; and so on. This process of functional sectorization, as Turner (1974:79) named it, is illustrated for the adaptive requisite in Fig. 2.3.

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### 3.4 Criticism of Parsons' Functionalism:

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Despite his original thinking and significant contribution on the premise of early functionalism, theory of Parsons faces severe criticisms from scholars. Some of the criticisms are briefly listed below:

1. Scholars of conflict perspective like Ralph Dahrendorf criticize his portrayal of society for revealing no developmental history, overemphasizing on integration of components and focusing only on mechanisms that preserve status quo, especially through the conceptualization of four functional requisites. For these critics, such an image of

society is utopian as this never reveals the possibility of conflict, deviance and change, presence of which is ubiquitous in social reality.

2. Much like the early functionalists like Spencer and Durkheim, Parsons also stresses on equilibrating tendency of social systems; hence the conceptualization of social change in his theory only speaks of evolutionary change, as opposed to revolution and other forms of violent disruptions to social systems.
3. Like the early functionalists, Parsons also carries in his theory the legacy of a logical error called teleology, which means circular kind of reasoning. For Parsons, social actions, whether individual or collective, are always goal oriented. This conceptualization of goal attainment as a basic system requisite leads inevitably to teleological propositions: social action can only be understood in terms of the ends in terms of the end it is desired to serve.
4. The conceptualization of four functional requisites in the work of Parsons is based on the assumption that if these requisites are not met, the system's survival is threatened. But Parsons never mentions any way to determine what constitutes the survival and non-survival of a system, and the level to which the needs must be met for the survival of the system. Hence, the propositions documenting the contribution of items for meeting survival requisites reveal tautology (another logical error and also the legacy of early functionalism): the items meet survival needs of the system because it exists and, therefore, must be surviving. (Turner 1974:84)

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### **3.5 Contribution of Talcott Parsons: an overview:**

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Talcott Parsons was one of the most dominant theorists of his time. His functionalist theory not only surged waves of criticism in the arena of social science, it profoundly influenced future theory building in sociology also.

Parsons in his theory of social action reveals enormous amount of continuity in developing and expanding concepts- starting with unit act and expanding it into hierarchy of control among the system of action; which fulfils the major requirement of consistency in construction of theory in Sociology. Despite enormous criticisms against his functionalist view of society and logical problems in theory building, its influence in sociology has been so widespread that many other theoretical perspectives in sociology start with criticizing against and then proceeding with desirable alternatives to Parsonian functionalism. According to Turner (1974:86), no theory in sociology is considered adequate unless it has performed at least some portions of ritual rejection of analytical functionalism offered by Parsons.

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### 3.6 Functionalism of Robert King Merton: A General Introduction

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Robert King Merton (1910-2003), born in a Jewish immigrant family in a slum of South Philadelphia, with his passion for learning and profound interest in social science, managed to join Harvard University as a student and became one of the earliest and most important graduate students of Talcott Parsons. Merton's interest in sociology grew with "the joy of discovering that it was possible to examine human behaviour objectively and without using loaded moral preconceptions" (Hunt 1961). He was educated with prominent socialists like Sorokin, Harold Garfinkel and others in the Harvard University under the tutelage of Talcott Parsons. Beside Parsons, the works of early sociologists like Emile Durkheim and George Simmel, and researches and thoughts of his contemporary scholars like P. Sorokin and Paul K. Lazarsfeld also cast influence on Robert K. Merton's theory. Though he is renowned in sociology for introducing the "middle range theory" in the discipline, his theory of deviance, clarification and refocusing of functional analysis, development of concepts like self fulfilling prophesy, role model, deviant behavior and focus groups etc. are also important with enormous influence in future sociological research. Some of R.K. Merton's important works include:

- i. *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949)
- ii. *Mass Persuasion* (1946)
- iii. *On the Shoulders of Giants* (1965)
- iv. *On Theoretical Sociology* (1967)
- v. *Social Theory and Functional Analysis* (1969)
- vi. *The Sociology of Science* (1973)
- vii. *Social Ambivalence and Other Essays* (1976)

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### 3.7 Contribution of Merton in Functionalism

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Robert K. Merton's contribution in functionalism can be analysed briefly under following broad headings:

#### **Advocating the theories of middle range as an alternative to grand theoretical schemes**

As a functionalist, Merton started with a critique of Talcott Parsons' functional strategy for building a grand sociological theory by developing an all-encompassing system of concepts. For Merton, a grand theoretical scheme is hardly scientifically defensible without the necessary theoretical and empirical groundwork, which the discipline is still waiting

for. He was equally sceptic about the promise of building inventories of low level empirical propositions. Hence, as an alternative, he suggested the need for the 'theories of middle range' in sociology. Such theories are couched at a lower level of abstraction than the analytical functionalism offered by Parsons; and they are connected to the empirical world by constructing clearly defined and operationalized concepts that can be incorporated into statements of relationship for a limited range of phenomena. According to Merton, such theorizing strategy will encourage the interplay between theory and empirical research; thus, making the latter more systematic and meaningful for expanding a body of sociological knowledge.

### **Merton's Paradigm for Functional Analysis**

Merton's contribution to the codification and systematization of functional analysis begins with the review and critique of what he thinks the three essential postulates of functionalism: i) the functional unity of social systems, ii) the functional universality of social items, and iii) the indispensability of functional items for social systems.

- i) ***The functional unity of social systems:*** Based on biological analogy this postulate views society as a well integrated, consistent system containing mutually interdependent elements which contribute to the maintenance of the whole. According to Merton, to begin analysis with the postulate of functional unity or integration of social whole diverts attention away from the vital empirical questions about the levels of integration existing for different systems, the processes leading to the different levels, forms and kinds of integration in different spheres of social system etc. Further, this postulate ignores the variety of consequences of a given social or cultural item for diverse social groups and various individual members of these groups. For Merton, functional unity of a social system cannot be assumed; at most it is an empirical question to be determined by social research. Further, it is possible for some social or cultural items to have functions for some groups within a social system and not for others. Instead, Merton offers a "provisional assumption" that widespread and persisting socio-cultural forms have a "net balance" of positive over negative consequences (Elwell 2013). Merton begins to suggest that functional analysis should divert its focus from total system as a whole, and emphasize on how different patterns of social organization with more inclusive social systems are created, maintained, and changed not only by the requisites/needs of the total system but also by interactions among the socio-cultural items within the systematic wholes.
- ii) ***The functional universality of social items:*** This postulate assumes that if a social item exists in an ongoing system, it must, therefore, contribute positively or

have some positive consequences for the maintenance of the integration of the total social system; and such assumption leads to tautological (the repetitive use of phrases or words that have similar meanings) statements: a system exists; an element is a part of that system; therefore, the item is positively functional for maintenance of the system. Merton suggests that socio-cultural systems may well have functional needs or prerequisites, but these needs may be met by a diversity of forms. Calling it a “major theorem of functional analysis,” Merton asserts, “just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items” (Merton 1948/1968: 87–88).

### **3.7.1 Concept of Dysfunction and Manifest vs. Latent Function:**

According to Merton, if an investigation of empirical systems is undertaken, a wider range of empirical possibilities will be revealed. Firstly, items may be not only positively functioning for a system or any part of a system, but also dysfunctional for either other particular item/s of the system or the system as a whole. In order to compensate for the excessive focus on stability of traditional functionalism, Merton introduces the concept of “dysfunction”. Whereas functions contribute to the adjustment of the system, dysfunctions are those consequences that lead to instability and ultimately change. Merton asserts that the task of an analyst is to recognize that institutional structures and cultural elements are interrelated and mutually supporting, and that the dominant orientation of socio-cultural systems is towards stability. “As we survey the course of history, it seems reasonably clear that all major social structures have in due course been cumulatively modified or abruptly terminated. In either event, they have not been eternally fixed and unyielding to change” (Merton, 1948/1968: 95). Merton insists that social structures can only be analyzed in terms of both statics (stability) and dynamics (change). The concept of dysfunction, which allows functional theory to focus on change, is based on tension, strain, or contradictions within component elements of socio-cultural systems. Dysfunctional elements create pressures for change within the system (Merton, 1948/1968: 176). Social mechanisms within the system, including the interrelation of predominantly mutually supporting elements of the system, operate to keep these strains in check, in an attempt to limit or minimize change of the social structure. However, such mechanisms are not always effective, and the amassing of stress and resulting conflict often bring change in a system. One of the primary goals of functional analysis is to identify these dysfunctions and examine how they are contained or reduced in the socio-cultural system as well as how they sometimes cause systemic or fundamental change. (Merton, 1948/1968: 107) According to Merton, “Functions are those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system; and dysfunctions, those observed consequences which lessen adaptation or adjustment of

the system.” Motive, on the other hand, is the subjective orientation of the actor engaged in the behavior (Merton 1948/1968: 105). The failure to distinguish between functions and motives is one of the principal sources of confusion for students of functionalism.

Secondly, Merton offers two new concepts: manifest function and latent function; the distinction between which is regarded as one of his major contributions in functionalism. Some consequences of the items in a system, whether functional or dysfunctional, are expected or intended or recognized by the members of the society; and hence are manifest. The other consequences may not be recognized or expected or intended by the members of the system; and therefore they are latent. The latent functions can take place only as a consequence of the manifest functions for which the members are not prepared. Merton argued that it is the job of the sociologist to uncover the latent functions of social activities and institution.

Merton argues that the analysis of diverse consequences or functions of socio- cultural items-whether positive or negative, manifest or latent- “for individuals, for subgroups, and for the more inclusive social structure and culture” (Merton, 1968:84) is necessary for building a meaningful theory of society. He visualizes contemporary functional thought as compensating for the ambitious over-emphasis of earlier theorists on the crucial types of consequences of socio-cultural items for each other and if the facts dictate, for the social whole.

- iii. The indispensability of functional items for social systems:* This postulate is based on the assumption that if a social pattern is well established, it must be meeting some essential needs for the system; and hence, the pattern is indispensable for the survival of the system. The basic assumption is itself double barreled as it considers some functions to be indispensable for the survival of the system; and again, certain social or cultural forms to be indispensable for fulfilling those functions. Merton proposes that functional analysis should concern with various types of “functional alternatives,’ or functional equivalents,” and “functional substitutes” with in social systems. In this way, functional analysis can avoid the trap of assuming an item in the social system as indispensable for the continued existence of a system. Rather, functional analysis must specify (1) Social patterns, whether a systematic whole or some subparts, under consideration; (2) the various types of consequences of these patterns for empirically established survival requisites; and (3) the processes whereby some patterns rather than others come to exist and have the various consequences for each other and for systemic wholes.



### 3.7.2 Functional Alternatives

Merton devises alternative concepts known as the 'functional substitutes', 'functional alternatives', or 'functional equivalents' which can analyze the sort of functions advocated by Talcott Parsons in the form of functional pre requisites. Merton argued that use of religion as a therapeutic device could be substituted effectively by the alternative healing and restorative devices like counselling and reasoning which can help members understand the values of normal life in society. Further, Secular education, vocational training can liberate their minds from religious superstitions, and guide them to become work-oriented, independent and self-reliant; which in turn, may help them recover from stress and depression, despair and obsession, aggravation and frustration; thus assuring their conformity to the values of the social system. Merton argued that functionalist approach should be aware of the fact that any part of society may be functional or dysfunctional for other parts or for the whole system; and may remain non functional for the system as well.

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## 3.8 A Protocol for Executing Functional Analysis

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To explain the causes and consequences of particular structures and processes, 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 distinguish clearly the social items to be subjected to functional analysis. Such descriptions can also provide a major clue to the functions performed by such patterned activity.

The first of these steps is for investigators 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, or mental and emotional significance, of the activity for group members. This can shed some tentative light on the manifest functions of an activity. The third step involves discerning some array of motives (other than the objective description or subsequent assessment of function served by the pattern) for conformity or for deviation among participants. The configuration of motives for conformity and deviation, in turn, indicates the psychological needs served or not served by a pattern; and thus offers clue to the various additional functions of the pattern. For understanding the latent consequences of an activity, Merton suggests his final analytical step that involves the description of how the patterns under investigation reveal regularities not recognized by participants but appear to have consequences for both the individuals involved and other central patterns or regularities in the system.

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### 3.9 Illustrating Merton's Functional Strategy

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Merton's paradigm and protocol for constructing functional theories of the middle range are remarkably free of statement about individual and system needs or requisites. Merton approaches the questions of the needs and requisites fulfilled by a particular item only after description of (1) the item in question, (2) the structural context in which the item survives, and (3) its meaning for the individuals involved. With this information in hand, he argues that it is possible to establish both the manifest and latent functions of an item, as well as the net balance of functions and dysfunctions of the item for varied segments of a social system.

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### 3.10 Conclusion

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R. K. Merton's contribution in functionalism is not beyond criticism. Following are some of the criticisms put forward against Merton's theory:

1. Like the early functionalist theories, Merton's theory also falls into the trap of tautology. Merton's assumption that "ordinarily" persistent structures serve positive functions for meeting the needs of some population segment, leads to the indication that if in an existing system an item persists, then it is functional, perhaps latently for some groups. This assumption that an item exists means that it must serve a function, either latent or manifest, for either the whole or for some part of the whole; is obviously an example of tautological error.
2. Merton's functional theory is not free from the trap of teleology too. Like his predecessors in functionalist tradition, his analysis often fails to separate causes from consequences. For example, he analyses the emergence and persistence of political mechanism as a response to needs, without the necessary precision in documenting the causal chains through which needs cause the emergence and persistence of an event.

However, R.K.Merton's original thought and concern for constructing a meaningful body of theory in sociology; his introduction of the theories of middle range, which boosts up the interplay between theory and empirical research, and helps defending sociological theory with appropriate empirical groundwork; his conceptualization and clear operationalization techniques along with introduction of new concepts like dysfunction, latent and manifest function, functional alternative etc., which later transforms into the colloquial terms in the writings of future sociologists, especially of the functionalist school;

all together leads to a revival of functionalist analysis in Sociology, attributing Merton an immortal place in the history of sociology.

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### 3.11 Summary

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We introduced our learners to the major functionalists such as Talcott Parsons and R. K. Merton. We have discussed their contributions to the making of the functionalist theory. We concluded with a brief overview on each of the thinkers.

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### 3.12 Questions

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- i. Write a short note on pattern variables.
  - ii. What are functional alternatives? Discuss with suitable examples.
  - iii. Write the differences between: (a) latent function and manifest function ( b) function and dysfunction.
  - iv. What do you understand by middle range theory?
  - v. How did Merton criticize the postulate of functional unity?
- B. Answer in detail. (12 marks)
- i. Discuss the social action theory by Parsons.
  - ii. Following Parsons, analyse the problem of functional systems.
  - iii. Discuss in detail the social action theory by Talcott Parsons.
  - iv. Analyse Merton's paradigms for functional analysis.
  - v. How did Merton criticize Parsons for his theoretical approach? What was Merton's protocol for theory building in sociology?
  - vi. How did Parsons conceptualize the integration among systems and action?
- C. Essay Type Question. (20marks)
- i. Critically evaluate the contribution of Talcott Parsons in Functionalism.
  - ii. Critically evaluate the importance of empirical functionalism proposed by R.K. Merton in Sociology.

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### 3.13 References

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### 3.14 Suggested Readings

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<https://www.britannica.com/>

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### 3.15 Glossary

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#### Module- II: Functionalism

Function	A function is the contribution made by a phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part, in order to maintain the unity of the system.
Functionalism	Functionalism is a sociological theory that attempts to explain social institutions as collective means to meet social needs. The basic concern of functionalism is to explain the apparent stability and internal cohesion of societies necessary to ensure their continued survival over time. Functionalism views society as a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. According to this approach, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society. A change in any part is seen as leading to a certain degree of imbalance, which in turn

results in changes in other parts of the system and to some extent to a reorganization of the system as a whole.

#### Organismic analogy

The Organismic analogy which is a staple of ancient and medieval thought was reformulated by Spencer, who recognized the similarities (and dissimilarities) between society and organism as the first step towards a general theory of evolution. The same definition of life applies to both biological and social organism.

#### Organic solidarity

As part of his theory of the development of societies in, *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), sociologist Emile Durkheim characterized two categories of societal solidarity: organic and mechanical. Mechanical solidarity is the type of social cohesion and integration that comes from the homogeneity of individuals: people in societies of small-scale technology feel connected to each other through similar life-ways, i.e., similar work, educational and religious training, and lifestyle, which is often based on the kinship ties of familial networks. Organic solidarity is social cohesion based upon the dependence individuals have on each other in more advanced societies. It comes from the interdependence that arises from specialization of work and the complementarities between people.

#### Structure

The complex and stable framework of society that influences all individuals or groups through the relationship between institutions (e.g., economy, politics, religion) and social practices (e.g., behaviours, norms, and values). The terms "structure" and "social structure" are used interchangeably in a sociological context. According to [functionalism], a society is composed of interrelated parts, each of which serves a function and (ideally) contributes to the overall stability of the society. Societies develop social structures, or institutions that persist because they play a part in helping society survive

#### Equilibrium

Social equilibrium, a theoretical state of balance in a social system referring both to an internal balance between interrelated social phenomena and to the external relationship the system maintains with its environment. In sociology, a system is said to be in social equilibrium when there is a dynamic working balance among its interdependent parts. Each subsystem

will adjust to any change in the other subsystems and will continue to do so until equilibrium is retained. The process of achieving equilibrium will only work if the changes happen slowly, but for rapid changes it would throw the social system into chaos, unless and until a new equilibrium can be reached.

Functional pre requisites	The provisions that all societies are required to make in order to come into existence, survive and maintain order. Talcott Parsons identified four fold set of functional pre-requisites in his social system model.
Social action	In sociology, social action, also known as Weberian social action, is an act which takes into account the actions and reactions of individuals. According to Max Weber, "an Action is 'social' if the acting individual takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course"
Social system	In sociology, social system is the patterned network of relationships constituting a coherent whole that exist between individuals, groups, and institutions. Parsons organized social systems in terms of action units, where one action executed by an individual is one unit. He defines a social system as a network of interactions between actors. According to Parsons, social systems rely on a system of language, and culture must exist in a society in order for it to qualify as a social system.
Personality system	The term personality is derived from the Latin word persona meaning a mask. Personality is a patterned body of habits, traits, attitudes and ideas of an individual as these are organized externally into roles and statuses and as they relate internally to motivation, goals and various aspects of selfhood.
Cultural system	According to the Action Theory of Talcott Parsons, culture is understood as an ordered symbolic system, that is, a symbolically mediated pattern of values or standards of appropriateness that permits the construction of a set of action-guiding, normative, conventional rules through which significant cultural objects are generated and used. If a symbolic system has validity for all of the participating actors, it is able to give order to action.

Value	Values are a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society; and this standard is shared by the people of that society. Values are deeply embedded and critical for transmitting and teaching a culture's beliefs. Functionalists believe that all members of society are socialized into these norms and values, first through the family and later through institutions such as education, the media and religion. It is in this secondary socialization that people learn universalistic values rather than just those particular values to their own family or community.
Adaptation	In AGIL model illustrated by Parsons, which represents the four basic functions that all social systems must perform if they are to persist, the first function is adaptation. In any system or sub-system, adaptation stands for the problem of acquiring sufficient resources.
Deviance	An action or behavior that violates social norms, including a formally enacted rule (e.g., crime), as well as informal violations of social norms (e.g., rejecting folkways and mores).
Latency	In AGIL model illustrated by Parsons, which represents the four basic functions that all social systems must perform if they are to persist, the fourth function is latency. In any system or sub-system, it is the organization for pattern-maintenance. E.g. values which serve to legitimate and authorize decision-making rights in system.
Functional alternatives	Functionalists believe societies must have certain characteristics in order to survive. Merton shares this view but stresses that at the same time particular institutions are not the only ones able to fulfill these functions; a wide range of functional alternatives may be able to perform the same task. This notion of functional alternative is important because it alerts sociologists to the similar functions different institutions may perform and it further reduces the tendency of functionalism to imply approval of the status quo.
Grand theory	Grand theory is a term coined by C. Wright Mills (1960) to describe the abstract generalized system building of structural functionalists, notably in the work of Talcott Parsons. In the social sciences, grand theory refers to those efforts devoted to abstract, analytical theory building.

Middle range theory	Middle-range theory, developed by Robert K. Merton, is an approach to sociological theorizing aimed at integrating theory and empirical research.
Tautology	A kind of logical error: a compound propositional form all of whose instances are true, as "A or not A."
Teleology	A kind of logical error: circular kind of reasoning.
Manifest function	The anticipated and intended goals of an action or social structure.
Latent function	Unanticipated and unintended consequences of an action or social structure.



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## **Unit - 4 □ A Critical Overview**

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### **Structure**

- 4.1 Objectives**
- 4.2 Introduction**
- 4.3 The Critique**
- 4.4 Limitation for Social Change**
- 4.5 The Negative Consequences for Social Order**
- 4.6 Conclusion**
- 4.7 Summary**
- 4.8 Questions**
- 4.9 References**
- 4.10 Suggested Readings**
- 4.11 Glossary**

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### **4.1 Objectives**

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Helping students to understand: i. The gaps in functional analysis of society ii. The conceptual and methodological problems- the pitfalls of functionalism iii. The philosophical error/bias for which functional theory is vehemently criticized iv. Functionalism's struggle to combat all the above mentioned criticisms

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### **4.2 Introduction**

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In social studies, the first hint of functionalist approach is found in the rational-choice approach. It says that if the choice is successful, the action is deemed to have been objectively rational; if not, the action is said to have been only subjectively rational. In either case, the formalism is saved at the outlay of substance or, rather, mechanism, namely interaction. For this reason, we regard the rational-choice approach as an illustration of formalist functionalism in social science. Not referring to social mechanisms, the rational-choice approach fails despondently to explain the very existence of social systems, from the family to the worldwide corporation. This failure is a necessary outcome of its explicit

implementation of ontological and methodological individualism. (Bunge, 1996: Ch. 14) Still, when used in restraint, this approach may have some heuristic value. Indeed, it suggests looking for the reasons, good or bad, which motivate decisions. (Boudon, 1999) It also suggests explaining some failed actions as results of miscalculations. (By contrast, success may be explained either by correct calculation or by favorable circumstances.) What is known as social functionalism is a version of adaptationist functionalism. It focuses on social systems and their specific functions or activities. It also studies both the cohesive or system-preserving (“functional”) and the divisive or system-interfering (“dysfunctional”) consequences of a system’s activities. Social functionalism is an alternative to both Marxist economic determinism and the traditional or culture-historical approach centered on statesmen and battles (Trigger, 1989). Though fathered by the classical Sociologists like A. Comte, H. Spencer and most prominently E. Durkheim at the turn of the century, functionalism flourished particularly in the UK and the US between 1920 and 1960, in the works of B. Malinowski and E. R. Radcliffe-Brown in Anthropology, G. Childe in Archaeology, and T. Parsons and R. K. Merton in Sociology. The functionalists in the realm of Sociology postulated that all the social items (mechanisms, roles, norms, patterns, institutions, etc.) come into being and persist because they are useful to the social system concerned, or even to society at large. Put negatively: the social items that have ceased to discharge any useful function eventually disappear. (Mahner et.al., 2001)

Functionalism in sociology includes the assumption that the social system is homogeneous, so that what is useful for its cohesion or preservation is good for every member of it. This presupposition is not even true for primitive societies, all of which retain negative items such as crippling kinship conventions and counter-productive superstitions. Thus, it is an instance of the fallacy of division. However, some functionalist questions may be rewarding. The reason is that many social functions are indeed aptations, or even adaptations. And the existence of such functions, poses the problem of their origin and persistence. Now, every such problem can be analyzed non-teleologically as the sequence of questions: What is the internal activity in question? What is its role? Are the activities and roles valuable to the group (or the society) as a whole? If in fact they are aptations (any character currently subject to selection whether its origin can be ascribed to selective processes (adaptation) or to processes other than selection or selection for a different function (exaptation)), are they also adaptation? (Mahner et.al. 2001)

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### 4.3 Critique

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Functionalism and latter, structural functionalism has recurrently been accused of being teleological in explanation. Teleology (from Greek *telos* meaning ‘end’ and *logos* meaning

scientific knowledge or 'reason') is a philosophical error of explaining something by referring to its purpose, goal, end or function. Functionalism falls in this trap for its over emphasis on the concept that social structures have specific goals. It tries to justify why structures exist without sufficient empirical substantiation (Ritzer & Goodman, Chapter 7 summary, 2004). It attempts to describe social structures through the purposes they fulfil, but doesn't explain the cause of their existence. Thus it offers the final cause of existence of a social structure, but fails in providing explanation of the efficient, material causes, i.e. the stuff out of which a thing is made (Encyclopaedia Britannica). In this regard, Durkheim said that "the determination of function is necessary for the complete explanation of the phenomena" (Coser, 1977) and "when the explanation of a social phenomenon is undertaken, we must seek separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfils" (Coser, 1977). The excerpts denote that the classical functionalist was aware of the theoretical task of explaining separate cause and effect for existence of any fact. Since Parsons was highly influenced by the writings of Durkheim it is likely that he used this notion when creating his theory. Still the theoretical model often remained trapped into the teleological reasoning of explaining cause of effect. Merton disregards this as he says that functional analysis doesn't try to explain cause of effects so is not teleological. (Encyclopedia, n.d)

Another question raised against the functional approach is that it never determines what is functional and what is not, and for whom each of these activities and institutions are functional. If there is no method to sort functional from non-functional aspects of society, the functional model can become tautological – without any analytical control in which any activity is regarded as functional.

Many critiques argue that society cannot have needs in the same way a human does, and if it has some needs also, there is hardly any necessity to meet those needs. Anthony Giddens suggests that functionalist explanations could be rewritten as historical accounts and not as a theory. Giddens offered a perspective of structuration that aims at explaining society as a dynamic process of continuous interaction between structure and agency (Human agency). According to Giddens, although all human action is performed within and influenced by a pre existing social structure, and is often determined by the rules of that structure; the rules are not permanent, but can change according to human action. (Giddens, 1986)

Structural functionalism dominated the realm of sociology as the major theoretical credence throughout most of the 20th century. It has been criticised, however, for accepting existing

social order without considering how they might take advantage of some groups or individuals within society. (Newman, 2010)

A critique of structural functionalism is that it assumes regular interaction between a political system and its environment. This ultimately led the approach to recognize the likelihood of change and so ignores the potential for political conflict. It indirectly supports the existence of the status quo. (Kamrava, 1996) Another criticism against the functional model in the area of politics is that of ethnocentrism. Structural functionalism does not account for authoritarian or dictatorial political systems. The system- environment interaction makes it only applicable to western democratic political systems. There are many places in the earth, where some group of people in society have no input in the world of politics (mainstream politics/governance of the state). These people, their interaction with the state etc. are often left out by the description provided by the structural functional model of analysis. (Kamrava, 1996)

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#### **4.4 Limitation for Social Change**

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Functionalism has been mostly criticized by scholars as being a static perspective because of its limitation to explain social change. Though Talcott Parsons opposed this view by explaining his idea of moving equilibrium that does account for change in social order (Parsons, *Theories of Society: foundations of modern sociological theory*, 1961), the fact that the functional model does stress on equilibrium and quick return to social order, rather than investigating the wide spectrum of social change is a proven fact. Further, if we keep in mind the time period when 20th century functionalism, especially, structural functionalism was developing in the U.S. intellectual arena- just aftermath of the 2nd world war- we can easily grasp the urge of the then intellectuals of social science for explaining social order rather than social change.

A further criticism is that functionalism doesn't explain why people choose to conform to norms or seeks to deviate from them. Functionalism faces severe criticism from the theorists of conflict perspective, Marxist intellectuals and feminist scholars. Feminists argue that functionalism fails to address the problem of gender discrimination in society. Parsons in his theory focuses on positive functions of the family for the society as a whole and never mentions it as a structure of oppression for women. Conflict theorists oppose it for excessive reliance on consensus and harmony within society while ignoring conflict and contradiction, which have obvious presence in society. Further Functionalism is criticised for disregarding individual freedom and will (Holmwood, 2005). According to Lockwood, Parsons does not account for organisations that do not work together and thus cause conflict. Parsons

thwarted this opposition by stating that issues of conflict and cooperation were included and analysed in his model (Holmwood, 2005). Parsons created an ideal for society and by doing this he restricted his analysis. R.K. Merton's contribution to functional theory addresses the issue of conflict and tension in society and introducing the idea of tension and conflict into structural functionalism, he offers a way to the model to counteract these stark criticisms. (Merton, 1957) Some critics, like Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, claim that the perspective justifies the status quo and the process of cultural hegemony that maintains it.

Functionalism does not encourage people to take an active role in changing their social environment, even when doing so may benefit them. Instead, functionalism sees agitating for social change as undesirable because the various parts of society will compensate in a seemingly organic way for any problems that may arise.

Overall, the main assumptions of structural- functional theory are that external social constraints create confines in individual behaviour; and that social order is based on shared values. The system of social structure and social order has needs that have to be met for its survival and stability. This theory allows for social change but assumes the change to be slow and evolutionary, so as the social structures may adapt to fit the requirements of system. For functionalists like Parsons, inequality may be seen as functional for society. The theory is promising in the sense that it explains predictable patterns of behaviour within social groups, and the influence of culture and society on individuals. This approach is associated with the positivist thesis and quantitative methods.

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## 4.5 The Negative Consequences for Social Order

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We have already mentioned that functionalism has been highly criticized because of its neglect of the often negative consequences of social order. As for example, the functionalist perspective of gender inequality was most robustly articulated in the 1940s and 1950s, and was propagated by Talcott Parsons in his model of the nuclear family. This theory states that gender inequalities exist as an efficient way to create a division of labour that serves as a mechanism for maximizing resources and efficiency in the family. A structural-functionalist view of gender inequality shows predefined gender roles as harmonizing: women take care of the home while men provide for the family. Thus gender, like other social institutions, contributes to the stability of family system, and thus solidifies the order of society as a whole.

In sociological studies, functional prerequisites stand for the basic needs (food, shelter, clothing etc.) that an individual requires to survive and sustain in the social world. Functional prerequisites may also refer to the factors that allow a society to maintain social order.

According to structural functionalists, gender roles serve to maintain social order by providing and ensuring the stability of such functional prerequisites. Hence, this view has been accused for reification, rather than reflection of gender roles. While gender roles, according to the functionalist perspective, have positive contribution for maintaining stable social relations, Feminist scholars argue that gender roles are discriminatory and should not be upheld. The feminist movement, which was on the rise at the same time that functionalism began losing popularity, takes the position that functionalism neglects the suppression of women within the family structure.

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## 4.6 Conclusion

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Overall, the main assumptions of structural- functional theory are that external social constraints create confines in individual behaviour; and that social order is based on shared values. The system of social structure and social order has needs that have to be met for its survival and stability. This theory allows for social change but assumes the change to be slow and evolutionary, so as the social structures may adapt to fit the requirements of system. For functionalists like Parsons, inequality may be seen as functional for society. The theory is promising in the sense that it explains predictable patterns of behaviour within social groups, and the influence of culture and society on individuals. This approach is associated with the positivist thesis and quantitative methods.

However vehemently criticized and fiercely debated the propositions of functionalism might have been, it remains productive throughout the century. The functional perspective can be applied to nearly all the key topics in sociology, for example Durkheim used functionalism to explain suicide rates in particular groups and societies. (Gingrich, 1999). Other themes including family, education, religion and deviance —everything that means the existence of social relationship can be understood, analysed and explained from the perspective of functionalism. Many scholars like to view and analyze social reality, and functionalism remained one of the favourite tools for many scholars to explain the way we live. Partially in response to the criticisms discussed above, scholars aligned with the functionalist approach initiated systematic theorizing and empirical research on the issue of change. Differentiation theory was one of the products of this collective intellectual effort.

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## 4.7 Summary

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We presented a critique of the functional theory. We concluded with the limitation for social change. We also discussed the virtues of the theory as well.

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## 4.8 Questions

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- A. Answer briefly (6 marks)
  - i. What is teleology? How does functionalism fall under its trap?
  - ii. How does Giddens criticize the functional perspective of viewing society?
  - iii. How does functionalism explain gender roles in society?
  - iv. “What is known as social functionalism is a version of adaptationist functionalism.”- Justify.
  - v. Why do functionalism and later structural functionalism seem so obsessed with explaining social order?
- B. Answer in detail (12 marks)
  - i. How does functionalism explain social change?
  - ii. How does functionalism attempt to analyse inequality in society?
  - iii. Why do feminist scholars criticize functionalism?
  - iv. Why has Functionalism been target of criticism by Marxist scholars?
- C. Essay Type Question (20marks)
  - i. Evaluate the importance of functionalist school of thought in the development of sociology as an academic discipline.

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#### 4.10 Suggested Readings

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## 4.11 Glossary

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Function	A function is the contribution made by a phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part, in order to maintain the unity of the system.
Functionalism	Functionalism is a sociological theory that attempts to explain social institutions as collective means to meet social needs. The basic concern of functionalism is to explain the apparent stability and internal cohesion of societies necessary to ensure their continued survival over time. Functionalism views society as a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. According to this approach, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society. A change in any part is seen as leading to a certain degree of imbalance, which in turn results in changes in other parts of the system and to some extent to a reorganization of the system as a whole.
Organismic analogy	The Organismic analogy which is a staple of ancient and medieval thought was reformulated by Spencer, who recognized the similarities (and dissimilarities) between society and organism as the first step towards a general theory of evolution. The same definition of life applies to both biological and social organism.
Organic solidarity	As part of his theory of the development of societies in <i>The Division of Labour in Society</i> (1893), sociologist Emile Durkheim characterized two categories of societal solidarity: organic and mechanical. Mechanical solidarity is the type of social cohesion and integration that comes from the homogeneity of individuals: people in societies of small-scale technology feel connected to each other through similar life-ways, i.e., similar work, educational and religious training, and lifestyle, which is often based on the kinship ties of familial networks. Organic solidarity is social cohesion based upon the dependence individuals have on each other in more advanced societies. It comes from the interdependence that arises from specialization of work and the complementarities between people.

Structure	The complex and stable framework of society that influences all individuals or groups through the relationship between institutions (e.g., economy, politics, religion) and social practices (e.g., behaviours, norms, and values). The terms "structure" and "social structure" are used interchangeably in a sociological context. According to [functionalism], a society is composed of interrelated parts, each of which serves a function and (ideally) contributes to the overall stability of the society. Societies develop social structures, or institutions that persist because they play a part in helping society survive
Equilibrium	Social equilibrium, a theoretical state of balance in a social system referring both to an internal balance between interrelated social phenomena and to the external relationship the system maintains with its environment. In sociology, a system is said to be in social equilibrium when there is a dynamic working balance among its interdependent parts. Each subsystem will adjust to any change in the other subsystems and will continue to do so until equilibrium is retained. The process of achieving equilibrium will only work if the changes happen slowly, but for rapid changes it would throw the social system into chaos, unless and until a new equilibrium can be reached.
Functional pre requisites	The provisions that all societies are required to make in order to come into existence, survive and maintain order. Talcott Parsons identified four fold set of functional pre-requisites in his social system model.
Social action	In sociology, social action, also known as Weberian social action, is an act which takes into account the actions and reactions of individuals. According to Max Weber, "an Action is 'social' if the acting individual takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course"
Social system	In sociology, social system is the patterned network of relationships constituting a coherent whole that exist between individuals, groups, and institutions. Parsons organized social systems in terms of action units, where one action executed by an individual is one unit. He defines a social system as a network of interactions between actors. According to Parsons, social systems rely on a system of language, and culture must exist in a society in order for it to qualify as a social system.

Personality system	The term personality is derived from the Latin word persona meaning a mask. Personality is a patterned body of habits, traits, attitudes and ideas of an individual as these are organized externally into roles and statuses and as they relate internally to motivation, goals and various aspects of selfhood.
Cultural system	According to the Action Theory of Talcott Parsons, culture is understood as an ordered symbolic system, that is, a symbolically mediated pattern of values or standards of appropriateness that permits the construction of a set of action-guiding, normative, conventional rules through which significant cultural objects are generated and used. If a symbolic system has validity for all of the participating actors, it is able to give order to action.
Value	Values are a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society; and this standard is shared by the people of that society. Values are deeply embedded and critical for transmitting and teaching a culture's beliefs. Functionalists believe that all members of society are socialized into these norms and values, first through the family and later through institutions such as education, the media and religion. It is in this secondary socialization that people learn universalistic values rather than just those particular values to their own family or community.
Adaptation	In AGIL model illustrated by Parsons, which represents the four basic functions that all social systems must perform if they are to persist, the first function is adaptation. In any system or sub-system, adaptation stands for the problem of acquiring sufficient resources.
Deviance	An action or behavior that violates social norms, including a formally enacted rule (e.g., crime), as well as informal violations of social norms (e.g., rejecting folkways and mores).
Latency	In AGIL model illustrated by Parsons, which represents the four basic functions that all social systems must perform if they are to persist, the fourth function is latency. In any system or sub-system, it is the organization for pattern-maintenance. E.g. values which serve to legitimate and authorize decision-making rights in system.
Functional alternatives	Functionalists believe societies must have certain characteristics in order to survive. Merton shares this view but stresses that at the same time particular institutions are not the only ones able to fulfill these functions;

a wide range of functional alternatives may be able to perform the same task. This notion of functional alternative is important because it alerts sociologists to the similar functions different institutions may perform and it further reduces the tendency of functionalism to imply approval of the status quo.

Grand theory	Grand theory is a term coined by C. Wright Mills (1960) to describe the abstract generalized system building of structural functionalists, notably in the work of Talcott Parsons. In the social sciences, grand theory refers to those efforts devoted to abstract, analytical theory building.
Middle range theory	Middle-range theory, developed by Robert K. Merton, is an approach to sociological theorizing aimed at integrating theory and empirical research.
Tautology	A kind of logical error: a compound propositional form all of whose instances are true, as "A or not A."
Teleology	A kind of logical error: circular kind of reasoning.
Manifest function	The anticipated and intended goals of an action or social structure.
Latent function	Unanticipated and unintended consequences of an action or social structure.

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## **Unit - 5 □ General Arguments**

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### **Structure**

- 5.1 Objectives**
- 5.2 Introduction**
- 5.3 Conflict perspective as a criticism to Structural Functionalism**
- 5.4 Contribution of Karl Marx**
- 5.5 Critique of Karl Marx**
- 5.6 Contribution of Max Weber**
- 5.7 Contribution of Georg Simmel**
- 5.8 Contribution of C.W. Mills**
- 5.9 The Main Arguments of the Conflict Perspective**
- 5.10 Conclusion**
- 5.11 Summary**
- 5.12 Questions**
- 5.13 References**

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### **5.1 Objectives**

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To understand the contributions of

- Karl Marx in the origin of Conflict theory
- Max Weber
- C.W. Mills
- G.Simmel

In the evolution of the conflict Perspective

- The main arguments of the conflict perspective
- Defining the term Conflict Perspective

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## 5.2 Introduction

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As a sociological Theory, conflict perspective understands the social reality in terms of competitions and conflicts that ensue between different groups because they have common interest. It is due to lack of resources and increase in competition that conflict seems to be the only route to maximize one's desires and gains, and conflict is the natural consequence as the attainment of one's desires is stopped by the other, thereby creating a relation of inequality and subordination. In such scenario, conflict seems to be the only route to attain equality, and hence change in the existing social structure. Conflict theorists emphasized the proactive roles of individuals who were capable of being actors, in achieving their own goals.

Machiavelli and Hobbes initiated the basic stance of cynical realism about human society. Individuals' behavior is explained in terms of their self-interests in a material world of threat and violence. Social order is seen as being founded on organized coercion. There is an ideological realm of belief (religion, law), and an underlying world of struggles over power; ideas and morals are not prior to interaction but are socially created, and serve the interests of parties to the conflict

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## 5.3 Conflict perspective as a criticism to Structural Functionalism

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Conflict perspective developed as a major theoretical alternative to the structural functional perspective. The Structural-Functional perspective of Talcott Parsons which was based on the principle that societies and social institutions work as a unit and if there are anomalies or conflict within, then there are alternatives to tackle the conflict. The functionalist perspective points to the ways in which different parts of a system are interdependent and work together to keep the system working together and hence there is always peace in society. There cannot be any anomaly as all the parts necessary for the smooth functioning of the society help and work in a coordinated manner. Functional perspective was criticized as it could not apprehend social change; hence functionalist were termed as being politically conservative as they focused on the cultural and political norms and values rather than understanding the phenomenon of power and resource. As the structural functionalists focused on norms, they failed to look into the dynamic nature of actors who could change the situation through social action. In contrast to the single way of understanding of the society, there were various other ways of looking at society.

These were the major criticisms labelled against the Structural Functional Perspective, which brings us to the forerunners of the Development of the Conflict Theory. The main personalities

who developed the Conflict Perspective are – Karl Marx (1818-1833), C.W Mills (1916-1962), Gumplowicz etc. Gumplowicz theorized that large complex human societies evolved from the war and conquest. The winner of a war would enslave the losers; eventually a complex caste system develops.[3] Horowitz says that Gumplowicz understood conflict in all its forms: “class conflict, race conflict and ethnic conflict”, and calls him one of the fathers of conflict theory.

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## 5.4 Contribution of Karl Marx

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Karl Marx was a humanist who was moved by the immense sufferings of the working class under the pressure of capitalism. Hence an undeniable social reality was the prevalence of conflict and contradictions, which he calls dialectics, among the various levels of social reality. Marx analyses society in the form of a stratified system where relation between a group of men and the means of production becomes the starting point of conflict. According to Karl Marx, the major classes in a capitalist society are on the one hand owners of capital i.e., owners of labour power and landowners on the other hand. Individuals are self-seeking, guided by their own interests. Hence the major cause of destruction of the capitalist system is the increase in the self-interest of the capitalist. When due to the increase in network of communication there develops some form of organization and people have a common enemy the masses convert from just an aggregate of individuals to self-conscious individuals. In a capitalist society when the workers unite on understanding their extreme exploitation at the hands of the capitalists, they convert themselves from class-in-itself to class-for-itself so that they realise that conflict is the only way to their attaining freedom. According to Karl Marx conflict is the major reason for change in society from feudal to capitalist which is propelled by the economic causes as economy forms the substructure of society upon which the superstructure is based.

Thus Karl Marx viewed society as a form of stratified class structure, where social groups were based on their relations of production. In a stratified society there are mainly two classes the ruling class or the Bourgeoisie and the working class or the Proletariat. The Bourgeoisie derive their power from the ownership and control of the means of production. The ruling class deprives the working class of all their basic pay and exploits them by expropriating the surplus values. The Surplus value is the difference in the actual value of the product once it is sold in the market and the value that the proletariat receives. The proletariat receives only a meager amount just enough to maintain the bare existence of the proletariat while the surplus is expropriated by the capitalist. In this way the working class is alienated from his livelihood, his product and consequently from all the social and cultural values and hence alienated from himself.

Thus, according to Karl Marx, history has been moving through different stages and these changes have been initiated by social conflict, where the subordinated and oppressed classes come in conflict with those holding the power and dominating positions. Due to the dialectics between the dominating and the oppressed classes, a new socio – economic order is created and new classes are formed. In the stages of conflict, three factors become absolutely necessary, which are – 1. The power of the productive forces, 2. The mode of production, and 3. relations of production, (the classes involved in the struggle). And 4. The role played by ideology. According to Karl Marx, society has passed from primitive communism, ancient society, feudal society and industrial capitalist society. In this society as well conflict between the working labour class and the ruling bourgeoisie class shall result in a new era which shall be marked by classlessness. In the primitive communist stage, there were no classes because there was no private property. In the ancient society, there were visible classes- the serfs and the masters. In the feudal society conflict between the serfs and the feudal lords resulted in the industrial society. The ruling class in all these epochs formed the minority but they were in control over the means and forces of production while the subject classes were the slaves, serfs and workers. The subject classes formed the majority but they were dominated, controlled and their means of sustenance was controlled by the ruling classes. The relation between the ruling and the subject classes was marked by exploitation and oppression. In all these societies the real wealth laid in the labour of the oppressed classes. The ruling classes controlled the labour by giving them wages. But the wages were not equivalent to the labour power given to produce a certain product. Thus conflict ensued between the classes as there was stark difference between the rewards received for labour compared to the reward received in exchange for the product that was finally sold in the market.

The contributory factors that initiated and intensified the conflict between the classes are

1. Conflict over economic rewards between the classes.
2. Physical concentration of masses of people.
3. Easy communication among the people in the same class position.
4. Development of solidarity (class consciousness)
5. Political organization and role of ideology
6. Revolution that changed the entire social structure.

The society shall hence be known as Socialist Society where all men shall be treated equal, but as state is always controlled by the ruling class it becomes necessary to annihilate



the State, which will result in Communism on the basis of withering away of the state and classes.

Thus, Karl Marx's conflict perspective is known as the Materialist conception of history or Dialectical Materialism, where matter or the economy is the main cause of generating conflict and thereby creating social changes.

### **Do you know?**

The major causes of conflict, according to Marx, are-

- Marx indicated the material conditions that mobilize particular class interests into action and that make it possible for the classes to articulate their ideas.
- 2. The material conditions for mobilization as a coherent, intercommunicating group also vary among social classes.
- 3. Classes differ in their control of the means of mental production.

These Marxian principles, with certain modifications, provide the basis for a conflict theory of stratification. Thus Karl Marx can be rightly called the father of Conflict perspective, who understood the inequalities that prevailed in society which could only be corrected through conflict which in turn shall bring social change.

1. Historically, particular forms of property (slavery, feudal landholding, capital) are upheld by the coercive power of the state; hence classes formed by property divisions (slaves and slave-owners, serfs and lords, capitalists and workers) are the opposing agents in the struggle for political power and the underpinning of their means of livelihood.
2. Material contributions determine the extent to which social classes can organize effectively to fight for their interests; such conditions of mobilization are a set of intervening variables between class and political power.
3. Other material conditions—the means of mental production—determine which interests will be able to articulate their ideas and hence to dominate the ideological realm.

### **Marx's idea about Theory of Stratification**

According to Marx, conflict leads not only to ever-changing relations within the existing social structure, but the total social system undergoes transformation through conflict. During the feudal period, the relations between serf and lord and between burgher and gentry, underwent many changes both in law and in fact. Yet conflict finally led to a breakdown of all feudal relations and hence to the rise of a new social system governed by different patterns of social relations. It is Marx's contention that the negative element, the opposition,

conditions the change when conflict between the sub-groups of a system becomes so sharpened that at a certain point this system breaks down. Each social system contains elements of strain and of potential conflict; if in the analysis of the social structure of a system these elements are ignored, if the adjustment of patterned relations is the only focus of attention, then it is not possible to anticipate basic social change. Exclusive attention to want and use, to the customary and habitual bars access to an understanding of possible latent elements of strain which under certain conditions accentuate in overt conflict and possibly in a basic change of the social structure.

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## 5.5 Critique of Karl Marx

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Karl Marx's theory was heavily criticized for the following reasons –

- (1) Societies are not simply reflections of the economic inequalities. There are other forms of inequalities as well.
- (2) Apart from social classes there are also interest groups in societies that are unrelated to social classes but demand benefits.
- (3) Those who possess power in capitalist society are not always those with the highest income or the owners of the most property. There are other criterion of assuming power in society.
- (4) Conflict in a large modern society is rarely bipolarized. Society is not simply characterised by the working proletariat and ruling bourgeoisie classes, rather the nature of classes has changed in accordance with the change in the society and
- (5) Social conflict does not always lead to structural social change. Social conflict might lead to reformation or change in the social parts but not necessary a total revolution.

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## 5.6 Contribution of Max Weber

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We now turn our attention to Max Weber who also made an important contribution in throwing a new dimension to conflict perspective. He was preoccupied with the issues of power and conflict. He suggested that the capitalist world of rational calculation and profit necessarily involved the sublimation of erotic desires. Conflict and search for power were for Weber, endemic in all social relationships. The key determinants in social relationships was power, which he defined as the “probability that one actor within social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.”. A more refined definition, he went on, would include the

basis for the probability that a command will be obeyed. “Domination, a related concept, he defined as the possibility that a command will be obeyed by a given group of persons.(1925,1:53)

Weber pointed out that every social sphere was influenced by the structures of domination. The concept could be applied to relations “ a drawing room as well in the market, from the rostrum of a lecture hall as well as command post of a regiment , from an erotic or charitable relationship as well as from scholarly discussions or athletics (1925, 2:943).

Weber was primarily concerned with domination related to administration. Domination, “expresses itself and functions through administration and every administration needs domination because it is always necessary that some powers of command be in the hands of somebody. (1925,2:948)

German sociologist Max Weber adopted many aspects of Marx’s conflict theory and further refined the idea. Weber believed that conflict over property was not limited to one specific scenario. Rather, he believed that there were multiple layers of conflict existing at any given moment and in every society. Whereas Marx framed his view of conflict as one between owners and workers, Weber also added an emotional component to his ideas about conflict. He stated: *“It is these that underlie the power of religion and make it an important ally of the state; that transform classes into status groups, and do the same to territorial communities under particular circumstances...and that make ‘legitimacy’ a crucial focus for efforts at domination.”*

Weber’s beliefs about conflict extend beyond Marx’s in that they suggest that some forms of social interaction, including conflict, generate beliefs and solidarity between individuals and groups within a society. In this way, an individual’s reactions to inequality might be different depending on the groups with which they are associated, whether they perceive those in power to be legitimate, and so on.

He agreed with Marx but also believed that, in addition to economic inequalities, inequalities of political power and social structure cause conflict. In addition to that Weber noted that different groups were affected differently based on education, race, and gender, and that people’s reactions to inequality were moderated by class differences and rates of social mobility, as well as by perceptions about the legitimacy of those in power.

Weber shows that several different forms of property conflict coexist in the same society, and hence, by implication, allow the existence of multiple class divisions. He elaborates on the principles of organizational intercommunication and control thereby adding a theory of organization and yet another sphere of interest conflict, this time intra-organizational factions; he also emphasizes that the violent coercion of the state is analytically prior to

the economy, and thus transferred the center of attention to State as the control of the material means of violence.

Max Weber noted that different groups were affected differently based on education, race, and gender. People's reactions to inequality were moderated by class differences and rates of social mobility, as well as by perceptions about the legitimacy of those in power.

#### **Max Weber's contribution**

- a. Like Marx, Weber too believed that men are motivated by their self-interest and society has paid importance to aggrandisement of wealth.
- b. People manoeuvred circumstances to suit their interests.
- c. Power is a defining principle in society and people dominate others using power. Legitimate power is called authority, which implies that certain people have the right to be obeyed.
- d. Other than wealth, an individual's status and life chances were equally important in determining the power that an individual had in society.

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### **5.7 Contribution of Georg Simmel**

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German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918) believed that conflict can help integrate and stabilize a society. He said that the intensity of the conflict varies depending on the emotional involvement of the parties, the degree of solidarity within the opposing groups, and the clarity and limited nature of the goals. Simmel also showed that groups work to create internal solidarity, centralize power, and reduce dissent. Resolving conflicts can reduce tension and hostility and can pave the way for future agreements. Georg Simmel analyzes conflict in terms of interactive processes and depicts conflict as “a form of socialization.” No group can be entirely harmonious, for then it would lack process and structure. Group formation is a result of both association and dissociation, so that both conflict and cooperation serve a social function. Some certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation.

Simmel in the chapter on “Sociology: Studies in the Form of Sociation” writes about the social significance of conflict. He maintains that one should not overlook the positive aspect of conflict and just focus on the destructive tendencies of conflict. In Simmel's view, conflict serves as maintaining and increasing the integration within group. “It is a way of achieving unity”

He analyses conflict as a social form. The fighting instinct is the ultimate cause of social conflict because conflicts are means to achieve the end rather than merely an instinctual reactions to external stimulus. It means that conflict is the fundamental principle by which individuals achieve their purposes in innumerable social contexts like marriage, work , politics, play hence it is viewed as a social form.

Moreover, conflict is nearly always combined with cooperation ; people agree on norms that regulate when, where and how to fight with one another. As he writes, “there probably exists no social unit in which convergent and divergent currents among its members are not inseparably interwoven.” He then goes on to illustrate conflict between groups and conflict between groups.

### **Conflict within groups**

Conflict within groups revolves around three forms – 1. Conflicts in which opposing groups possess common personal qualities. 2. Conflicts in which opposing parties perceive each other as threat to the existence of the group and 3. Conflict in which the opposing parties recognise and accept each other as legitimate opponents.

**Conflict between groups** – Simmel analyses the consequences that “conflict between groups has for the inner structure of each party itself.” He was concerned with the consequences of conflict on social relationships with regard to (1) degree of centralisation of authority within each group, (2) degree of social cohesion / solidarity within each group and (3) likelihood of coalitions among groups having similar opponents.

### **Things to do**

Have you ever fought with your classmates? Write about the changes that you see in the friendship after the in- group fight.

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## **5.8 Contribution of C.W.Mills**

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C.W. Mills or Charles Wright Mills was an American sociologist and a professor of sociology at the Columbia University. He was born in 1916 and died in 1962. Mills was a known figure in the popular and intellectual journals. He wrote several books which highlighted several relationships among the American elite and the common people during the post-World War 2 era. There are three books which define his term as a sociologist: ‘*The Power Elite*’ looks to focus on the relationships and the class alliances among the US political, military and economic elites, ‘*White Collar: The American Middle Classes*’ which was a study of the American middle class and ‘*The Sociological Imagination*’, which

presents a model of analysis for the interdependence of subjective experiences within a person's biography, general social structure and historical development.

He is known as the founder of the modern conflict theory. He regards society as a dynamic entity constantly undergoing change as a result of competition over scarce resources. The theory regards life competition and focuses on the distribution of resources and power. The conflict theory is better at explaining social change. In his work, he believes social structures are created because of conflict between differing interests. People are directly influenced by the social structures which are formed due to difference in power and because of the power struggle between the "elite" and the "others". People feel the impact of social structures, and the usual result is a differential of power between the "elite" and the "others".

C. Wright Mills writes about the governing elite in America in his book the Power Elite and argues that a few individuals within the political, military and corporate realms hold power within the United States and they make decisions that affect the common lives of the Americans. The executive branch, military leaders and corporate leaders occupy the topmost portion of the power structure, the interest group leaders, legislators and local political leaders occupy the middle; and the common masses (the everyday people) at the bottom. Therefore the 'national upper class' that own most of the country's wealth, run its banks and corporations, are in control of the universities and mass media and staff some of the highest ranking positions within government and courts and these elites move fluidly between positions within the three controlling realms. Mills noted that these power holders.

usually were people who interacted with each other regularly and typically held the same political and economic views or agendas. Therefore the few individuals who have so much power that the wishes of the average people are not heard. Those at the top of the social structure are so distant from the average people and that they are so powerful that there isn't any true competition for them. Thus, they usually tend to get what they want.

The labour class had always been of interest to Mills. He strongly believed that the labour class was a strong force against the monopoly of the corporate capitalist in economic, political and cultural terms. He further stated that mass society and culture could affect the governing elites at that point of time.

Other contributors of the conflict theory are Vilfredo Pareto, Mosca and Michels and Thorstein Veblen.

Thorstein Veblen said that modern society is characterised by conflict between opposing economic groups. People demanded high esteem of others that naturally motivated them to engage in leisure activities or in consumption behaviour.

According to Pareto, men in power always exert authority over the others. People who occupy the position of authority share a common culture and they act together to defend their position.

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## 5.9 The main arguments of the Conflict Perspective

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Thus the main tenants of the Conflict perspective can be summarized as follows. Conflict theory states that tensions and conflicts arise when resources, status, and power are unevenly distributed between groups in society and that these conflicts become the engine for social change. In this context, power can be understood as control of material resources and accumulated wealth, control of politics and the institutions that make up society, and one's social status relative to others (determined not just by class but by race, gender, sexuality, culture, and religion, among other things). It is stated that

- a. People are power hungry and work towards their own interest.
- b. The source of conflict in society is power which is scarce and unequally divided. Power is also coercive.
- c. Groups and units in society fight for power and resources.
- d. Conflict implies one group is able to suppress its rivals, temporarily. The strife continues in a cycle as when one group rises to power, the rival determines to throw them down and rise to power.
- e. The institutions created by the State shall benefit those in power and the others shall stay deprived.
- f. An important aspect of Conflict perspective is that, they see values and ideas that can be used by different groups to achieve their own ends, rather than defining goals for the society. People have defined 'true' interest that works in their favour.
- g. Marx had analysed societies historically and concluded that there have always been conflicts between different classes, which was also responsible for social change. Marx established the link between ideas and 'interests' who developed those ideas and concluded that the 'ideas of an age always reflected the ideas of the ruling class'. He also said that the nature of property ownership determines the nature of people and social conflict

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## 5.10 Conclusion

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**Conflict Theory** : A social science perspective that holds that stratification is dysfunctional and harmful in society, with inequality perpetuated because it benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. Conflict theory sees social life as a competition, and focuses on the distribution of resources, power, and inequality.

- Unlike functionalist theory, conflict theory is better at explaining social change, and weaker at explaining social stability.
- Conflict theory has been critiqued for its inability to explain social stability and incremental change.
- Conflict theory derives from the ideas of Karl Marx

Why do conflicts occur?

*There is conflict because violent coercion is always a potential resource to achieve one's gain but being coerced is an intrinsically unpleasant experience, and hence that any use of coercion, even by a small minority, calls forth conflict in the form of antagonism to being dominated.*

### What are the different Schools of Conflict Perspective?

- a. The first group of thinkers believe that fact is inseparable from value, hence social scientists have the moral obligation to criticize society thereby eliminating all sources of social conflict. Thinkers in this category were influenced by the work of Karl Marx like C.W Mills, Pierre Bourdieu, neo Marxism and the Frankfurt school.
- b. The second group of thinkers believe that fact and value should be separated and be objective like the natural sciences, in understanding the social phenomenon. These thinkers believe that conflict is an essential part of every society. We shall discuss the second group of thinkers – Ralf Dahrendorf and Lewis Coser.

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## 5.11 Summary

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We have presented the general arguments of conflict theory. We have discussed the contributions of Karl Marx, Max Weber, George Simmel, C. W. Mills etc. We also presented a critical overview.



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## 5.12 Questions

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- a. Analyse the Marxian notion of class conflict.
- b. Write the concept of power and domination as mentioned by Weber . How does power lead to conflict?
- c. Elaborate on Simmel's notion of social conflict.
- d. Do you think Marxism is still relevant in the present post Capitalist age ?
- e. Make a list of classes that you see in society.
- f. Is society only divided into the bourgeoisie and the proletariat classes?
- g. What is the most common form of domination in the present age ?
- h. How will you link class and the WhatsappUsage ?

### Answer briefly

1. What are the major criticisms levelled against Karl Marx?
2. Write a short note on the different schools of social conflict.
3. What are the main arguments of conflict perspective ?
4. Write a brief note on the different types of conflict as given by Simmel

### Answer very briefly.

5. Who are the governing elite ?
6. How does conflict help in social cohesion.
7. State one similarity and one difference between Weber and Marx.
8. Name the sociologist who linked authority and culture ?
9. Key Terms- conflict, power, resource, stratification, class, economy, ruling class, oppressed class

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## 5.13 References

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## **Unit - 6 □ Contributions of Dahrendorf**

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### **Structure**

- 6.1 Objectives**
- 6.2 Introduction**
- 6.3 Vision of Society : Authority and Class**
  - 6.3.1 Authority**
  - 6.3.2 Class**
- 6.4 Society as “Imperatively Coordinated Association”**
- 6.5 The Intensity of Conflict**
- 6.6 Dahrendorf’s Theoretical Formulation**
- 6.7 Dahrendorf on Conflict**
  - 6.7.1 Main Types of Intervening Variables**
  - 6.7.2 Conditions that Influence Conflict**
- 6.8 Criticism**
- 6.9 Conclusion**
- 6.10 Summary**
- 6.11 Questions**
- 6.12 References**

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### **6.1 Objectives**

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- To learn about the influencing factors on Dahrendorf’s conflict analysis
- To understand his concept of class , society and social change
- To understand his concept of the ICA and the intervening variables
- A critical appreciation of Dahrendorf

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## 6.2 Introduction

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Dahrendorf attempts to synthesize the Marxian concepts of class, class interests, and class conflict on the one hand and the methodology and the concepts of the modern theory of action, on the other, in his analysis of social conflict and change. In his theory, Dahrendorf attempts to understand authority as it appears as the focus and cause of social conflicts and plays a dual role in social structures, as both an integrative force and a source of conflict. In each social structure (“imperatively coordinated association”) there are two classes, rulers and ruled, whose conflicting interests are defined in terms of role-expectations.

Likewise Dahrendorf cannot fulfil his promise to provide a concept of change which transcends given structures, in the Marxian sense. However his explanation of change turns out to be identical with that of social mobility. Dahrendorf’s criticism is directed against those sociologists whose works suggest that industrial society is characterised by consensus and integration. He wants to redirect the focus of inquiry to the phenomena of inequality, power, and social conflict.

- a. He stresses the importance of power which inevitably results in conflict.
- b. He is concerned with the ways in which social institutions generate groups with conflicting interests and the circumstances in which such groups become active and organized.

Marx’s notion of social structure and power is the starting point of the production and reproduction of the material culture in which human life is embedded. Capitalism is a form of social production process that generates material conditions which in turn are vehicles of the social conditions to which individuals are subjected. Property arrangements underlie the existence of “surplus” labour, performed in excess of the socially “necessary” labour, by those who do not own any means of production. In this sense property is conceived of as the basis of the master-servant relationship, in which the worker possesses only his marketable labour. This antithesis of capital and wage labour, of power and subjection, is for Marx the basis of the social structure. Society is divided into two principal classes arising from this structural antithesis, whose objective interests arise from their respective positions in the production process. The class structure, for Marx, is identical with the power structure. For Marx, power is not an irreducible phenomenon it is explained through a dialectic inherent in power. The social class which becomes the ruling material force of the society is forced to promulgate its particular interest as the common interest of the whole society. The objective conflicts which continue to exist between rulers and ruled are merely suppressed. With every new class rising to power, new conflicts evolve.

In this way ruling classes produce the conditions of their own destruction. These conditions are the dynamic elements of history.

**Parsons' explanation of power :** For him, social order is realized basically through the internalization of norms and values, but value consensus alone cannot guarantee order. There is also the need for “some supplementary coordination provided by explicit prescriptive or prohibitory role expectations (e.g., laws) enunciated by actors in specially differentiated roles to which is attached ‘responsibility’. In this context, authority is identical with social controls, external to “ego,” and has an integrative function which goes beyond that of internalization in that it helps to define norms and secure their observance.

From Marx's theory Dahrendorf borrows one central element, the notion of social change as a normal and continuous phenomenon of society; not only isolated parts of society but its entire structure change. Conflicts, as the cause of change, are inevitably produced in the social structure. Dahrendorf points out, however, that property has been replaced in the course of history with authority relations as the basis of social conflict. Thus, authority becomes the key analytical category of his theory.

In his efforts to direct sociological theory out of a “functional utopia,” Dahrendorf has reformulated in even more extreme form some of Marx's key assumptions:

- (1) Social life is typified by opposed interests cohering around differences in the distribution of power;
- (2) Opposed interests will inevitably result in conflict between those who have and do not have power;
- (3) Conflict is dialectical since the resolution of one set of conflict relations establishes the conditions of opposed interests for subsequent conflict;
- (4) Social change ensuing from conflict dialectics is therefore an inevitable feature of social systems.

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## 6.3 Vision of Society: Authority and Class

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### a. Society

Dahrendorf explains his dialectical conflict theory through integration and conflict where there is a dialectical relation between stability and change. To balance the image of society as integrated, Dahrendorf begins by outlining conflicting elements. The dynamics of social structures develops from authority relations. According to this “central thesis” the basic

phenomenon, social conflict, is found in all societies at all times. Authority is an element of social structure, but, according to Dahrendorf does not contribute to that structure's functional integration. Consequently, authority must be defined in terms other than those of structural-functional theory.

### **6.3.1 Authority**

Dahrendorf's analytical concept of structure, his normative definition of the term, leads him back to structural-functional theory and its difficulties in explaining conflict and change. The connection of authority to social structure, in which he tries to locate the origin of social conflicts in the social structure, means in this context nothing else but that authority resides in roles. Authority is linked to role and derived from it. Authority thus turns out to be defined as legitimate institutionalized role-expectation of superordination and subordination. Although Dahrendorf takes the definition of authority from Weber, it is identical with Parsons' conception. Authority is an institution as it is for Parsons. In this sense authority relationships are nothing else but a specific form of complementary social behavior. Authority is only one integrated pattern of action in the whole role structure of a social system. From the concept of social structure defined in terms of social action, the explanation of authority, coercion, conflict, social classes, class interests, and social change emerge.

In his model of society, the function and genesis of authority necessarily are defined in a different way, methodologically, than Marx defines them. Authority is a source of conflict. But Dahrendorf's theoretical foundation of authority varies somewhat with various contexts. Authority, to Parsons, is a necessary supplement to the normative system which can never be explicit enough to guide all action in every possible circumstance. Dahrendorf's differences with Parsons begin where he attaches to authority functions that are not integrative, but are sources of conflict. Thus, he says, the same structure of authority which guarantees integration also becomes the source of conflict. The reason for this is that authority is always coercion, the rule of some over others. Coercion implies, further, the particularization of interest and permits the conclusion that authority not only enforces norms, but performs a norm-setting function as well. This aspect is most important to Dahrendorf when he wants to explain conflict and change, in opposition to Parsons, who stresses authority as an integral subpart of the normative system.

With the norm-setting function, Dahrendorf can explain authority only as a prerequisite of ruling groups. This other- wise implicit formulation can be found in his use of the reference-group concept. Here norms originate from social groups in authority positions who use their authority in order to legislate norms.

On the one hand, authority functions to integrate society under a common normative system and to act as a mechanism of social control. On the other hand, it has the instrumental capacity to impose a value system derived from the goals of a minority. Dahrendorf's attempt to evade the consequences of structural-functional theory confronts a difficulty. He has to explain both the integration of society and the conflicts for the attainment of authority as the resultants of the will and intention of a social power group which is able to institutionalize its ends as a comprehensive normative system.

### **6.3.2 Class**

Dahrendorf defines classes as being identical with the antagonistic role aggregates of rulers and ruled. The criterion for the definition of classes is not property but the possession of authority positions. Accordingly, in each ICA, there can be only two classes. Therefore, "class" is not, in Dahrendorf's scheme, an independent analytical concept. Classes represent merely the positional (factual) aspect, while class interests are role- expectations or in other words authority .

In the context of this reinterpretation of the role-concept, Dahrendorf has to see conflict as arising from the expectations of obedience which the rulers address to the ruled, on the one hand, and the interests of the ruled in authority. The interest in authority exists because authority has the implicit instrumental value for the realization of different end. The importance for the theory lies in the fact that they are automatically in conflict with each other, implying either the preservation or change of the status quo.

### **d. The Explanation of Conflict and Change**

Dahrendorf's concept of structure does not imply the dialectic of self-originating antagonisms as he intends to show, but that conflict is postulated as a prerequisite of the social structure. The ubiquity of authority, in the context of this theory, correlates perfectly with the ubiquity of conflict. The plurality of values as a source of conflicts.

The object of conflicts is not the scarcity of means but authority. The distribution of facilities and rewards, for Dahrendorf, is only an ancillary consequence of the institutionalization of interests as values which the possession of authority makes possible.

He defines structural change as the "deviation of values (normative structure) or institutions (factual structure) of a structural entity at a given point of time . . . from those of a preceding point of time" .The change of the value system is concomitant with the change of the normative institutions.

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## 6.4 Society as “imperatively coordinated association”

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By means of conflict theory Dahrendorf (1958b:82) intends to present a model which is known as, the “structural origin of social conflicts.” He argues that the structural origins of social conflicts are found in the authority relations of organized social entities, and that these entities appear as coercively integrated Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society for which Dahrendorf uses the ponderous translation of Weber’s term, “imperatively coordinated association.” Authority, in the ICA as in the social system, constitutes the “coercive, controlling element”. It is understood as a functional imperative. Coercion which, in contrast to normative consensus, is the integrating force of the ICA is defined, exactly as in Parsons’ “system,” as the sanction against deviation from norms. Dahrendorf thus fails to establish that coercion is unique to it or that it is a specifically different aspect of authority from that term’s structural-functional definition. Indeed, the coercive nature of authority simply results from its integrative function.

Basically, coercion in Dahrendorf’s understanding does not differ from social control. Dahrendorf has to demonstrate that authority coercively integrates and causes conflict. Dahrendorf can thus establish the structural conflict of positions in the social structure. The ICA then is split into two role aggregates according to their “possession of or exclusion from legitimate power”. This opposition becomes comprehensible as the starting point of the conflict theory if different and contradicting role-expectations are associated with the authority and non- authority roles.

For Dahrendorf, the individual acts in compliance with his role if he contributes to the conflict of contradicting interests, and not to integration .This clearly demonstrates that “conflict” serves as an analytical point of reference in the same manner as “integration” does for the structural-functional theory. That is, integration and conflict are both “prerequisites” of society. This implies obviously an apriori solution of the problem posed: to analyze conflict as generated by structural causes.

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## 6.5 The Intensity of Conflict for Dahrendorf

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The concept of intensity refers to the degree of psychological commitment of parties to pursue conflict. For Dahrendorf, the more the conditions of organization are met, the more the distribution of scarce resources are correlated, and the less the mobility of the deprived, the more intense will be the conflict.



**Major Propositions:**

- Dahrendorf outlined his theory in the book, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. He argues that there is an inherent tendency to conflict in society. Because the groups with power will pursue their interests and those without power will pursue theirs. The interest of these groups are different. According to Dahrendorf, distribution of power is a crucial determinant of social structure. He uses Weber's definition of power. Power is the *"the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance regardless of the basis on which this probability rests."*
- Social system is in a state of continuous conflict that is generated by the opposed interest that is inherent in social systems. Opposed interests arise in society due to differential distribution of power.
- Conflict is part of every social life and society deals normally with conflict by institutionalizing it. Class antagonism between factory workers and owners in the late nineteenth century gave rise to political solutions establishing new norms for negotiating grievances like legalization of unions for airing grievances.
- Conflict is dialectical, because the resolution of a conflict gives rise to another set of opposed interest that under certain conditions shall generate further conflict.

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**6.6 Dahrendorf's Theoretical Formulation**

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According to Dahrendorf, there are processes in the society other than conflict that operates in the society. However, the conflict model, according to him, presents the clearer representation of the workings of the human society. Society, according to him, has two sides- one consensus the other that of conflict.

He is influenced by the Parsonian model and says how the process of institutionalization creates ICA or the imperatively associated associations, who are characterized by differential power relations with some roles having authority to demand conformity from the others. The social order is maintained by creating various types of authority relations and therefore the ICA becomes legitimate groups.

As power and authority are scarce in the society, subgroups within ICA struggle to obtain a greater share of authority. The outcome of the conflict is determined by how the groups within ICA stand in relation to authority. Thus two types of roles can be classified in ICA – the ruled and the ruling. The ruling has an interest of preserving the status quo,

while the ruled has interest in distribution of power or authority. Under certain condition the ICA gets polarized into two conflict groups - each having their objective interests.

The resolution of conflict in the ICA only result in the reorganization of the ICA. So, while for Marx, the source of authority relations is superstructure created by the dominant classes, that can be destroyed by conflict, Dahrendorf acknowledges that the source of conflict lies in the dominant classes but the cause of conflict remains the legitimized authority relations of the ICAs. Hence unlike Marx who sees power in property ownership, Dahrendorf locates that in authority.

The similarity between Marx and Dahrendorf lies in the changes that conflict does to the restructuring of social structures. The relations of domination and subjugation, created by opposite interests, awareness of the subjugated classes to the opposed interests, the formation of political organization upon the presence of the suitable conditions and consequently polarization of the subjugated groups who are then in conflict with the dominant group form a new pattern. A new set of relations of domination and subjugation further leads to a new set of conflict that changes the social organization.

Marx's notion of class consciousness is similar to awareness among the quasi group as given by Dahrendorf. Similarly Marx's class-for-itself is similar to Dahrendorf's conflict group.

Dahrendorf in his ICA elaborates on the intervening empirical conditions on the conditions under which legitimized authority relations are converted into relations of domination, coercion and subsequently conflict. Hence according to him, conflict can hinder changes unless the intervening variables are present.

The intervening variables cause the quasi group to become conflict group as well affect the intensity (or involvement of the members) of the conflict, violence or the degree of regulation of conflict and the rate of structural changes caused by it. Dahrendorf outlines three types of intervening variable conditions-1. Condition of organization that affects the transformation from quasi group to conflict group, 2conditions of conflict that determine the form and intensity of conflict. 3. Condition of structural changes that influence the kind, speed, and depth of changes in the social structure.

The variables in his theoretical scheme are –

1. Degree of conflict group formation
2. Degree of intensity of conflict
3. Degree of violence of the conflict

4. Degree of changes in the social structure
5. And rate of such changes .

Dahrendorf sees conflict as the growing awareness among the subjugated groups about their conditions and their formation into conflict groups. The more the technical conditions of the quasi group become aware of their objective interest, the more conflict is likely to occur. The more leaders among the quasi group can be developed and the more there are codified idea system the more the technical conditions can be met. More the sense of deprivation, greater shall be the violence of conflict which is closer to Karl Marx's analysis.

The more the political conditions are met the more likely is the formation of the conflict group. The more dominant groups permit organisation of the opposed interest, the more likely are the political conditions to be met.

The more social conditions are met through giving opportunity to the quasi group to communicate and by permitting recruitment, the more likely are the social conditions to be met.

The less the technical conditions are met, more shall be the intensity and violence of the conflict.

The more the distribution of authority and other rewards are associated with other , the more intense will be the conflict.

Less the mobility between the super and subordinate groups, the more intense will be the conflict. In this proposition, Dahrendorf was much influenced by Weber and Marx.

The greater the realisation that distribution of rewards are based on relative basis rather than on absolute terms, more shall be the violence of the conflict.

Less the ability of the conflict group to develop regulatory arrangements, more shall be the violence of the conflict.

Greater the intensity in a conflict, greater shall be the structural changes and its reorganisation. This too is also obtained from Marx's analysis.

In this analysis , it is observed that Dahrendorf was influenced by Marx and Weber. Marx's correlation between awareness of the subordinate group's interest and its subsequent formation into conflict group is similar to Dahrendorf's analysis of a conflict group .

'less the technical , political and the social conditions of the organisation , greater shall be the intensity of the conflict'. This proposition of Dahrendorf is borrowed from Simmel's

proposition that if the organisation is not well organised then conflict shall be emotionally involving.

In the proposition where Dahrendorf talks about the distribution of rewards as it is associated with conflict, he borrows this from Weber, when he claims that the greater is the superimposition of rewards – or the privilege of those who enjoy prestige, privilege greater shall be the involvement of the subordinates in pursuing conflict.

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## **6.7 Dahrendorf's Idea of Conflict**

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1. Social stratification is based on different social positions of wealth and reputations which is expressed in a rank order of social status. Therefore stratification is caused by norms which makes certain things desirable and others not.
2. For Dahrendorf, the source of conflict lies in the institutionalized authority relations of ICAs. ICA or Integrated Coordinated Association consists of authority relations that forms the 'factual substrates', or the source of conflict. ICA is characterized by relations of domination and subjugation which creates an inherent opposition of interest. Under certain conditions when opposed interests lead to political organization then polarization of subjugated groups creates new patterns of conflict.
3. There are certain intervening conditions that affect the degree of conflict.
4. The intervening empirical conditions cause quasi groups to become conflict groups. The conditions also affect the intensity or the involvement of the group members in the conflict and violence or the rate of structural changes that conflict is able to bring forth.

### **6.7.1 Main types of intervening variables**

- a. Conditions of organisations that affect the transformation of latent quasi group into manifest conflict groups.
- b. Conditions of conflict that affect the form and intensity of conflict.
- c. Conditions of structural changes that affect the kind, speed and depth of the changes in the social structure.

### **6.7.2 Conditions that Influence Conflict**

1. The more the technical conditions are met, the more likely are they to transform into conflict group.

- a. The technical conditions in a group are – leadership cadre and codified idea system. The more a leadership cadre among quasi group can be developed, the more the technical conditions will be met.
- b. The more the idea system is developed, the more technical conditions will be met.
2. The political conditions of a group is determined by the opportunity of the quasi members to communicate amongst themselves.
3. The more the members of a quasi-group communicate, the more likely are the social conditions to be met.

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## 6.8 Criticism

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Some of the criticisms levelled against Dahrendorf can be mentioned below:

1. Dahrendorf does not clearly specify the variables
2. Although he gives a dialectical conflict theory, it was more akin to Talcott Parson's theory of institutionalisation where presence of authority is the beginning of conflict.
3. He defines authority as a relation of domination-subjugation that makes it structural dichotomy necessary for the beginning of his dialectical theory.
4. Turner explains that the concepts of authority, domination, and interest have their own intervening empirical conditions that also influence the extent, violence and intensity of the conflict.
5. Although Dahrendorf positions himself as a critique of functionalism, rather he is a critique of Parson's theory of shared values or generalized value system in society. Dahrendorf's Imperatively Coordinated Associations are similar to Parsons' view of the social world in terms of institutionalized patterns.
7. The legitimized normative patterns reflect power differentials. This is similar to Parsons. concept of power, as the legitimate right of some status roles to regulate the expectations attendant upon others statuses.
8. In Dahrendorf's model, deviation from the norm established by status- roles will lead dominant groups to attempt to employ negative sanctions. This position is similar to Parsons' concept that power exists to correct deviations from within the group.

From the above position, it can be observed that for Dahrendorf power differentials cause integration through legitimized authority relations and disintegration through persistence of

opposed interests. This further implies the functional strands that are visible in Dahrendorf's position. When he says that conflict arises out of legitimized authority, it implies that opposed interests exist and cause conflict. Therefore he assumes that authority is functional requisite for system integration and that conflict that emerges from authority relations is a functional requisite for change.

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## 6.9 Conclusion

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Dahrendorf was much influenced by Parsons' functional analysis. Parsons' theory of social system is similar to Dahrendorf's ICA, Parsons' function of role as associated with social control is similar to Dahrendorf's concept of role and authority. Conflict is pre-requisite to meet the needs for social change. Due to these reasons Dahrendorf's theory can be called functional theory of conflict. He emphasizes on functions of social conflict because conflict has become an essential part of social structure that allows scope for co-existence and interdependence of numerous groups with diverse and conflicting values.

Dahrendorf's conflict theory represents a mixed system having some properties of both alternative approaches. Dahrendorf's starting point is that neither structural functionalism nor Marxism alone provides an acceptable perspective on advanced society. Dahrendorf contends that post capitalist society has institutionalized class conflict into state and economic spheres. For example, class conflict has been habituated through unions, collective bargaining, the court system, and legislative debate. In effect, the severe class strife typical of Marx's time is no longer relevant.

According to Dahrendorf, Marx's notion of class is justifiable because in his time capitalism was dominated by owner-managed firms where ownership and authority were concentrated in the same hands. In contemporary economy, however, the most representative form of business organisation is a joint-stock company with dispersed share ownership. In this situation control over the means of production is wielded by professional managers, and not by legal owners. This shows, in Dahrendorf's opinion, that the priority order of ownership and power should be reversed, it is no longer, as in Marx's time, that ownership entails authority, but, contrariwise, property is subordinated to authority. This is its special case. On the basis of his assumptions, Dahrendorf argues that society can be split up into the "command class" and the "obey class" and class conflict should refer to situations of struggle between those with authority and those without. However, there are several serious problems with that notion.

Dahrendorf claims that all conflicts only involve two contending parties. This view of conflict appears too simplistic to apply to advanced society, the very same inaccuracy

Dahrendorf accuses Marx of. Furthermore, on the basis of Dahrendorf's theoretical premises, one can in fact distinguish innumerable classes. For Dahrendorf classes are present in each so-called imperatively-co-ordinated group, be it a nonprofessional theatrical troupe, football club or a business corporation. In each such case one can discern two opposed groups : superiors and the subordinated. Needless to say, this leads to rather odd conclusions. From his definition of social class, if we see all authority relations as class relations, it follows that a conflict between parent and child, for instance, is a class conflict. Besides, he fails to establish the difference between authority resulting from truly legitimate power and authority stemming from a situation where a subordinate is regularly obedient to a superior for other reasons.

He claims that structural functionalists neglect realities of social conflict and that Marx defined class too narrowly and in a historically-specific context. Furthermore, he believes that traditional Marxism ignores consensus and integration in modern social structures. Dahrendorf combines elements from both of these perspectives to develop his own theory concerning class conflict in post capitalist society. Dahrendorf claims that capitalism has undergone major changes since Marx initially developed his theory on class conflict. This new system of capitalism, which he identifies as post capitalism, is characterised by diverse class structure and a fluid system of power relations. Thus, it involves a much more complex system of inequality

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## 6.10 Summary

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We discussed at length the contributions of Dahrendorf . We introduced the concept of Imperatively Coordinated Association. We also discussed a critique of Dahrendorf's theories.

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## 6.11 Questions

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### Short questions

1. What is Dahrendorf's notion of authority?
2. What is the ICA?
3. What do you mean by intervening variables?
4. What is Dahrendorf's notion of class?
5. What is Dahrendorf's concept of social change?
6. What is Dahrendorf's concept of society?

**Broad question**

1. Write a critical note on Dahrendorf's concept of the ICA.
2. Give a critical view of Karl Marx's influence on Dahrendorf's notion of dialectical conflict theory.
3. Draw a comparison between the Dialectical and Functional Conflict theories.
4. Draw a comparison between Functionalism and Dialectical Conflict theory .
5. Explain in detail how the intervening variables affect the intensity of conflict in Dahrendorf's model ?
6. What are the criticisms against Dahrendorf ?

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## **Unit - 7 □ Contribution of Lewis Coser**

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### **Structure**

- 7.1 Objectives**
- 7.2 Introduction**
- 7.3 Causes of Conflict**
- 7.4 Types of Conflict**
- 7.5 Functions of Social Conflict**
- 7.6 Social Conflict and Social Change**
- 7.7 Intensity of Conflict**
- 7.8 Conclusion**
- 7.9 Summary**
- 7.10 Questions**
- 7.11 References**

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### **7.1 Objectives**

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- To understand the concept of conflict and its necessity as given by Lewis Coser.
- To understand the causes of conflict.
- To understand the types and functions of conflict
- To understand the relation between conflict and social change.

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### **7.2 Introduction**

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Lewis Alfred Coser was born on 27 November 1913 in Berlin. He was a German-American sociologist. His father was a successful Jewish industrialist. In 1933 he fled from the Nazi Germany to Paris and in 1941 he left Nazi occupied Paris for the United States where he married Rose Laub. In the Fifties, he enrolled as a graduate student in sociology at Columbia University, taking his PhD at the age of forty-one. Coser first taught at the University of Chicago and then the University of California. He then founded the sociology department at Brandeis University and taught there for 15 years before joining the sociology department of the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Lewis Coser revealed recently that “the latent motives for doing much of my work are probably formed in the vicissitudes of my life and career” (Rosenberg 1984, p. 52). In addition, Coser has published several autobiographical writings (Coser 1988a, pp. xi-xx; 1988b). Together these writings can be taken as an invitation to pursue a contextualist interpretation of his sociological oeuvre. This Paper offers one modest contribution to such an undertaking: an examination of some neglected aspects of Coser’s reception of Georg Simmel. Coser’s dissertation-as-book, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956a), hereafter called *Functions*, will be the main focus of analysis. It is the thesis of this paper that Coser’s reception of Simmel and his theory of conflict were a function of his reaction to the postwar loss of Marxist “revolutionary self-confidence and theoretical self-certainty”<sup>1</sup> and of his consequent search for new ideals and intellectual directions. It is basic to our argument that Coser’s study on conflict was a deeply personal book and a historically situated statement. The following discussion will substantiate this biographical and historical argument and will draw implications for current sociological theory and research. Lewis A. Coser was born in 1913, in Berlin, to Martin and Margarete (Fehlow) Cohn.<sup>2</sup> His father, a banker and stockbroker of German-Jewish heritage, did not himself attempt to assimilate, but changed the family name to Coser for the sake of his son. It is significant for his later intellectual career that Coser did not identify directly with his father’s Jewish heritage or with the upper middle-class background of his youth, but rather with the cause of socialism and radical politics. Still, Coser was to benefit from his father’s economic situation and the educational opportunities it entailed. Following his father’s wishes to gain international experience, he traveled to England in the early 1930s. He moved on to Paris rather than returning to Berlin in order to escape persecution by the virulent anti-communist campaigns of the ascendant Adolf Hitler. In Paris, Coser not only attended classes in sociology at the Sorbonne, taught by the aging Durkheimians Bougle and Fauconnet, but also became intensely involved in radical political groups. Coser was the first sociologist who tried to bring together structural-functionalism and conflict theory. His work was focused on finding the functions of social conflict. Coser argued with Georg Simmel – that conflict might serve to solidify a loosely structured group. In a society that seems to be disintegrating, conflict with another society or inter-group conflict, may restore the integrative core. For example, the cohesiveness of Israeli Jews might be attributed to the long-standing conflict with the Arabs. Conflict with one group may also serve to produce cohesion by leading to a series of alliances with other groups.

Conflicts within a society, intra-group conflict, can bring some ordinarily isolated individuals into an active role. The protest over the Vietnam War motivated many young people to take vigorous roles in American political life for the first time.

Conflicts also serve a communication function. Prior to conflict, groups may be unsure of their adversary's position, but as a result of conflict, positions and boundaries between groups often become clarified, leaving individuals better able to decide on a proper course of action in relation to their adversary.

In his major work, "*The Functions of Social Conflict*", (1956), he enumerates the functions or role of social conflict. Coser has also published several autobiographical writings (Coser 1988a, pp. xi-xx; 1988b).

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### 7.3 Causes of Conflict

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Yet, not all social systems contain the same degree of conflict and strain. The sources and incidence of conflicting behaviour in each particular system vary according to the type of structure, the patterns of social mobility, of ascribing and achieving status and of allocating scarce power and wealth, as well as the degree to which a specific form of distribution of power, resources and status is accepted by the component actors within the different sub-systems. But if, within any social structure, there exists an excess of claimants over opportunities for adequate reward, there arises strain and conflict.

Any social system implies an allocation of power, as well as wealth and status positions among individual actors and component sub- groups. As has been pointed out, there is never complete concordance between what individuals and groups within a system consider their just due and the system of allocation. Conflict ensues in the effort of various frustrated groups and individuals to increase their share of gratification. Their demands will encounter the resistance of those who previously had established a 'vested interest' in a given form of distribution of honour, wealth and power. To the vested interests, an attack against their position necessarily appears as an attack upon the social order. Those who derive privileges from a given system of allocation of status, wealth and power will perceive an attack upon these prerogatives as an attack against the system itself. However, mere 'frustration' will not lead to a questioning of the legitimacy of the position of the vested interests, and hence to conflict. Levels of aspiration as well as feelings of deprivation are relative to institutionalized expectations and are established through comparison. When social systems have institutionalized goals and values to govern the conduct of component actors, but limited access to these goals for certain members of the society, 'departures from institutional requirements' are to be expected thereby causing conflict.

Similarly, if certain groups within a social system compare their share in power, wealth and status honour with that of other groups and question the legitimacy of this distribution, discontent is likely to ensue. If there exist no institutionalized provisions for the expression

of such discontents, departures from what is required by the norms of the social system may occur. These may be limited to 'innovation' or they may consist in the rejection of the institutionalized goals. Such 'rebellion' 'involves the direct or vicarious experience of frustration leads to full denunciation of previously prized values'. Thus conflict is not mere deviation from the norms of a society rather it involves frustration over the distribution of value system.

Thus the causes of conflict can be summarized as follows ;

1. The more the subordinate members in a system of inequality question the legitimacy of the existing distribution of scarce resources, the more likely are they to initiate conflict.
2. The fewer the channels of redressal of grievances over the distribution of resources , the more likely are they to question the legitimacy.
3. The greater the ego deprivation of those without grievance redressal, greater are they likely to question the legitimacy.
4. The more privilege of membership is sought without allowing their participation , and lesser the possibility of mobilization, greater is the grievances.
5. The more deprivation is transformed from absolute to relative, greater is their grievances.

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## 7.4 Types of Conflict

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Coser attempts to demonstrate theoretically the potential danger to individuals and social structures in a society intolerant of conflict. To this end, he presents the distinction between "realistic" and "nonrealistic" conflict.

Coser uses interesting terms to describe "realistic" and "non-realistic" conflicts. *"Conflicts which arise from frustration of specific demands within the relationship and from estimates of gains of the participants, and which are directed at the presumed frustrating object, can be called realistic conflicts, insofar as they are means toward a specific result.*

*Non-realistic conflicts, on the other hand, although still involving interaction between two or more persons, are not occasioned by the rival ends of the antagonists, but by the need for tension release of at least one of them"*

Coser is very clear in his justification for the creation of the new terms, "realistic" and "nonrealistic" conflict: the times demanded the distinction (Coser 1956a, pp. 50-54). According

to Coser, workers fighting for higher wages through strike or union activity were being equated in the literature with frustrated individuals displacing onto their bosses their oedipal hatred toward their father. The distinction between types of conflict would help to avoid confusing these two dissimilar social types (p. 50).

- a. Is a conflict that ensues between groups essential in establishing group identity? He states with Simmel that conflict sets boundaries between groups by strengthening group consciousness and awareness of separateness from other groups. Reciprocal antagonisms between groups preserve social divisions and systems of stratification. These reciprocal “repulsions” both establish the identity of the various groups within the system and also help to maintain the overall social system.
- b. External conflict can strengthen the group and makes the group conscious of its identity by introducing a strong negative group to which they contrast themselves.

#### Internal Conflict –

- a. Internal conflict or conflict with the deviants makes apparent to the group members what they ought to do. Therefore internal conflict is essential in determining group identity.
- b. Internal conflict can increase group’s survival or stability.
- c. Stability within a loosely structured society can be viewed as a product of the continuous incidents of conflicts crisscrossing each other, therefore they are less likely to break the society apart.

#### 5. Functions of Social Conflict

In *The Functions of Social Conflict*, Coser analyses the functions, rather than the dysfunctions, of conflict. Published in 1956, it considers 16 propositions contained in another book – *Conflict*, by Georg Simmel examining, elaborating, extending, changing, and then reformulating Simmel’s original points. Coser arranges Simmel’s propositions into seven groups, covering:

- The way that conflict helps bind groups together;
- The functions of hostility and tensions in relationships;
- Conflict inside groups;
- Conflict with other groups;
- Conflict and ideology;

- How conflict binds and unifies groups;
- The ways in which conflict promotes alliances between groups.

Coser cites the functions and the dysfunctions of conflict. He also focuses on the latent and the manifest functions of conflict. According to Coser, conflict generates new norms, new institutions by stimulating the economic and technological realm. Economic historians often have pointed out that much technological improvement has resulted from the conflict activity of trade unions through the raising of wage levels. A rise in wages usually has led to a substitution of capital investment for labour and hence to an increase in the volume of investment.

But a successful reduction of industrial conflict may have unanticipated dysfunctional consequences for it may destroy an important stimulus for technological innovation. Coser goes on to mention the necessity of conflict in a modern state. He says, conflict within and between bureaucratic structures provides means for avoiding the ossification and ritualism which threatens their form of organization. Conflict, though apparently dysfunctional for highly rationalized systems, may actually have important latent functional consequences. By attacking and overcoming the resistance to innovation and change that seems to be an occupational psychosis always threatening the bureaucratic office holder, it can help to insure that the system does not stifle in the deadening routine of habituation and that in the planning activity itself creativity and invention can be applied.

Yet, it may be well to repeat that mere 'frustration' and the ensuing strains and tensions do not necessarily lead to group conflict. Individuals under stress may relieve their tension through 'acting out'. In special safety-valve institutions in as far as they are provided for in the social system and bring about change in this way. The strain leads to the emergence of specific new patterns of behaviour of whole groups of individuals who pursue 'the optimization of gratification by choosing what they consider appropriate means for the maximization of rewards.

Social change which reduces the sources of their frustration may come about. This may happen in two ways: if the social system is flexible enough to adjust to conflict situations we will deal with change within the system. If, on the other hand, the social system is not able to readjust itself and allows the accumulation of conflict. Thus conflict acts as safety valve.

- According to this theory, Coser maintains, conflict "serves as an outlet for the release of hostilities which, were no outlet provided, would sunder the relation between antagonists" (1956a, p. 41). The "hydraulic" imagery that Coser uses in this and

other related passages-”safety-valves,” “accumulation,” “blockage,” “release”-is not only difficult to locate in the cited quotation from Simmel; it is also not consistent with Simmel’s view of the origins of conflict. Simmel conceived the “hostility drive” as apriori: “It seems impossible to deny an apriori fighting instinct” (1955, p. 29). According to Simmel, a priori drives are a part of human experiential equipment that shape experience (Weingartner 1962, pp. 56-61; see also Oakes 1977, pp. 23-24; 1980, pp. 8-27). For example, the concept functions as an apriori in Simmel’s sense when it serves “as a criterion by means of which certain contents are selected as belonging [to experience] and others are rejected as not belonging to it” (Weingartner 1962, p. 58). The “hostility drive” is such an operative principle for human emotional experience. Simmel’s language reflects this active, formative view rather than the hydraulic “safety-valve theory” of conflict set forth by Coser. “Safety-valve” institutions – processes such as grievances, whistle-blower policies, complaint mechanisms – tend to focus on releasing tension. Over time, this kind of displacement towards non-realistic aims is *dysfunctional for the social system* since the fundamental causes of the conflict are not addressed (pg 46), while pressure to modify the system to meet changing conditions is reduced (pg 48).

In coser’s terms, therefore, conflict has adaptive role, as conflict promotes integration based on solidarity , functional interdependence and normative control . He divides the function of conflict into two basis –

- a. For the system as a whole in which conflict occurs – or intra group conflict
- b. Conflict between the respective parties

The functions of conflict for the respective parties

1. The more violent or intense is the conflict, the more-clear cut is the boundaries between the respective parties.
2. The more violent is the conflict, the more internally differentiated are the parties , the more likely to centralize their decision – making structures
3. The more violent is the conflict, the more it is perceived to affect the welfare of all segments of the conflict parties.
4. The more violent is the conflict, the more it leads to suppression of dissent and forced conformity to norms and values
5. The more conflict leads to conformity, the greater is the accumulation of hostility.

**The functions of conflict for the social whole**

1. The more differentiated and functionally interdependent are the units in a system, the more likely are the conflicts to be frequent but of low intensity.
2. The more frequent are conflicts, less is their intensity, low is their level of violence, the more likely are conflicts in a system (a) to increase the level of innovation and creativity of system units, (b) promote normative regulations, (c) increase awareness of realistic issues, and (d) increase number of associative coalitions among social units.
3. The more conflicts promote innovation, release hostilities, normative regulations, and increase associative coalitions the greater will be the level of internal social integration and greater the capacity to adapt to the external environment.

Thus, the more people are emotionally involved, greater is the intensity of the conflict, greater is the integration as the central power increases and deviance is suppressed. However, Coser does not specify the conditions when the inherent dialectics within party shall cause it to disunify.

In case of conflict for the entire society, where there are likely to be more interconnectedness, there is greater likeliness to have greater conflict but less emotionally involving and less violent than systems that are less complex. Due to the frequent interval along which conflicts erupt, emotions are not allowed to build up causing it to be more violent. System with low functional interdependence, will polarize into two hostile camps and make the conflict violent and intense

Frequent conflicts of low intensity have the following positive functions

1. Development of normative procedures like laws, mediating agencies
2. Increased sense of realism, as the parties are able to articulate their goals
3. Conflicts promote coalition among parties who are threatened by the actions of the other parties
4. These conflicts help in release of hostilities

Infrequent hostile conflicts accumulate emotions and they are likely to be polarized into hostile camps.



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## 7.5 Functions of Social Conflict

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- a. Conflict is functional because it serves as safety valve without which social hostility would eventually disrupt the society. When conflict emerges after being suppressed after a long time, it splits the group around basic issues and principles.
- b. External conflict can only strengthen a group. It makes group members conscious of their identity.
- c. A group's conflict with the 'deviants' makes apparent to the group what they ought to do.
- d. Conflict brings stability within loosely structured society.
- e. A society where there is little expression for antagonistic claims, conflict provides scope for venting out antagonistic sentiments.
- f. The distinction between one's own group and "outsiders" is established in and through conflict. This includes conflicts between classes, nations, ethnic groups, and political parties.
- g. Coser describes some positive functions served by the expression of hostility in conflict.

Coser maintains that such expressions of conflict maintains relationships under conditions of stress and thereby prevents group dissolution.

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## 76 Social Conflict and Social Change

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Lewis Coser first dealt with some functions of conflict within social systems, more specifically with its relation to institutional rigidities, technical progress and productivity. He then expressed his concern to the relation between social conflict and the changes of social systems. Coser gives the observation of George Sorel in his *Reflections on Violence* where Sorel wrote: We are today faced with a new and unforeseen fact-a middle class- which seeks to weaken its own strength. The race of bold captains who made the greatness of modern industry disappeared to make way for an ultra-civilized aristocracy which asks to be allowed to live in peace. The threatening decadence may be avoided if the proletariat hold on with obstinacy to revolutionary ideas. The antagonistic classes influence each other in a partly indirect but decisive manner. Everything may be saved if the proletariat, by their use of violence, restore to the middle class something of its former energy. Sorel's specific doctrine of class struggle is not of immediate concern here. What is important for us, says Coser, is the idea that conflict (which Sorel calls violence, using the word in a

very special sense) prevents the ossification of the social system by exerting pressure for innovation and creativity. Though Sorel's call to action was addressed to the working class and its interests, Coser conceived conflict to be of general importance for the total social system; to his mind the gradual disappearance of class conflict might well lead to the decadence of European culture.

A social system, he felt, was in need of conflict if only to renew its energies and revitalize its creative forces. This conception seems to be more generally applicable than to class struggle alone. Conflict within and between groups in a society can prevent accommodations and habitual relations from progressively impoverishing creativity.

Social conflict was the result of difference in interest between those who had vested interest and others who demanded their share of power, wealth and status. Thus the real reason for the origin of conflict was power, wealth and status. In this regard Coser was much influenced by the idea of social stratification as given by Max Weber.

- *In groups that appeal only to a peripheral part of their members' personality ... in which relations are functionally specific and affectively neutral, conflicts are apt to be less sharp and violent than in groups wherein ties are diffuse and affective, engaging the total personality of their members. In effect, this suggests that conflicts in groups such as Rotary Clubs or Chambers of Commerce are likely to be less violent than in groups such as religious sectors or radical parties.*
- Coser asserts that closely-knit groups with high personality involvement tend to suppress conflict, as the intensity and intimacy of relations means that conflict is threatening, dangerous. Feelings of hostility tend to accumulate, and when conflict does break out, it is particularly intense, firstly "*because the conflict does not merely aim at resolving the immediate issue ... all accumulated grievances which were denied expressions previously are apt to emerge ... secondly, because the total personality involvement of the group members makes for mobilisation of all sentiments in the conduct of the struggle ... likely to threaten the very root of the relationship*"

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## 7.7 Intensity of Conflict

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In relationships in which individuals are very deeply involved, both feelings of attraction as well as feelings of hostility are likely to arise. The closer the relationship, the greater the affective investment, and the more potential there is for ambivalence. Antagonism is a central part of intimate social relations and a by-product of cooperation and frequent

interaction. Close social relationships may therefore be said to contain an essential element of ambivalence.

Coser suggests that the closer the relationship, the more intense the conflict. Given the ambivalence described above, it is understandable that conflict would arouse very strong feelings and lead to intense conflict. Also, the fear of intense conflict is likely to lead parties to suppress their hostile feelings, the accumulation of which is likely to further intensify the conflict once it breaks out. If parties' total personalities and identities are involved in the relationship, there is greater likelihood that non-realistic, hostile elements will come into play. For example, individuals who participate extensively in certain groups are typically concerned with that group's continuance. They are likely to react violently if someone with whom they have shared the cares and responsibilities of group life wishes to break away from the group. Such antagonism threatens group unity and is often perceived by a close group as a symbolic threat to its identity. Violent reactions to disloyalty may result. Intense conflict and group loyalty are thus two aspects of the same relation.

The more frequent the interaction, the more occasions arise for hostile interaction. However, frequent occasions for conflict do not necessarily result in frequent conflicts. This is because the closeness of relationship and the strong mutual attachment may induce parties to avoid conflict. As stated previously, when conflict does occur, it is likely to be intense. However, conflict also has the potential to re-establish unity. Much depends on the issues that are at stake in conflict and the type of social structure in which conflict occurs. There is a distinction to be made between conflicts over basic matters of principle and conflicts over less central issues. Insofar as conflict resolves tension between antagonists it can serve to integrate relationships. However, conflict tends to serve this positive function only when it concerns interests or values that do not contradict the basic assumptions upon which the relation is founded. Loosely structured groups and open societies that are capable of avoiding conflicts over core values will tend to be most stable.

The absence of conflict within a relationship cannot serve as an index of its underlying stability. In fact, parties are more likely to express their hostile feelings if they feel secure and stable in the relationship. They are more likely to avoid acting out their hostile feelings if they fear the termination of the relationship. The fact that a relationship is free of conflict cannot be taken to indicate that it is free from potentially disruptive elements. In fact, if parties' relationship is stable, conflicts are likely to arise between them. For this reason, occurrence of conflict can actually indicate the strength and stability of a relationship. Conflict can serve as a balancing mechanism.

Coser begins to discuss the impact that conflict with out-groups has on the structure of in-groups. First, he considers the idea that conflict with outside groups tends to increase internal cohesion. Coser suggests that whether increase in centralization likewise results depends on the character of the conflict and the type of group. Centralization is more likely in cases of warlike conflict and in social structures with a marked division of labour. Despotism is likely where there is a lack of group cohesion. And both centralization and despotism depend on the group's structure and common values prior to conflict. Social systems that lack solidarity are likely to disintegrate in the face of conflict with outside groups. In some cases, groups may actually search for or invent enemies in an effort to maintain unity and internal cohesion.

Groups engaged in continual struggle with outside groups tend to become intolerant within and are less likely to tolerate even limited dissent. These groups maintain and reinforce their unity in the face of dissent through the voluntary or forced withdrawal of those who threaten the group's solidarity. In some cases, they may even search for internal dissenters in order to serve as scapegoats. On the other hand, groups that do not make such strong claims on people's identity and establish no rigid criteria for membership are more likely to be large, and able to resist outside pressures. They also tend to be more flexible in structure and more capable of tolerating conflict within the group.

Coser makes a distinction between two types of conflict: that in which the goal is personal and subjective, and that in which the matter in contention has an impersonal, objective aspect. He notes Simmel's claim that objectified struggles, which go beyond personal issues, are likely to be more severe and radical. These are conflicts in which parties understand themselves as representatives of collectives or groups, fighting not for themselves, but rather for the goals and ideals of the group. Elimination of personal reasons tends to make conflict more intense. On the other hand, when parties are pursuing a common goal, objectification of the conflict can serve as a unifying element.

There are also cases where the very act of entering into conflict establishes relationships where none previously existed. Once relations have been established through conflict, other types of relations are likely to follow. Conflict often revitalizes existent norms and creates a new framework of rules and norms for the contenders. This is because conflict often leads to the modification and creation of laws as well as the growth of new institutional structures to enforce these laws. The presence of antagonistic behaviour makes people aware of the need for basic norms to govern the rights and duties of citizens. The resulting creation and modification of norms makes readjustment of relationships to changed conditions possible. However, this is possible only if there is a common organizational structure in

place to facilitate the acceptance of common rules and conformity with them. Also, if the parties are relatively balanced in strength, a unified party prefers a unified party. Each group's having a centralized internal structure ensures that once they have devised some solution, peace can be declared and maintained. There will be no lingering enemies to disrupt the relationships. Finally, conflict is integrative insofar as it allows parties to assess their relative power and thus serves as a balancing mechanism to help consolidate societies.

Conflict also leads to the formation of coalitions and associations between previously unrelated parties. If several parties face a common opponent, bonds tend to develop between them. This can lead to the formation of new groups or result in instrumental associations in the face of a common threat. In short, conflicts with some produce associations with others. However, the unification that results when coalitions are formed simply for the purpose of defence need not be very thoroughgoing. Alliance can simply be an expression of groups' desire for self-preservation. Of course, such alliances may be perceived by other groups as threatening and unfriendly. This may lead to the creation of new associations and coalition, thus drawing groups into new social relations.

In conclusion, Coser suggests that conflict tends to be dysfunctional only for social structures in which there is insufficient toleration or institutionalization of conflict. Highly intense conflicts that threaten to "tear apart" society tend to arise only in rigid social structures. Thus, what threatens social structures is not conflict as such, but rather the rigid character of those structures.

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## 7.8 Conclusion

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Coser's theory has introduced Simmel's ideas into conflict theory. Although Coser begins with the hostile nature of the world, he quickly enters into the integrative function of conflict. Thus the adaptive functions of conflict are quickly transformed to functional requisites that cause conflict. We can alongside add also a short critique of it.

### Critical Overview

1. Coser starts with the inevitability of conflict but soon makes conflict adaptable to the social situation.
2. He emphasizes on the integrative functions of conflict that necessitate the occurrence of conflict.
3. He emphasizes on how society produces conflict to meet its integrative forces , making his perspective a skewed one.

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## 7.9 Summary

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We discussed the contributions of Lewis Coser. We explained types, functions and intensity of conflict. We also related conflict with social change.

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## 7.10 Questions

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**Write in brief:**

1. What is the 'safety – valve' theory as given by Lewis Coser?
2. What are the integrated functions of conflict ?
3. How does conflict promote social change?
4. What are the different types of conflict.?
5. Differentiate between external and internal conflict .

**Write in detail :**

1. Write a detailed note on the functional theory of conflict as given by Lewis Coser.
  2. How is social conflict related to social change ?
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## 7.11 References

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## **Unit - 8   □   Critical Overview**

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### **Structure**

- 8.1   Objectives**
- 8.2   Introduction**
- 8.3   Comparison between Coser and Dahrendorf**
- 8.4   Coser's Propositions**
- 8.5   Dahrendorf's Propositions**
- 8.6   The Outcomes of Conflict**
- 8.7   Critical Appraisal of the Conflict Theory**
- 8.8   Conclusion**
- 8.9   Summary**
- 8.10   Questions**
- 8.11   References**
- 8.12   Suggested Readings**
- 8.13   Glossary**

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### **8.1   Objectives**

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- To understand and make comparison between Coser and Dahrendorf
- To make a critical appraisal of Coser and Dahrendorf.

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### **8.2   Introduction**

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Conflict would mean different terms like hostility, violence, competition, antagonism, tension , quarrel . Dahrendorf uses the terms contests, competitions, disputes and tensions and manifest clashes between social forces.

Dahrendorf's definition is consistent with the dialectical framework that he sets through the ICA, which reveals the clash of interest among quasi group. Under the technical, political and the social conditions the quasi groups are converted to conflict groups.

For Coser conflict is the antagonistic dispositions of the subgroups in a system, where antagonism has promoted integration and adaptability among the parties or the system as

a whole. He prefers to use ‘antagonistic’ disposition because violence would make it more disruptive and its integrative tendencies would be ignored.

Every social system produces conflict inducing tendencies. The Dialectical Conflict theorist, Dahrendorf focuses on the violent conflict that causes the redistribution of resources forming a more equal society. Coser develops a functional perspective on conflict to show how the violent conflict contributes to integration to make the system adaptable.

Both Dahrendorf and Coser are not interested in the factors causing conflicts, rather what conflict does for the entire system. However, conflict is dependent upon factors that vary in case of Coser and Dahrendorf but both agree that conflict produces change in the system.

We shall now draw our attention to the points of compatibility and incompatibility between the two thinkers.

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### **8.3 Comparison between Coser and Dahrendorf**

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Much like Dahrendorf, Coser also views functional theorizing as having “too often neglected the dimensions of power and interest.” But in contrast to Dahrendorf, he has not followed Marx’s emphasis on conflict dialectics and their consequences for perpetual reorganization of social systems. On the contrary, Coser has sought to correct Dahrendorf’s oneness with another one-sidedness emphasizing the “integrative” and “adaptive” functions of conflict for social systems. In so doing, Coser has been led to embrace many of the organismic assumptions of Simmel’s (1955) earlier analysis of conflict: (1) social life tends to be organized into systems, whose interrelated parts reveal imbalances, tensions, and conflict of interests; (2) under different conditions, processes in social systems operate to maintain, change, and increase or decrease not only the system’s integration but also its “adaptability”; and (3) some of these processes-notably violence, dissent, deviance, and conflict-can, under certain conditions, strengthen the system’s basis of integration as well as its adaptability to the environment.

Coser said that the more deprived members of a system question the legitimacy of the existing distribution of scarce resources, the more likely they are to initiate into conflict. The fewer the channels for redressing grievances over the distribution of scarce resources by the deprived, the more likely they are to question legitimacy. The fewer internal organizations there are segmenting emotional energies of the members of the deprived, the more likely are the deprived groups without grievances alternatives to question legitimacy. The greater the ego deprivation of those without grievances channels, the more likely they are to



question legitimacy. The more membership in the privileged groups is sought by the deprived, and the less mobility allowed, the more likely they are to withdraw legitimacy. The more deprivations are transformed from absolute to relative, the more likely are the deprived to initiate conflicts. The less the degree to which socialization experience of the deprived generates internal ego constraints, the more likely are they to experience relative deprivation. The less the external constraints is applied to the deprived, the more likely are they to experience relative deprivation. The more the conditions causing outbreak of conflict are realised, the more intense is the conflict. The greater the emotional involvement of the members in a conflict, more is the intensity of conflict.

The more primary are the relations among the parties to a conflict, the more emotional involvement is caused.

- a. The smaller the primary group where conflict occurs, the more emotional the involvement
- b. The more primary the relations among parties, the less likely the open expression of hostility, but the more the expression in a conflict situation
2. The more secondary relations among parties to a conflict, the more segmental their participation and the less emotional involvement
  - a. The more secondary relations, the more frequent the conflict, but the less the emotional involvement.
  - b. The larger the secondary group, the more frequent the conflict

The more ideologically unified a group, the more conflicts transcend self-interest.

The more ideologically unified a group, the more common are goals of group.

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## 8.4 Coser's Propositions

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Coser highlights on the *factors determining the intensity of conflict* –

1. The more frequent and less intense conflicts, the more likely are groups to centralize in an effort to promote conformity of each group's membership to the norms governing the conflict.
2. The less rigid system, the more likely it is that conflict can establish balances and hierarchies of power in a system
3. The less knowledge of the adversary's strength and the fewer the indexes of such strength, the more likely is the conflict between the groups.

4. The less rigid the system the more likely is the conflict to cause formation of associative coalitions that increase the cohesiveness and integration of the system.
5. The more other parties in a system are threatened by coalitions of other parties, the more likely they are to form associative coalitions (1956). The more a system is based on functional interdependence, the more likely coalitions are to be instrumental and less enduring.
6. The more a system reveals crosscutting cleavages, the more likely groups in a coalition are to have their own conflicts of interests, and the more likely is the coalition to be instrumental.
7. The more a coalition is formed for purely defensive purposes, the more likely it is to be instrumental. The more tightly structured and primary the relations in a system, the more likely coalitions are to develop common norms and values and form a more permanent group. The more coalitions are formed of individuals (or more generally, the smaller the units forming a coalition), the more likely they are to develop into a permanent group. The more interaction required among the parties of a coalition, the more likely it is to form a permanent group.

**The Outcomes of Conflict-** the more intense the conflict, the more clear-cut the boundaries of each respective conflict party.

- I. The more intense the conflict and the more differentiated the division of labor of each conflict party, the more likely each to centralize its decision-making structure.
- II. The more intense the conflict, the less differentiated the structure and the less stable the structure and internal solidarity, the more centralization is despotic.
- III. The more intense the conflict and the more it is perceived to affect all segments of each group, the more conflict promotes structural and ideological solidarity among members of respective conflict groups.
- IV. The more primary the relations among members of respective conflict groups, and the more intense the conflict, the more conflict leads to suppression of dissent and deviance within each conflict group and to forced conformity to norms and values. The more conflict between groups leads to forced conformity, the more the accumulation of hostilities and the more likely internal group conflict in the long run .
- V. The less rigid the social structure where conflict between groups occurs and the more frequent and less intense the conflict, the more likely is conflict to change the system in ways promoting adaptability and integration.

- VI. The less rigid the system, the more likely is conflict to promote innovation and creativity in the system. The less rigid the system, the less likely is conflict to involve displacement of hostilities to alternative objects and the more likely is conflict to confront realistic sources of tension.
- VII. The more a system is based on functional interdependence, and the more frequent and less intense the conflict, the more likely it is to release tensions without polarizing the system. The more stable the primary relations in a system, and the more frequent and less intense is the conflict, the more likely it is to release tensions without polarizing the system, but not to the extent of a system based on secondary relations.
- VIII. The less rigid the system, the more likely is conflict to be perceived by those in power as signals of maladjustment that needs to be addressed. The more frequently conflict occurs, the less likely it is to reflect differences over core values and the more functional for maintaining equilibrium it is likely to be .
- IX. The more a conflict group can appeal to the core values of a system, the less likely the conflict to create dissensus over these values and the more likely it is to promote integration of the system
- X. The more a conflict group does not advocate extreme interpretations of core values, the less likely a counter conflict group to form and the less disruptive the conflict for the system. The more frequent and less intense are conflicts, the more likely they are to promote normative regulation of conflict.
- XI. The less rigid a system, the more frequent and less intense the conflict . The less rigid the system, the more likely conflict to revitalize existent norms. The less rigid the system, the more likely conflict to generate new norms.

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## 8.5 Dahrendorf's Propositions

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The more members of a quasi-group in the ICA can become aware of their objective interests and form a conflict group, the more likely is conflict to occur. The more the technical conditions of organisation can be met, the more likely is the formation of the conflict group .

The more a leader cadre among the quasi group can be developed, the more the codified idea system or charter system can be developed and therefore more the technical conditions of the organization can be met.

The more the political conditions of the organization can be met, the more likely is the formation of the conflict group.

The more the dominant group permits organization of opposed interest, the more likely can the political conditions of the organization be met.

The more the social conditions of the organization can be met, the more likely are the formation of the conflict group. That can happen if their members have more opportunities to communicate and the more recruiting is permitted by structural arrangements, more likely are the social conditions to be met.

### **Intensity of the conflict is determined by**

For Dahrendorf, the more the technical, political and social conditions of organization are met, the more intense is the conflict.

The more the distribution of authority and other rewards are associated with each other, the more intense is the conflict

The less the mobility between super and subordinate groups, the more intense is the conflict.

Dahrendorf's Proposition states the conclusion reached in the discussion of the causes of conflict: if the technical, political, and social conditions of organization cannot be met, conflict will be less structured and regulated. Thus, for Dahrendorf, conflict will be violent when the parties are emotionally aroused, the conditions of organization are not met, and the conflicting parties cannot develop regulatory agreements.

For Coser, conflict is over objective interests that represent an important set of conditions facilitating or inhibiting violence. Dahrendorf recognizes this condition in his discussion of how awareness of true interests is a result of the conditions of organization being met. But Coser specifies additional conditions which can supplement Dahrendorf's limited discussion. Furthermore, Coser's inventory has already incorporated the relative deprivation hypothesis at a more appropriate place in the overall inventory of propositions on conflict. Also, Coser's inventory specifies some of the conditions under which Dahrendorf's "regulatory agreements" inhibiting violent conflict will be likely to emerge between conflicting parties. And finally, Coser places more significance on the impact of values on conflict-a variable Dahrendorf only implicitly acknowledges in discussion of the technical conditions of organization. Thus, for both Coser and Dahrendorf the degree of organization of the conflict parties, the capacity of the more inclusive system to institutionalize conflict relations, and the ability of conflict parties to articulate their interests independently of core values will influence the degree of violence in the conflict between the deprived and privileged.

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## 8.6 The Outcomes of Conflict

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For Dahrendorf, the only outcome of conflict is social change, with only the amount and the rate of such change visualized as varying.

In contrast, Coser has developed propositions on integrative and adaptive outcomes of conflict for both the parties to a conflict and the social whole within which the conflict occurs. In the first group of propositions conflict can cause a shoring up of group boundaries, centralization of decision-making, ideological solidarity, and increased social control. As with previous propositions, these events occur only under specified conditions, including the degree of rigidity and differentiation in social structure, the intensity of the conflict, and the extent to which conflict is perceived to affect all factions of the group. Furthermore, in this particular inventory it is not immediately evident that stating the inverse of the propositions would reveal the conditions under which conflict would lead to disintegration of conflict groups.

Furthermore, under conditions of conflict frequency and intensity, conflict can promote varying degrees and types of equilibrium, normative regulation, and associative coalitions. While the inverse of some of these propositions perhaps reveals a few of the conditions promoting disequilibrium, anomie, and antagonisms among subgroups, the propositions still remain overly loaded. Turner has pointed out that they fail to conceptualize adequately the conditions under which conflicts of varying degrees of violence cause certain outcomes in the short and long run for both conflict parties and the more inclusive system. For example, does violent conflict always result in rapid change of a system? It is clear that such a proposition would hold true only under conditions which would have to specify the causal impact of such variables as the duration of the violence, the repressive powers of the privileged, the nature and composition of the deprived who initiate the conflict, the issues over which the conflict is fought, the values involved to justify the violence, and so on.

Turner writes that Coser's propositions would seem to provide a list of variables influencing outcomes; but unfortunately the variables of "intensity" and "violence" are not clearly defined in this context. Hence, the propositions on outcomes are not systematically linked to the conditions causing conflict of varying degrees of violence. To take another example from Dahrendorf's analysis of outcomes: Does organized conflict of high intensity necessarily lead to "more structural change?" Or, could not the regularization of conflict among highly organized groups result in forms of competition which maintain the status quo? This possibility is, of course, the point to be emphasized by Coser's propositions, and a number of

suggestive variables are introduced to explain when such an outcome is likely. But Coser's inventory again raises as many theoretical questions as it answers. For example, does frequent and violent conflict in flexible social systems which have clear-cut mechanisms for regulating conflict lead to change? And could one objectively describe either outcome as increasing integration or adaptability?

Turner also writes about the kinds of problems presented by Coser's and Dahrendorf's propositions on the outcomes of conflict. Seemingly, the one-sided assumptions underlying their analysis forced evaluative conclusions about the desirable outcomes of conflict—for Coser, such as integration and adaptability, and for Dahrendorf, social change and reorganization.

As such, the analysis of outcomes is not easily connected to their more interesting analysis of the causes of conflicts of varying degrees of violence. Coser provides a suggestive list of variables: but no clear causal relations can be inferred from this list because they are not clearly linked to the conditions affecting the causes and violence of conflict.

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## **8.7 Critical Appraisal of the Conflict Theory**

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Predictably, conflict theory has been criticized for its focus on change and neglect of social stability. Some critics acknowledge that societies are in a constant state of change, but point out that much of the change is minor or incremental, not revolutionary. For example, many modern capitalist states have avoided a communist revolution, and have instead instituted elaborate social service programs. Although conflict theorists often focus on social change, they have, in fact, also developed a theory to explain social stability. According to the conflict perspective, inequalities in power and reward are built into all social structures. Individuals and groups who benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained. For example, the wealthy may fight to maintain their privileged access to higher education by opposing measures that would broaden access, such as affirmative action or public funding.

Turner questions Dahrendorf's easy usage of the concepts in such a way that they can be applied to wide ranging phenomenon thereby making the testing of a theory problematic. For instance, the concepts of power, authority, interest and domination can be used in all empirical situations.

Secondly, Turner questions the guidelines for measuring the intensity of conflicts. He uses vague concepts to conform his scheme. Both these create problematics for empirical investigation.

Yet, he has been one of the harshest critiques of functionalism. He provides a dialectical – functional approach that will explain the understanding of human society. Parsons’ social system is similar to Dahrendorf’s ICA, where systems are broken up into subsystems, involving organization of roles. Deviation from the roles leads to imposition of sanction. The dialectics in Dahrendorf’s theory observes that arrangement of roles implies integration and deviation from norms that cause the employment of negative sanctions or presence of opposed interests.

However, the real genesis in Dahrendorf’s model remains unexplained because Dahrendorf marks authority as the main cause of conflict, which further reiterates that opposed interests are the causes of conflict. Here there is lack of detailed sequences in the origin of conflict. Thus the assumption that conflict groups emerge from authority is a reflection of the hidden assumption that authority is a functional requisite for system integration. Dahrendorf is also unable to explain the organization of the ICA, and to explain why they are organized solely on the basis of power and authority. He does not mention the mechanism of how they are organized. He emphasizes on the presence of authority that causes conflict and makes the system amenable to change, imputing a teleological error to his theory.

Coser begins with the inevitability of conflict and then turns into a reason for integration. He elaborates on the functions that conflict serves for group maintenance rather than focusing on the reason for conflict.

Both Dahrendorf and Coser keep the ‘units’ of their conflict vague that makes their theory applicable to all situations from small groups to nation states.

However, both agree that inequality is the ultimate cause of social conflict. Coser through his functional conflict theory and Dahrendorf through the dialectical conflict theory are not interested in what causes conflict, rather they are focused on the consequences of conflict and what conflict does for the whole system. However, they fail to delineate the units which will be involved in the conflict. This makes ‘conflict’ an independent variable in their proposal.

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## 10.8 Conclusion

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Dahrendorf’s contribution lies in his analysis of the ubiquity of conflict everywhere and the change in society that comes along with it. Since distribution of authority is the fundamental source of conflict, changes resulting from class conflict will bring about changes in the authority system. Latent or manifest, conflict makes up the essential ingredients of social structure. Conflict can be regulated and its specific expression can be contained but until

the authority structure is done away with, conflicts cannot be resolved permanently. Since differential distribution of authority is the fundamental source of conflict, changes resulting from conflict are essentially changes in the authority system. Structural changes can be brought about by total or near total exchange of dominant positions as in the case of the revolutionary overthrow of the governments or partial exchange of personnel as in the case of coalition and class alliances.

By pointing to the general theory of conflict Dahrendorf has developed a general theory of social conflict of his own. By doing so he has made a significant contribution to the dialectic of sociology. However, Dahrendorf is guilty of the fallacy of the binary model. The attempt to trace all conflicts to dichotomous authority relations involves straining the facts. Class is defined in terms of authority so that class conflict revolves round the struggle for authority. Authority, however, is not the only determinant of class. Income, status, prestige, life style and material possessions are also significant ingredients of class structures. Nor is authority the only or primary source of social conflict. Inter caste and inter religious conflicts are seldom based on authority relations. Throughout human history, ideology, values, lifestyles, customs, belief systems have provided ammunition for social unrest.

However, Dahrendorf's analysis of social conflict cannot analyse social changes in all the societies. His position that social change is necessarily the result of change in the authority structure is not always proved correct, because changes have been found in societies without corresponding changes in the authority system.

He rejects the Marxian emphasis on property as the determinant of class and substitutes it with authority. However, he neither demonstrates why authority is prior to the relations of means of production nor convincingly demonstrates how classes are different from conflict groups and hence why they should be treated as a special analytical category. He, just like Marx, sees authority as structurally induced. They kept power at the centre of their theoretical scheme. In terms of power relations they saw a structural tendency towards polarization into two class model – the ruled and the rulers. Dahrendorf rejects Marx's overemphasis on the primacy of class conflicts and their revolutionary character. While Marx saw class antagonism manifest in violent and abrupt changes, Dahrendorf also apprehended the possibilities of gradual and peaceful changes as well.

Dahrendorf's dialectical sociology is the systematic study of social conflict which involves conceptualization of opposing forces with conflicting interests. The dialectical model begins with a dichotomy of opposites such as individual and society, lords and serfs, rich and poor, elites and the masses, majority and minority, liberals and conservatives etc. Dahrendorf's



model is a dialectical model because he saw conflict as inherent in the dichotomous division of all social organisations into contending categories of roles— those who have authority and those who are subjected to authority.

Since conflict is conceived as a process arising out of opposing forces within authority structures, innovations and revolutions do not eliminate conflicts. They only introduce new authority structures which perpetuate the dichotomous division of associations into superordinates and subordinates and thus the endless process goes on.

Dialectical sociology does not begin with a specific social problem, rather it begins with society as a whole and seeks to demonstrate how conflicts emanate from structural arrangements. Dahrendorf has been successful in developing a scientific theory of conflict, which attempts to explain the possibilities of change in society, the structural origin of dissent as well as the multiplicity of forms of conflict and their degree of intensity. The dialectics of internal contradictions is the essential feature of the contemporary conflict theory.

Coser is primarily concerned with how conflict prevents the ossification of the social system by exerting pressure for innovation and creativity. He allows expression of hostility and mending of strained relations. It leads to the elimination of specific sources of conflict between parties and enables redressal of conflict between parties through establishments of new norms or affirmation of the old ones. Hostility towards the out-group unifies the in-group , when there is a need felt for greater solidarity , members of in-group tend to exaggerate conflicts with other groups and where such conflict exists any deviation from the group norms is severely condemned. Social conflict not only generates new norms but also brings forth new coalitions and alliances. They bring improvement and revitalize the economy , lubricate the social system, facilitate release of tension and frustration and enable social system to adjust itself. However, conflict within and between groups in a society can prevent accommodations and habitual relations from progressively impoverishing creativity. But the internal conflict between vested interests and new strata demanding share of power, wealth, status does not contradict the basic assumptions that relationships tend to be functional for the social structure.

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## 8.9 Summary

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We presented the propositions of Coser and Dahrendorf. We discussed the critical overview of the theory.

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## 8.10 Questions

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1. Draw a comparison between Coser and Dahrendorf on the intensity and outcomes of the conflict.
  2. Draw comparison between Coser and Dahrendorf.
  3. Make a critical appraisal of the theories of Coser and Dahrendorf.
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## 8.11 References

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## 8.12 Suggested Readings

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## 8.13 Glossary

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**Conflict-** Conflict is a clash of interest. The basis of conflict may vary but it is always a part of society. Basis of conflict may be personal, racial, class, caste, political and international. Conflict in groups often follows a specific course. *Routine group interaction* is first disrupted by an *initial conflict*, often caused by differences of opinion, disagreements between members,

or scarcity of resources. At this point, the group is no longer united, and may split into coalitions. This period of *conflict escalation* in some cases gives way to a *conflict resolution stage*, after which the group can eventually return to *routine group interaction*.

A **System** is a group of interacting or interrelated entities that form a unified whole. A system, surrounded and influenced by its environment, is described by its boundaries, structure and purpose and expressed in its functioning. Systems are the subjects of study of systems theory.

*Status quo* or *Statu quo* is a Latin phrase meaning the existing state of affairs, particularly with regard to social or political issues. In the sociological sense, it generally applies to maintaining or changing existing social structure and/or values. With regard to policy debate, it means how conditions are inviting a good or bad analysis of them, for example, “The countries are now trying to maintain a status quo with regard to their nuclear arsenal which will help them if the situation gets any worse turn.

**Imperatively Co-ordinated Association (ICA)** Multiple roles within the structure of authority may have conflict when different positions call for different things. According to Dahrendorf, these different defined areas of society where people’s roles may be different are called imperatively coordinated associations. The groups of society in different associations are drawn together by their common interests.

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## **Unit - 9 □ Basic Arguments**

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### **Structure**

- 9.1 Objectives**
- 9.2 Introduction**
- 9.3 History of Social Exchange Theory**
- 9.4 Behaviourism**
- 9.5 Rational Choice Theory**
- 9.6 The Social Psychology Groups**
- 9.7 Utilitarianism**
- 9.8 Advantages of Social Exchange Theory**
- 9.9 Disadvantages of Social Exchange Theory**
- 9.10 Homan's Proposition**
  - 9.10.1 The Objective Behind the Development of his Theory**
- 9.11 Purpose of Social Exchange Theory**
- 9.12 Basic Concepts of Social Exchange Theory**
  - 9.12.1 Different forms of Reward**
- 9.13 Basic Assumptions of Social Exchange Theory**
- 9.14 Basic Propositions of George Homans**
- 9.15 Conclusion**
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## 9.1 Objectives

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- To understand the history of social exchange.
  - To understand the concepts of social exchange theory.
  - To understand the general arguments of exchange theory.
  - To understand the propositions offered by Homans.
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## 9.2 Introduction

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Social exchange theory is a socio-psychological theory which focuses on social behaviour in the interaction of two parties. Proponents of social exchange theory suggests that calculations occur on romantic relationships, friendships, professional relationships etc. We always weigh pros and cons. They are often interchanged for “risk” and “reward”. Social exchange theory applies similar principles while dealing with interaction among people.

One of the most influential conceptual paradigms for understanding marketplace behaviour happens to be social exchange theory. The theory emerged during the 1920s (e.g. Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1925). Disciplines such as Anthropology, Social Psychology and Sociology were bridged together. Social exchange involves different perspectives. Theorists are mostly in favour of the fact that social exchange encapsulates a series of interactions that generate obligations. These interactions are normally perceived as interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person. The major focus of these interdependent transactions is upon the capability to generate high-quality relationships. Different domains like social power, networks, board independence, organisational justice, psychological contracts, leadership etc have been influenced by social exchange theory.

Social exchange theory refers to the fact that it is a socio-psychological and sociological perspective that explains social exchange and stability as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties. The theory got its formal development in 1958 by George Homans. He defined social exchange as the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two people. Peter Blau and Richard Emerson also came forward to develop the theory.

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## 9.3 History of Social Exchange Theory

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Several distinct lines of theoretical work in the social sciences has been largely instrumental in shaping of exchange theory. They are behaviorism, utilitarianism and functionalism (Turner

1986). Major proponents of social exchange perspective within sociology include Homans, Blau and Emerson. Thibout and Kelly also contributed to a great extent to social exchange theory in their emphasis on the interdependence of actors and the social implications of different forms of interdependence. The contribution of anthropologists such as Malinowski, Mauss, Schneider and Levi-Strauss towards social exchange theory is highly appreciable. It is important to remember here that the foundation of microeconomics has much in common with some variants of social exchange theory. It has a clear reflection in Blau's exchange and power in social life and in subsequent theoretical developments(e.g. Cook and Emerson 1978; Coleman 1972, 1990). Social exchange theory has a continued significance in the social sciences.

Social exchange theory dates back to 1958, through the work of the American sociologist George Homans. He portrayed a vivid image of social exchange in his article "Social Behaviour as Exchange". Homans designed a framework which was a culmination of behaviorism and basic economics.

Social exchange theory is based on the principle that the relationship between two people is made through a process of cost-benefit analysis. It is like a metric system which is designed to determine the effort poured in by an individual in person to person relationships.

This theory is unique in nature. It measures relationships on mathematics and logic to determine the balance within a relationship. The theory can be applied to both romantic as well as friendly relations.

Exchange theory has been influenced by different intellectual currents. Rational choice theory was one of them which shaped the development of exchange theory. Exchange theory is also rooted in behaviorism.

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## 9.4 Behaviourism

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Behaviourism is very crucial in behavioral sociology, most significantly in exchange theory. The behavioural sociologist focuses upon the relationship between the effects of an actor's behaviour on the environment and their impact on the actor's later behaviour. In operant conditioning, this happens to be the pivotal point of discussion where "behaviour is modified by its consequences". It is important to note that whether it is social or physical environment, it is definitely affected by the behaviour and in turn "acts" back in many ways. Here the reaction strongly affects the actor's later behaviour. If the actor finds it rewarding then the same behaviour is likely to be repeated in future in similar situations. However if the reaction has been painful or punishing then there is less chance of repeating it again.

Here we have to remember that the behavioural sociologist revolves around between the history of environmental reactions or consequences and the nature of present behaviour. Behaviourists are mainly interested in rewards(or reinforcers) and costs(or punishments). The ability to strengthen(i.e. reinforce) behaviour is known as rewards while cost refers to those which reduce the likelihood of behaviour.

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## 9.5 Rational Choice Theory

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Rational choice theory has influenced the development of exchange theory to a great extent. Let us first understand it.

Neoclassical economics(as well as utilitarianism and Game Theory) paved the way for rational choice theory. This theory puts actors in the pivotal position. They are seen as active, purposive beings. Their behaviours are directed towards some goals. Actors do have preferences. Rational choice theory takes into consideration two major constraints on action. The first is scarcity of resources. Actors have access to different resources. People who have lots of resources, it becomes easy for them to achieve the ends. On the other hand, those who do not have access to scarce resources, achieving goal becomes difficult.

Here, in this particular context the idea of opportunity costs (Friedman & Hechter) is very much closely associated with scarcity of resources. While setting a goal, social actors must be cautious about the costs of forgoing their next-most-attractive action. Actors are viewed as trying to maximize their profits. Social Institutions happen to be another source of constraints on individual action. These institutional constraints, provide both positive and negative sanctions that stimulate certain actions and discourage others.

Homans basically advanced statement of human rationality. He always emphasized on rationality. A debate can be put forward that people repeat rewarding actions, respond to stimuli associated with such rewards and act on the basis of the values they attach to things. This is, in fact, to state that they are rational.

While examining the deterrent effects of arrest rates and sentencing, this principle is being employed by criminology. This principle suggests that more often the crimes succeed, the more people will commit them. This evidence is to a great extent in accord with this argument.

This approach is also very much relevant to the poor quality education pattern which many children obtained in inner city schools and the overt war between teacher and pupils that characterizes many inner city classrooms. Basically students are less interested towards studies and more inclined towards warfare.

However, this idea of rationality, especially the notion that people choose courses of action on the basis of their potential value, has been criticized by other exchange theorists. What Homans originally established was value proposition as an empirically verifiable proposition. On the other hand, his critics argued that it was a tautology. Sociologists in the rational choice or exchange theory tradition assumes that certain values and objectives are very common. They predict that people value survival, approval and power. This value proposition provides an inadequate explanation of guide to behaviour. On the other hand, people are in a situation of uncertainty or risk where they cannot be sure of the outcomes of their actions or which is the most valuable alternative.

This principle is very complicated. It is not possible for anyone to be alert with calculations all the time. According to this principle, on the basis of our perception of risks and rewards react objectively and in a logical manner. This does not mean that we are always right.

Next school of thought which also influenced the growth of exchange theory was : The Social Psychology of Groups.

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## **9.6 The Social Psychology Groups**

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As highlighted by Thibaut and Kelly (1959) the bulk of Social Psychology of Groups is dedicated to dyadic relationships. They are fully immersed in interaction and its consequences for the members of the dyad. Just like in behaviourism and in exchange theory, rewards and costs are central to Thibaut and Kelly's analysis of dyadic relationships.

Molm and Cook observed that three aspects of Thibaut and Kelly's theory were significant to the development of exchange theory. First is their interest in power and dependence. Thibaut and Kelly are of the opinion that power is derived from the ability of one actor in a dyad to affect the quality of outcomes achieved by the other actor. They distinguish between two forms of power. When actor A affects the outcomes of actor B "regardless of what B does" then it takes place. The second is behaviour control : "If by varying his behaviour A can make it desirable for B to vary his behaviour too, then as put by Thibaut and Kelly, A has behaviour control over B". The relationship is the main focus of attraction in a dyad. Thus, each can exercise power over the other to some degree.

Another key idea put forward by Thibaut and Kelley is that of ideas of Comparison Level (CL) and Comparison Level for alternatives (CL alt). These are standards for the evaluation of outcomes of relationships. Thibaut and Kelley come forward with another interesting contribution that is the notion of the "outcome matrix" which is a way of visually depicting "all of the possible events that may occur in the interaction between A and B".



These schools of thought came forward with their own set of ideas and finally laid the foundation of exchange theory of George Homans and Peter Blau at least in the initial level.

Next, let us focus on utilitarianism which is another very influential school of thought in the development of exchange theory.

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## 9.7 Utilitarianism

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The contribution of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill etc can be included in the school of utilitarianism. They viewed humans as rational beings who seek to maximize their material benefits or utility, from transactions or exchanges with others in a free and competitive marketplace. Social actors and free national units in the so-called marketplace. They have access to all necessary information. All available alternatives can be considered by them and on the basis of that they rationally choose the cause of activity that will maximize material benefits : Here, it is crucial to keep in mind that there has been a continuous debate between intellectual descendants of utilitarianism and those reacting to this perspective.

Like Talcott Parsons, modern exchange theorists have attempted to reformulate the utilitarian principles into various theories of social exchange. The alternative assumptions are as follows :

1. Humans do not seek to maximize profits but they always attempt to make some profit in their social transactions with others.
2. Humans are not perfectly rational, but they do engage in calculations of costs and benefits in social transactions.
3. Humans do not have perfect information on all available alternatives but they are usually aware of at least some alternatives which form the basis for assessments of costs and benefits.
4. Humans always act under constraints but they still compete with each other in seeking to make a profit in their transactions.
5. Humans always seek to make a profit in the transactions but they are limited by the resources that they have when entering an exchange solution.

Turner added two more assumptions. They are :

6. Humans do engage in economic transactions in clearly defined market places in all societies but these transactions are only a special case of near more general exchange relations occurring among individuals in virtually all social contexts.

7. Humans do pursue material goals in exchanges but they also mobilize and exchange material resources such as sentiments, services and symbols.

Turner said that some forms of modern exchange theory have also followed the strategy of utilitarians for constructing social theory. Utilitarians claimed that social actors are rational. They proposed that exchanges among people can also be studied by a rational science, one in which the “laws of human nature” would stand at the top of a deductive system of explanation. He further observed that utilitarianism influences exchange theory in an indirect manner. He pointed out that utilitarianism initially passed through Social Anthropology and then on to Sociology.

While talking about social Anthropology mention must be made of Sir James George Frazer. He wrote *Folklore in the Old Testament*. It was most probably the first explicit exchange theoretic analysis of social institutions. Following the footsteps of Frazer, Malinowski and Levi Strauss, modern exchange theory in Sociology inspires a similar concentration of social organization :

1. Exchange processes are the result of efforts by people to realize basic needs.
2. When yielding payoffs for those involved, in exchange processes lead to the patterning of interaction.
3. Such patterns of interaction not only serve the needs of individuals, but they also constrain the kinds of social structures that can subsequently emerge.

Bronislaw Malinowski also contributed to a great extent towards building up of modern exchange theory. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is a famous work of Malinowski. He observed an exchange system termed the Kula Ring, which was a closed circle of exchange relations among individuals in communities inhabiting a wide ring of islands.

Turner paid immense importance to Malinowski’s analysis and stressed that it had made innumerable contributions to modern exchange theory. Let us see in what way is Malinowski’s work significant through the following propositions.

1. In Malinowski’s words, “the meaning of Kula will consist in being instrumental to dispel [the] conception of a rational being who wants nothing but to satisfy his simplest needs and does it according to the economic principle of least effort”.
2. Psychological rather than economic needs are the forces that initiate and sustain exchange relations and are therefore critical in the explanation of social behaviour.
3. Exchange relations can also have implications beyond two parties for, as the Kula demonstrates, complex patterns of indirect exchange can operate to maintain extended and protracted social networks.

4. Symbolic exchange relations are the basic social process underlying both differentiation of tanx in a society and the integration of society into a cohesive and solidary whole.

Another scholar whose work also had a huge impact on the development of exchange theory was Marcel Mauss. He felt that it was “force” which compelled reciprocity in society. He said that in the end, exchange relations create, reinforce and serve a group morality that is an entity. Thus, his work also helped in the growth of present day exchange theory.

Next, Levi-Strauss came up with his sophisticated structural exchange perspective. He also came forward towards the development of exchange theory. In contrast to Frazer he illuminated the fact that “it is the exchange which accounts and not the things exchanged”. He defined exchange in terms of its functions for integrating the largest social structures. He is strongly against the fact that there exists psychological interpretations of exchange processes.

He is of the opinion that humans possess a cultural heritage of norms and values. This separates their behaviour and societal organization from that of animal species. He stated that exchange is more than psychological needs. It cannot be understood only in terms of individual motives. Exchange relations are basically a reflection of patterns of social organization that exist as an entity, sui generis. It is regulated by norms and values. Levi Strauss emphasized on two points which exerted a strong influence on modern sociological theory. They are as follows :

1. Various forms of social structure rather than individual motives are the critical variables in the analysis of exchange relations.
2. Exchange relations in social systems are frequently not restricted to direct interaction among individuals, but protracted into complex networks of indirect exchange. On the one hand, these exchange processes are caused by patterns of social integration and organisation; on the other hand, they promote diverse forms of such organization.

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## **9.8 Advantages of Social Exchange Theory**

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1. It is a scientific theory. It explains that individuals minimize their cost and maximize their rewards within a relationship.
2. It tells one how to sustain and keep relationships.
3. It is a timely and systematic approach. The theory is almost applicable in all situations.

4. It helps us to understand that when we give something in any relationship then we expect something in return to maintain the relationship.
5. The theory is fairly simple, allowing for most people to understand its general assumptions and relate to them.
6. When a person becomes knowledgeable of this theory, he or she can work towards having more balanced relationships. This knowledge can also provide awareness of what one's own costs are to other people.

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## **9.9 Disadvantages of Social Exchange Theory**

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1. The whole theory revolves around the rewards only and it neglects the cultural contexts and variations of cultures.
2. Social Exchange Theory makes people seem individualistic and reward-seeking people.

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## **9.10 Homans' Propositions**

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The system of social exchange theory was summarized into three propositions. They are as follows :

1. Success Proposition : when a person is rewarded for his or her actions, he or she tends to repeat the action.
2. Stimulus Proposition : The more often a particular stimuli has resulted in a reward in the past, the more likely it is that a person will respond to it.
3. Deprivation : The more often in the recent past a person has received a particular reward, the least valuable any further unit of that reward becomes.

### **11.10.1 The Objective Behind the Development of this Theory**

Social exchange theory did not crop up all of a sudden. People have always been involved in social interactions and in various forms of relationships with others. This dimension actually paved the way towards its development. To put in a nutshell, the objectives were as follows :

1. Helping people in understanding relationships well. It opened the eyes of the individuals as to why some relationships are successful and why some are doomed to failure.
2. Secondly, to understand what makes us to start and continue certain relationships.
3. To explain communication and introduction as well as factors governing interaction in humans.

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## 9.11 Purpose of Social Exchange Theory

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Social exchange theory observes that social behaviour is the result of an exchange process. Maximizing benefits and minimising costs happen to be the sole concern of social exchange theory. It is two-sided process involving two actions - one is to give and the other is to get something in return. This theory posits that the individual measures all social interactions against personal gains that he achieves. The proponents of this theory highlight that all individual actions and decisions are driven by a self-serving motivation.

The Basic Formula For Predicting Behaviour :

Behaviour (Profit) = Reward of Interaction - Cost of Interaction.

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## 9.12 Basic Concepts of Social Exchange Theory

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This theory mainly explains the behaviour of people while exchanging something. Human beings are studied with respect to their circumstances. The following are the various concepts of this theory :

1. Costs : costs can be anything whether time, effort or money.
2. Rewards : it can be anything whether the sense of acceptance on support and companionship. It is assumed by simple social exchange models that rewards and costs drive relationship decisions.
3. Resources : Any commodity whether material or symbolic which can be transmitted through interpersonal behaviour and which gives one person the capacity to reward another is referred as resource.

Outcomes = Rewards - Costs.

In other words, social exchange theory is a model which interpret society as a cluster of interactions among people which are based on estimates of rewards and punishments. This perspective makes us perceive interactions from the angle of rewards or punishments, which we expect to receive from others. We measure them using a cost-benefit analysis model( consciously or subconsciously).

The crux of the theory is that an interaction that elicits approval from another person is more likely to be frequent than interaction that elicits disapproval. If we receive more rewards from a particular interaction, which naturally surpasses punishment, then it is quite natural that we will get involved in that interaction once more.

According to this theory the formula for predicting the behaviour of any individual in any situation is :

Behaviour (Profits) = Rewards of interactions - Costs of interactions.

### **11.12.1 Different Forms of Rewards**

It is fascinating to note that rewards can take various dimensions like : social recognition, money, gifts and even subtle everyday gestures like smile, nod or a pat on the back.

Let us delve further into social exchange theory with the help of an example. For example a guy named A has invited a girl B on a date. If B accepts the invitation then it can be said that A has gained a reward and so it is quite obvious that he is likely to repeat that interaction again. On the other hand, if B would have rejected the invitation then it would have been a punishment for A. After that he would avoid asking B again in future.

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## **9.13 Basic Assumptions of Social Exchange Theory**

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- People who are involved in the interaction are rational seeking to maximize their profits.
- Most gratification among humans comes from others.
- People have access to information about social, economic and psychological aspects of their interactions that allow them to consider the alternative, more profitable situations relative to their present situation.
- People are goal oriented in a freely competitive system.
- The exchange operates within cultural norms.
- Social credit is preferred over social indebtedness.
- The more deprived the individual feels in terms of the act, the more the person will assign a value to it.
- People are rational and calculate the best possible means to compete in rewarding situations. The same is true of punishment avoidance situations.

Thus, on the basis of the above assumptions certain observations can be made. The assumptions, as discussed earlier, is indeed an eye-opener for all if we think in depth. For instance, individuals engage in interactions with the motive of fulfilling their desires. Major emphasis is given on relationship between actors. Exchange theorists are of the opinion that social relations and social structures generated by the ties that bind people in different forms

of association happen to be the central object of sociological inquiry. Key forces like power and status relations among actors in different types of social structures are actually responsible for determining the nature of structural change over time. While formulating theories, exchange theorists regard power, structural sources of power and the dynamics of power as primary issues of concern.

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## 9.14 Basic Propositions of George Homans

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George Homans stated several propositions. They have been discussed below.

### The Success Proposition

This proposition means that there is a high chance of asking others for service if that person has been rewarded in the past with useful advice. So, based on past positive experience of receiving useful service, the person will request more advice.

In this proposition three stages are involved : First, action of a person, next is a rewarded result and ultimately, a repetition of the original action or at minimum one similar action.

### The Stimulus Proposition

In this proposition the stimulus or a set of stimuli of the past is likely to stimulate a person's action. If the person's action has been rewarded by a series of stimulus in the past and if at present the stimuli are similar to that of the past, then there is a high chance that the person is likely to perform that action once more.

### The Value Proposition

Homans says that the more valuable is the result of a person's actions, the more likely he is to perform the action. Homans introduced the concepts of rewards and punishments. He defined rewards as actions with positive values; so an increase in rewards is more likely to elicit the desired behaviour. Punishments are actions with negative values; an increase in punishment means that the actor is less likely to manifest undesired behaviours.

### The Deprivation - Satiation Proposition

Homans says that more often in the recent past a person has received a particular reward, the less valuable any further unit of that reward becomes for him. In our daily life when person and other rewards each other frequently for giving and getting advice then the rewards tend to be less valuable to each other. A crucial factor is time as people become satiated if they go on receiving specific rewards over a prolonged period of time. Homans also mentioned about cost and profit which will be discussed in the next chapter.

### The Aggressive Approval Propositions

Homans says if a person's action does not receive the reward he expected or if he receives punishment which he did not expect, then the consequence is that he will be angry. In this proposition Homans mentioned about frustration and anger.

### The Rationality Proposition

This proposition clearly brings to the surface the influence of rational choice theory on Homans approach. Homans said that people compare between two courses of action. They think in terms of the rewards associated with the actions. An interaction takes place between the value of reward and the likelihood of attainment. Rewards which are very valuable and highly attainable are the most desired ones. On the other hand, those which are not very valuable and are unlikely to be achieved are the least desirable ones. Homans relates this proposition to the success, stimulus and value proposition.

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## 9.15 Conclusion

This chapter highlights about the importance and significance of social exchange theory in our life. Social exchange theory only focuses on social behaviour of human beings. Social exchange theory is based on certain principles when it comes to interaction among people. While studying about social exchange theory one needs to know about the contribution of some great exchange theorists like Homans and Blau. The chapter deals mainly with the general principles which will definitely help students of sociology to understand market place behaviour. The main emphasis is upon quality of relationships.

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## 9.16 Summary

Social exchange theory looks into domains like social power, networks, independence, psychological contracts etc. This chapter also deals with the different intellectual currents like behaviourism, rational choice theory, the social psychology of groups and utilitarianism. Advantages and disadvantages of social exchange theory have also been discussed here. This will help readers to have a thorough understanding of social exchange theory.

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## 9.17 Questions

1. What led to the emergence of social exchange theory?
2. Discuss the basic concepts of social exchange theory.
3. State the basic assumptions of social exchange theory.
4. Highlight the different intellectual currents behind social exchange theory.



5. State the basic propositions of George Homans.
6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of social exchange theory?

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## 9.19 Glossary

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- Behavioural Psychology : Behaviorism, also known as behavioral psychology, is a theory of learning based on the idea that all behaviors are acquired through conditioning.
- Behaviourism : the theory that human and animal behaviour can be explained in terms of conditioning, without appeal to thoughts or feelings, and that psychological disorders are best treated by altering behaviour patterns.

Rationality : the quality of being based on or in accordance with reason or logic.

Tautology :A **tautology** is a proposition that is true by **definition** (such as ‘all mothers are female’) or one in which the same thing is said twice in different words

Utilitarianism :**Utilitarianism** is a moral theory that advocates actions that promote overall happiness or pleasure and rejects actions that cause unhappiness or harm.

Propositions :A theory is a **proposition** or a set of interrelated **propositions** that purports to explain a given social phenomenon. It is a systematic explanation for the observed facts and laws (or principles).

Stimulus :something that causes a reaction, especially interest, excitement or energy.

Punishment :The **sociology** of **punishment** seeks to understand why and how we **punish**, the general justifying aim of **punishment** and also the principle of distribution.

Positive rewards :**Rewards** are the elements of relational life that have **positive** value for a person.

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## **Unit - 10 □ Contributions Homans and Peter Blau : Critical Appraisal**

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### **Structure**

- 10.1 Objectives**
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- 10.4 Exchange Theory and Communicative Action**
- 10.5 Primary Observations of Homans**
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## 10.1 Objectives

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- To have an idea about the exchange theorists, George Homans and Peter Blau.
  - To understand the general arguments of Homans and Blau.
  - To make a critical appraisal of both.
  - To understand the general concepts of exchange as designed by them.
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## 10.2 Introduction

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George Caspar Homans(1910 - 1989) was a humanist and a sociologist. He took birth in the prosperous Back Bay district of Boston, Massachusetts. He did not do graduation in sociology or in any other subject. He received education from the readings done by his peers and from his own “field work” among different social groups. He was the president of American Sociological Association. His two major works are *The Human Group* and *Elementary Social Behaviour*. He was a firm believer in social science. He was one of the pioneers of modern exchange theory.

The famous “Mayo studies” executed under the influence of industrial psychologist Elton Mayo provided the foundation for Homan’s work. He made a major contribution towards the in-depth study of small group theory and research. significant fact is the exploration of the activities of individuals in his famous work Social Behaviour. Homans put forward the dynamics of friendship and conformity in small groups. Homans opined that people recognised some precise rules regarding the relationship between rewards, cost and investments. He claimed that people believe the relative amount they put into something including costs, contributions and investments must be equal to what they get. It is interesting to note that Homans was deeply influenced by Pareto.

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## 10.3 Intellectual Influences

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When George Homans was in his undergraduate years at Harvard University he came under the influence of physiologist cum sociologist Lawrence J. Henderson. It was through Henderson that Homans was introduced to the notion of the conceptual scheme. The set of variables which needs to be taken into account while studying a set of phenomena makes up the conceptual scheme. It also includes a framework of the given conditions within which the phenomena is to be comprehended and analysed. Moreover, it should contain a statement which says that variables are related to one another.

Homans was highly impressed with Henderson's notion of the conceptual scheme. In order to study small groups, Homans developed his own conceptual scheme as well. He observed that a conceptual scheme of a social system provides the sociologist "with the mental pigeonholes he needs and some notion of the relations between the materials in them and it will help him to new discovery if he does not let it altogether master his thinking".

The behavioral psychology of B.F. Skinner has been highly instrumental in shaping up his theory. During his days at Harvard University, their friendship became stronger. He was always fascinated with Skinner's behavioral psychology.

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### **10.4 Exchange Theory and Communicative Action**

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Homans spoke about human interaction. He showed how interaction ultimately led to social processes and social structures. On the basis of four different social groups, he developed his theory. These social groups are : the street gang, the working group of factories, the Royal System of Private Island and the New England village. These observations aided him to develop five propositions to form the power of the group. There are four social psychology theories. They include : similarity attraction theory, social exchange process theory, casual attribution process theory, group originality theory. For intergenerational communication, communication between young people and the elderly and intercultural communication, this theory has been continuously in application.

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### **10.5 Primary Observations of Homans**

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It is interesting to note that Homans began his tenure at Harvard University through the popularity of the book *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*. He got training to search for relationships between variables. In his investigation, two kinds of variables of field systems were arrived at. He found a high statistical correlation between the open field system and the village settlement pattern. During his primary investigation, he never liked cultural explanations.

Homans always believed in the folk adage that human nature is the same the world over. R.Firth's ethnography of Tikopia always fascinated Homans.

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### **10.6 Theory of Stratification**

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In his book *Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms*, he described and explained small group behaviour as an emergent social system of rewards. He applied the logic of Hermstein's positive reinforcement propositions. The most significant contribution in *Elementary Forms*

was his theory of stratification. It was enunciated in a series of scattered propositions and definitions. They are as follows :

The more valuable to other members of a group are the activities a person emits to them, the higher is the status they give him in return.

The higher a person's status in a group, the greater his power is apt to be.

The more members of a group a person is regularly able to influence, the greater his power.

The value of what a member receives by way of (monetary) rewards should be proportional to his status in the group.

Distributive injustice occurs to the extent that the monetary rewards members receive are disproportionate to their relative status in the group.

Homans hypothesized that differences in status and power are natural. He predicted that the productivity and morale of group members naturally, inevitably would suffer. Homans' theory provided an alternative to the Marxist formulation that stratification refers to differences in monetary rewards and it was the root cause of all social problems.

He further put forward a set of propositions which form the basis of his exchange theory. It states that individual assessments of costs and benefits are the basis of such social phenomena as competition and cooperation, authority and conformity. Other than contributing to social theory, he also enlightened us with industrial sociology and historical sociology. Some other popular works of Homans are : *Sentiments and Activities*, *Certainties and Doubts*. His autobiography *Coming to My Senses* is also very popular.

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## 10.7 Homans and Social Interaction

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Homans' contribution towards social interaction is indeed remarkable. He came forward with certain innovative ideas. He analysed social interaction from a new dimension that is from the perspective of psychological principles. He designed his social model in such a way so that it would elaborately discuss how any group at all gets started and creates its own culture and structure.

However, while working on this model he realised a problem and then in his later system (1961) formulated a principle to deal with it. Thus he developed the principle of marginal utility, which was taken from economics. The principle says that the more persons possess some particular reward the less rewarding are further increments of that award. This means when interaction takes place within certain individuals, it is highly rewarding. When this

same social interaction reaches a specific level where individuals meet each other a lot, it ultimately reaches a stage where the attraction of the interaction becomes less desirable. It simply fades away gradually. Hence, no further growth occurs in intensity of social bonding. It is similar to other processes which are linked to the interaction loop : common sentiments and behaviours build up as liking which reinforces interaction, though it levels out at some point, thereby strengthening the group in having a common culture which remains fairly stable.

After stating the first proposition, Homans found out that introduction is not always rewarding. So, if the introduction itself is not fruitful then it is unlikely that people will like each other. This intrigued him further and he proposed something new. He propounded that the interaction will be mutually rewarding only when the persons are equal; if they are unequal, the one with the lower rank or power will find the exchange unpleasant and will avoid further interaction. It was derived empirically from the role of the maternal uncle in tribal societies with patrilineal kinship. So he formulated that unequal relationships are unrewarding to at least one partner, hence the result is avoidance, while equal relationships allowed the principle to play itself out that interaction leads to liking.

Homans also concentrated upon the status of the group leader. According to him, the leader is the person who conforms to most of the group norms. It is the leader who represents the ideal attitudes and behaviour in the group culture.

His perception of the leader is one who conforms to the group norms and at the same time has many social contacts within the group, one who initiates as well as receives communications. He visions leader as one who interacts the most with the members of the group. Homans says that the sentiments and activities of the leader should be similar to the group's own.

Thus, he analysed a leader in an entirely different perspective. He placed the leader at par with others. He didn't favour the gap between the leader and the group members. It helps in strengthening the group bond and strengthens the relationship. It would definitely boost up the functionality of the group members. It would lead to the feeling of 'we-ness'. While explaining about a leader, he illustrated the incidence of the popular work of William F. Whyte's *Street-Corner Society*.

On the basis of the several studies Homans concluded that the operative principles in social relationships are psychological laws. He was of the view that society had been constituted out of common sense and rational behaviour of individuals with special emphasis on rewards.

Homans claimed that people are social and spend a significant amount of their time interacting with other people. While discussing about interaction he agreed with Durkheim that interaction leads to the emergence of something new.

A comprehensive program was carried out to “bring men back into” Sociology. The structural functional theory of Talcott Parsons motivated Homans to a large extent.

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## **10.8 Power, Equity and Games**

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With regard to friendship and conformity Homans identifies social approval as the good people offer, when there is nothing else to exchange. When one party or the other has relatively little to offer, a situation of imbalance takes place. This lies at the root of Exchange Theory’s analysis of power. Homans defined power as the ability to provide valuable rewards. His explanation of power is quite similar to that of economists. Power is evaluated on the basis of the price people get for their services. This is paid usually in the form of some concrete exchange, such as money, or in a more generalised form, such as obedience to orders. Being the master of valuable resources does not mean that a person can exercise full power over others. Or else it leads to imbalance.

The practicality of Homans’s analysis of power lies in the fact that it can be exercised in the case of both coercive power and non-coercive power too. Let us understand the two types of power. Coercive power refers to the ability to punish while non-coercive power refers to cases where both sides achieve some degree of extra reward. For instance, mugging victims generally believe their choice to be between losing life (and thus money too) or just using money.

Homans says non-coercive power is more reliable and effective. He found that theories of punishment often stir up rebellion and then may not yield the desirable behaviour.

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## **10.9 Homans’ Propositions**

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### **Success Proposition**

For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action (Homans, 1974 : 16). This proposition states that an individual is more likely to ask others for advice if he or she has been rewarded in the past with useful advice. Based on the weightage of receiving useful advice in the past, a person is likely to request for more advice.

This proposition consists of three stages; first, a person’s action, next, a reward result; and finally, a repetition of the original action or at minimum one similar in at least some



respects. Homans listed some features of success proposition. The first one is that this reciprocating relationship that frequents rewards lead to increasing the frequent actions will not continue for an unlimited span of time. Secondly, the shorter the interval between behaviour and reward, the more likely a person is to repeat the behaviour. On the other hand, longer the interval between behaviour and reward, lower the likelihood of repeat behaviour. Finally, Homans claimed that intermittent rewards are more likely to elicit repeat behaviour than regular rewards. While regular rewards lead to boredom and satiation rewards at irregular intervals are very likely to elicit repeat behaviours.

So, basically the success proposition deals with a man's(or woman's) action towards obtaining success in receiving a desirable result. It is popularly called "the law of effect" in classical psychology. The proposition states nothing about the reasons behind the performance of the person. In case of experimental animals like pigeon its repertory of innate behaviour seems to include a tendency to explore or investigate its environment by pecking at the objects within it. The cage has been arranged in such a way that the motion of a mental key will release a grain of corn to the pigeon. Now while exploring the cage, if the pigeon pecks at the key, it will get the corn and eat it. This leads to the probability that pigeon will peck the target again and again. Automatically it will increase its likelihood.

Through this experiment, it was proven that men share a similar behaviour like animals. In other words, success proposition states that whatever be the cause behind the performance of an actor, once he has done it and its successful, the person is obviously going to repeat it. It can also be regarded as a positive value.

The consequence of an action is what follows it. The success proposition holds good even if success was not in the eyes of some informed observers caused by the action of what was rather a matter of chance.

It may seem that the proposition has said that an action was caused by its result. It will definitely be observed to those who does not believe in teleology. However, it does not see that. Within this proposition there is a sequence of at least three events. They are : (1) A person's action which is followed by (2) a rewarding result and then by (3) adaptation of the original action i.e. an action which is similar to the original. It is this combination of (1) and (2) which causes event (3). As the former two precede the latter in time, the question of teleology does not occur.

The proposition contends that an increasing frequency of reward leads to an increasing frequency of action, at the same time, it is quite obvious that such an increase will not go

on indefinitely. This proposition has its own built-in-limits, which will be explored later while discussing deprivation-satiation proposition. According to this proposition, the less often an action is rewarded, the less often it is likely to be repeated. If we consider the extreme situation, if an action once rewarded, is never rewarded thereafter, a person will never ever perform it. Technically this behaviour can be described as one which becomes extinguished.

In this context, it is highly crucial to highlight some qualifications of the success proposition. The shorter the interval of time between the action and the reward, the more likely the person is to repeat it. So, positive reinforcement plays an important role here. It is fascinating to note that the principle on which “teaching machines” are based owes its roots here. For instance, when we expect a person to learn, we have to do well in order to reward his correct responses promptly.

### **The Stimulus Proposition**

With respect to the second proposition, let us first concentrate on what Homans said. According to him, if in the past occurrence of a particular stimulus or set of stimuli, has been the occasion on which a person’s action has been rewarded, then the more similar the present stimuli are to the past ones, the more likely the person is to perform the action or some similar action. Homans took up a very humble approach while illustrating this proposition. He offered a squared and impressive example : “A fisherman who has cast his life into a dark pool and has caught A fish becomes more left to fish in dark pools again” (1974:23).

What interested Homans was the process of generalisation, i.e. the tendency to extend behaviour to similar situations. In the above example the tendency to move from fishing in dark pools to fishing in any pool with any degree of shadiness is one aspect of generalisation. Another dimension says that success in catching fish is likely to lead from one kind of fishing to another or even from fishing to hunting. Other than generalisation, discrimination is equally common here. Under the circumstances, the actor may fish only during particular time periods which proved successful in the past. It must be remembered here, that if complicated conditions lead to success then similar conditions may not stimulate behaviour. If there is a long gap between the crucial stimulus and the behaviour which is required then it may not actually stimulate that behaviour. Suppose the stimuli which is presented to the actor is very valuable then it can lead to over sensitization. In fact, the individual can respond to irrelevant stimuli at least until the situation is corrected by repeated failures. It is the individual’s alertness or attentiveness to the stimuli which affects his responses.

This proposition is concerned with the impact on the action of the circumstances catering to it. In many narrations of operant or voluntary behaviour, these attendant circumstances are called stimuli. Hence they are referred to as the stimulus proposition.

There are some psychologists who include the reward of the action itself among the stimuli in their endeavour to construct theories. So it is referred as a reinforcing stimulus.

In case of social behaviour, individuals and their qualities become crucial stimuli. Under normal circumstances, human social behaviour is simple. Unfortunately it is the verbal language which makes everything complicated.

What sets apart human beings from animals, is the application of language. Same set of general propositions are applied to the behaviour of both men and animals. As the stimuli available to men are highly complex in nature, it leads to an increased state of complexity in their behaviour.

The degree of similarity between present stimuli and those under which an action was rewarded in the past is the most crucial variable in this proposition. This similarity may vary across different dimensions. It depends on a complicated pattern of measures. In this context we must introduce ourselves to a new fact. The ways in which people discriminate or generalise different stimuli is known as perception or cognition in Psychology.

### **The Value Proposition**

The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action (Homans).

In this proposition Homans speak about an office situation, where some individuals offer rewards to others. Now, if these rewards are valuable, then the incidence of performing those actions gets accelerated. On the other side if the rewards are not valuable then the chance of performing those behaviours reduces. These helped Homans to reach a new level where he introduced the concept of rewards and punishments. He defined rewards as actions with positive values; an acceleration in rewards is more likely to elicit the desired behaviour. Punishments, Homans contented, are actions with negative values. So an increase in punishment means that the actor is less likely to manifest undesired behaviour. Homans felt that punishments are an inefficient means of getting people to change their behaviour as people may react in undesirable ways to the punishment. Then, such kind of behaviour eventually gets extinguished. By values, he means both positive and negative values depending on the situation. He stated that rewards are the positive values that result from a person's actions while results which lead to negative values are punishments. In this proposition, zero point is a very significant feature. It is that point on the scale

where the person is indifferent to the result of his action. Thus the proposition contends that just as an increase in the positive value of the rewards makes it more likely that the person will perform a particular act, so an increase in the negative value of the punishment makes it less likely that he will do so. While discussing about reward it must be mentioned here that there are two classes of reward : intrinsic reward and avoidance of punishment. Similarly there two classes of punishment : intrinsic punishment and the withholding of reward.

Generally it is believed that the use of punishment is an inefficient means of getting another person to change his behaviour. There is no surety that it will definitely work. If we look at the other side of the coin, we will see that it gives immense pleasure as well as great emotional satisfaction to the actor who actually punishes. However, no one is sure about the result. Another efficient alternative means of extinguishing an undesirable activity is to just let it go unrewarded, i.e. simply ignoring it. For instance a child is crying only to get attention. Once others understand this, they start to ignore it. In case of a mother, it really takes strong nerves to carry out such a strategy. It is obviously quite heartbreaking for her.

We must keep in mind that punishment leads to hostile emotional behaviour in the person punished and we must be prepared to deal with it tactfully. Reality says that positive rewards are always in short supply so there will be times when punishment will become necessary in order to control undesirable behaviour.

The objects which men regard as rewarding i.e. their values will definitely vary from one person to another. Some of them are genetically determined so they are shared by many men, such as the value set on food and shelter. A value is learnt by being linked with an action that is successful in obtaining a more primordial value (Staats and Staats, 1963 : 58-54). A mother who often hugs her child, gets hugged in return as an innate value in circumstances where the child has behaved differently from others. As the mother says “better” than “behaving better” than others is a means to a rewarding end and is surely to become “rewarding in itself”. This is a perfect situation where acquired value comes to the forefront. This reward may generalise and the child may set a high value on status of all kinds. Through these processes of linking, people learn and maintain long chains of behaviour leading to some ultimate reward.

All of us have some kind of experience in our daily life. The impact of those diverse experiences is indeed very strong in nature. Individuals face different kinds of upbringing, this acquires various types of values. There are some values which men of particular societies would have difficulty in not acquiring. These are generalised values. Money and

social approval can serve as rewards for a broader spectrum of actions. In this sense, they are generalised values.

### **The Deprivation-Satiation Proposition**

The more often in the recent past a person has received a particular reward, the less valuable any further unit of that reward becomes for him. Homans says that at the workplace person and other may reward each other very often for giving and getting advice. This makes the rewards less valuable to each other. Time plays a crucial role here. It is important to remember that if particular rewards are stretched over a long period of time then social actors are less likely to become satiated.

In this context, Homans introduced two other critical concepts : cost and profit. Cost has been referred to as the rewards lost in foregoing alternative lines of action. Profit has been explained as the greater number of rewards gained over costs incurred. The latter led Homans to recast the deprivation-satiation proposition as “the greater the profit a person receives as a result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action” (1974:31).

This proposition is concerned with how valuable a person's values are, how valuable an individual finds a particular reward in comparison with other rewards. It has got two aspects; Is the same kind of reward more valuable on one occasion than on a different occasion? Is it like catching fish today maybe more rewarding than it will be in the afternoon? Secondly, is one kind of reward more valuable than a different kind on the same occasion?

In our everyday walk of life if we receive rewards often then we would be satiated with it. Naturally, its value will decrease and according to the value proposition we will be less interested to perform that action which would be followed by that reward. Here, the proposition emphasizes the “recent past” as there are innumerable rewards with which an actor can only be temporary satiated. In this case food is a good example. On the other side, if a man has mastered the skill to value a particular reward but has received it seldom in the recent past, it is said that he is deprived of it. According to this proposition the individual is more likely to perform an action that is followed by this reward. In this way, the value increases for the men.

This proposition states a very general tendency. It holds good that the recent past within which deprivation or satiation takes place must vary for various kinds of rewards. For instance food can satiate men quickly but soon recovers its value. Additionally, what is worth remembering here is that these values can be assigned in some kind of rank order or hierarchy of values.

### **The Aggression Approval Proposition**

Proposition A : when a person's action does not receive the reward he expected, or receives punishment he did not expect, he will be angry; he becomes more likely to perform aggressive behaviour and the results of such behaviour becomes more valuable to him.

This proposition is based on the "law of distributive justice". It refers to the fact whether the rewards and costs are distributed fairly among the individuals involved. Homans said that "The more to a man's disadvantage the rule of distributive justice fails of realisation, the more likely he is to display the emotional behaviour we call anger" (1961:75). Often we see that an employee does not get the advice he or she expected and others are not embraced with the appreciation which they desired. The consequence is both are angry. Homans gives this instance of office case.

Frustration and anger in spite of being mental states are highly significant in Homan's theory. It was admitted by him that "When a person does not get what he expected he is said to be frustrated..." (1974:31). He further clarified that frustration refers not only to an internal state but also to "wholly external events" as well.

Proposition A on aggression-approval refers only to negative emotions, whereas proposition B refers to more positive emotions.

Proposition B : When a person's action receives the reward he expected, especially a greater reward than he expected or does not receive the punishment he expected, he will be pleased; he becomes more likely to perform approving behaviour and the results of such behaviour become more valuable to him.

With respect to the proposition B let us trace back to the office circumstance. If we assume that the person is given the advice which is expected by him on her and others feel blessed with the praise received then both are pleased. Thus, both are more likely to get or give advice. Hence, advice and praise complement each other and becomes more valuable to each other.

In other words, approval can become an instrument as men may find the approval from others as rewarding. So, one can highlight the fact that approval like aggression may become a voluntary as well as emotional action. Over the passage of time, the unexpected and unusual reward takes the shape of an expected and usual reward. In this process the whole mechanism works.

### **The Rationality Proposition**

In choosing between alternative actions a person will choose the one for which, as perceived by him at the time, the value  $V$ , of the result, multiplied by the probability  $p$ , of getting the result, is the greater.

This proposition clearly demonstrates the influence of rational choice theory on Homan's approach. In economic terms, actors act in terms of rationality proposition thereby maximizing their utilities. Normally, people examine and make calculations about the various alternative actions open to them. Actors compare the amount of rewards related with each course of action. They wait in anticipation of receiving the rewards. If actors are unable to achieve the highly valued rewards then they tend to become devalued. On the other hand, if lesser valued rewards become attainable, then they get enhanced. So, the value of the reward and the likelihood of attaining it shares a very strong relationship. Rewards which are very valuable are the most desirable and highly attainable ones. Less valuable rewards are the least desirable ones.

Homans relates this proposition to the success, stimulus and value propositions. This proposition states that depending on the perception of probability of success, people are likely to perform an action. Depending on past successes and similarity of the present situation to past successful situations, the perception of whether the chance of success is higher or lower is determined. He says that an actor is a rational profit seeker. He always worked at the level of individual behaviour.

It was observed that exchange processes are "identical" at the individual and societal level although he granted that at the societal level "the way the fundamental processes are combined is more complex".

People are rational in the sense that they repeat rewarding actions, they respond to stimuli associated with such rewards and act on the basis of the values they attach to things. It is interesting to note that criminology draws on this principle when examining the harmful effects of arrest rates and sentencing. This principle conveys that other things being equal, the more often crimes succeed, the more people will commit them.

This approach is very beneficial when it comes to analysing problems like poor education, overt war between teacher and pupils etc. His rationality proposition is based on the first three propositions. Homans explains his proposition in terms of multiplication of value of an action's possible reward. This is based on the probability whether the value of a reward will multiply or not. For example, when we think about which career we should select we compare the probable rewards among the fields selected. Stock market also

tends to involve people comparing the likelihood of further rises on the basis of past experience. The rationality principle also includes people's use of "rules of thumb" to shorten decision making that proves successful most of the time. Hence, we can see that this principle teaches us to act rationally on the basis of our perception of risks and rewards, no matter whether they are right or wrong.

Here, we reach the end of our discussion about the different propositions stated by George Homans. The crucial point is that we all apply these propositions very much in our day to day life. The only difference is that we are not aware of these all the time. Next, let us introduce another very influential social thinker who went beyond George Homans and investigated further. His name is Peter Blau.

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### **10.10 Peter Blau**

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The two sociologists who were popularly responsible for bringing about exchange theory were Peter Blau and George Homans. Peter Blau was close to mainstream of American Sociology. He was born in Vienna in 1918 to a secular Jewish family. He had been involved in underground socialist politics as a teenager and was imprisoned for his activities. He taught at the University of Chicago for many years. In 1964, Blau became President of the American Sociological Association.

Peter Blau is popular specifically for his combination of original empirical research with general and theoretical propositions. He gave emphasis on occupational variation. While Homans believed in psychological factors, Blau gave importance to social factors as well. Blau believed that the study of the "simpler processes that pervade the daily intercourse among individuals" is vital for comprehending social structures. As a direct contribution to exchange theory, Blau came up with the book: *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. Blau missions exchange as one particular aspect of most social behaviour. He focuses upon "all voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring.

Blau moves beyond Homans' analysis of interpersonal relationships with more lucid discussion of price mechanisms in social exchange. Blau's major contribution to exchange theory lies in the concern with the relationship between exchange and the integration of society at large. He also questioned the exchange basis of power in large institutions as well as small groups. He said that social exchange is very important in social integration. It was highlighted that the creation of bonds of friendship happens to be one of the functions of social exchange. Establishing subordination or domination is another function. It is through creating trust, increasing differentiation, enforcing conformity with group norms, developing collective values that exchanges increase social integration.



Peter Blau discussed about “impression management” too. He put forward the social process of how people present themselves to others. Observation says that people want to be accepted in two ways : as associates who promise rewarding extrinsic benefits and can therefore command favourable returns and as companions whose presence is intrinsically rewarding. Thus impressions are very important to the “prices” at which social exchange is conducted. Here Blau relies on the work of Erving Goffman. Goffman introduced the notion of “role distance”. Blau related role distance to social exchange as people wish to demonstrate how efficient they are. In this way they proved their services to be very valuable.

In Blau’s theory, we also come to know about the determinants of friendship and love. On the basis of the assumption that value status, he defined status as the common recognition by others of the amount of esteem and friendship that someone receives. It means that social intercourse and friendship generally occurs among people whose social standing is roughly equal; secondly relationships between unequals are less strained when the inequality is clear and marked (Wallace & Wolf). Blau says that people with firmly established status are unaffected by any kind of exposure.

For instance, modern social scientists concluded that overt racial prejudice is strongest among those whites whose own status is least secure. it was also pointed out that some social associations are intrinsically valuable. Blau insisted on intrinsic elements of social exchange. He did not say much about the emotional aspects of exchange. Behind this process of social exchange, lies the fundamental social norm of reciprocity.

Thus Peter Blau’s goal was “an understanding of social structure on the basis of analysis of the social processes that govern the relations between individuals and groups. The basic question is how social life becomes organised into increasingly complex structures of associations among men” (1964:2). Blau proved further than Homans, regarding the elementary forms of social life and commented that “The main sociological purpose of studying processes of face to face interaction is to lay the foundation for an understanding of the social structures that evolve and the emergent social forces that characterize their development” (1964:13).

According to Blau, this process of social exchange guides much of human behaviour and underlying relationships among individuals as well as among groups. He developed a four stage sequence leading from interpersonal exchange to social structure to social change :

Step 1 : Personal exchange transactions between people give rise to...

Step 2 : Differentiation of status and power which leads to...

Step 3 : Legitimization and organisation which sow the seeds of...

Step 4 : Opposition and Change.

It must be remembered here that Blau's theory is limited to actions that stop when expected reactions are not forthcoming. There are different kinds of reasons which binds people together, thereby ending up into social associations. After the preliminary bonding takes place, it is the rewards which serves to maintain and enhance the bonds. The opposite circumstances is also possible : insufficient rewards lead to weak associations. Rewards are of two types : intrinsic and extrinsic. It is really not possible to reward each other equally. If there is an unequal exchange, a difference of power will emerge within an association.

Blau extended his theory to the level of social facts. He realised that it is not possible to analyse processes of social interaction without the social structure. They are inextricably connected to each other. Social groups make interaction functional. Depending on the value of rewards and how loving they are, social beings actually get inclined towards some particular groups and not all. In order to be members of that group, these new people must give many rewards to those in the group. If the newcomers are successful in impressing the group members, then only the bonding among all members gets strengthened.

Peter Blau based his theory on the societal level. Distinction was made between two types of social organisation. First is the emergent properties of social groups, which emerge from the processes of exchange and competition. Second is the establishment of social organisation in order to achieve specific objectives, for instance manufacturing goods that can be sold for a profit, participating in bowling tournaments etc.

In addition to this, he was concerned with subgroups within them. He stated that leadership and opposition groups are found in both types of organisation. The difference between Blau and Homans lies in the fact that while Blau identified the essential difference between small groups and large collectivities, Homans on the other hand minimised this difference in his effort to explain all social behaviour in terms of basic psychological principles.

The complex social structures that characterize large collectives differ fundamentally from the simpler structures of small groups. A structure of social relations develop in a small group in the course of social interaction among its members. Since there is no direct

social interaction among most members of a large community or entire society, some other mechanism must mediate the structure of social relations among them.

Blau pointed out that norms and values mediate among the complex social structures. He utilizes this concept of norm to the level of exchange between the individual and collectivity. On the other hand the concept of values takes Blau to the largest scale societal level as well as to the analysis of the relationship among collectivities. So, we can understand that Blau was mainly interested in groups, organisations, collectivities, societies, norms and values. He investigated what holds large-scale social units together and what sets them apart. Blau based his exchange theory on the basis of face to face relations.

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### **10.11 Critical Appraisal of Homans and Blau**

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As Homans said “no theory can explain everything”. It is necessary to ignore some things and assume them to be given for the purposes of explanation at hand. The same applies for his theory as well. Homans’s proposition on rationality was criticized as it was against utilitarianism. He met this criticism partially. He recognised that people make calculations by weighing costs, rewards and the probabilities of receiving rewards and avoiding punishments. However, people do so in terms of value. It is to be remembered that what is rewarding is a personal matter and unique to all individuals. It is the past experiences, that help people to establish their own values. Hence, rationality occurs in terms of calculations of personal value. Homans is also criticized on the ground that does all human actions involve calculations or not. Critics say that people receive rewards without prior calculations. For instance, when a person receives a gift or becomes the beneficiary of another’s desire to bestow rewards, prior calculations are not involved. Rewards or reinforcement are nonetheless involved.

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### **10.12 The Issue of Tautology**

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The problem of tautology is fundamental to the exchange perspective. When key concepts like value, reward and action are examined, they appear to be explained in terms of each other. Rewards are gratifications that have value. Value is the degree of reward or reinforcement. Action is reward seeking activity. It is really not possible to build a theory from tautological axioms. For example; Homans’s proposition that “The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action” could be considered a tautology. Value is defined as the degree of reward and action is defined as reward seeking behaviour (Turner). He feels that this can be solved by deductive theory. Thus “a tautology can take part in the deductive system whose conclusion is not a tautology”.

Here, critics say that rigorous deductive systems are absent in Homans's theory.

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### **10.13 The Issue of Reductionism**

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Homans' theory leads to the rise of the issue of reductionism. He failed to resolve sociologist's concern with the kind of reductionism. He is of the view that psychological axioms "cannot be derived from psychological propositions...this condition is unlikely to last forever".

Critics have charged Homans by saying that he is a "nominalist", one who asserts that society and its various collective forms (groups, institutions, organisations and so forth) are mere names that sociologists assign to the only "really real" phenomenon, the individual. (Turner)

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### **10.14 The Fallacy of "Misplaced Concreteness"**

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Homans was criticized on the basis of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. He was criticized on the ground that behaviour of persons or "men" are the basic units whose laws are to be understood in order to explain complex socio-cultural arrangements.

Turner stated that Homans' sociological laws are subsumable under more general psychological laws, which, with more knowledge and sophisticated intellectual techniques, will be inclined to more general set of laws. He further says that Homans is not a nominalist in disguise, rather sociological realist.

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### **10.15 The Utility of Homans' Reductionist Strategy**

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Homans's reductionism is a theoretical strategy. It does not deny the metaphysical or ontological existence of emergent phenomena. Critics pointed out that reductionist strategy will affect the kinds of theoretical and research questions that sociologists will ask. If the sociologists are concerned only with psychological laws as explanatory principles, then research questions and theoretical generalizations will revolve around psychological and social-psychological phenomena.

Thus the adoption of a reductionist strategy for building theory will naturally result in the avoidance of the more patterns of social organization. So, it is the reductionist strategy which gives rise to one-sided research and theory building. Further, his theory has been criticized on the ground that adherence to his strategy at present will lead to logically imprecise and empirically empty theoretical formulations.

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## 10.16 Critical Appraisal of Peter Blau

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Peter Blau has offered a most varied image of society. He has synthesized several theoretical traditions. This in turn helps other sociologists. His concept of mediating values, types of institutions has proved very beneficial for the functionalists. Blau's dialectical conflict perspective emphasized on the inevitable forces of oppositions in relations of power and authority. This provided an insight for the conflict theorist. With respect to interactionists, his analysis of elementary exchange processes places considerable emphasis on actions of people in interaction.

However, Turner said that Blau left a number of theoretical issues unresolved. In his early exchange approach Blau tried to resolve the problem of how groups, organisations, communities or social systems are similar or dissimilar. He attempted it in several ways :

- 1 By assuming that the basic exchange processes of attraction, competition, differentiation, integration and opposition occur at all levels of social organisation.
- 2 By explicating general exchange principles and incorporating abstract exchange concepts that can account for the unfolding of these processes at all levels of organisation.
- 3 By enumerating additional concepts, such as mediating values and institutionalization, to account for emergent phenomena at increasingly more levels of social organisation.
- 4 By classifying the generic types of organisation or categories, communities organised collectives and social systems (Turner).

Turner says this is a great effort in order to bridge the micro-macro analytical gap in sociological theorizing. Unfortunately, a number of problems persist. Firstly, Blau explained organised collectivities very elaborately. They included social phenomena ranging from small groups to complex organisations. One must be alert that the concepts and theoretical generalizations appropriate to the small primary group, the secondary group, a crowd, a social movement etc. are different in some way or the other. Blau failed to resolve the problem of emergent properties

Next, Blau asserts that elementary exchange processes occur at macro levels of organisation. Now, if these emergent levels of organisation are to be understood, then mediating values are needed. He only says that mediating values are critical and thus avoids answering theoretically important questions.

Finally, Blau's presentation of exchange concepts and their incorporation into exchange principles is vague. Turner concluded by saying that Blau has simply stopped trying to

view macro-processes as fundamentally connected to micro-exchanges. In Turner's observation, exchange theory is one of the rare approaches which can reach this gap with common principles.

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### 10.17 Summary

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Homans has helped us to understand power, equity and games. Homans has laid down some important propositions. Peter Blau put forward the determinants of friendship and love. The more we have a clear conception about these concepts, the better it is in dealing with our day to day life. It improves our basic social interaction patterns with others.

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### 10.18 Conclusion

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This chapter deals with the contribution of George Homans and Peter Blau. It has been felt that it's very significant to be familiar with the contributions of George Homans and Peter Blau. George Homans had showed how social interaction leads to social processes and social structures. The readers will come across certain valuable principles and works of these great social exchange theorists. Without understanding about Homans and Blau, it is not possible to have a thorough perception regarding social interaction.

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### 10.19 Questions

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- 1 Discuss George Homans's basic propositions.
- 2 How far do you feel these propositions to be relevant in our day to day life? Elucidate this with respect to examples.
- 3 On what basis can we differentiate between George Homans and Peter Blau?
- 4 Mention Peter Blau's four stage sequence.
- 5 How does Peter Blau envision exchange theory? Discuss this with reference to the modern world.
- 6 What was Peter Blau's main goal?
- 7 Compare and contrast Homans's and Blau's theory.
- 8 Make a critical appraisal of George Homans.
- 9 Critically evaluate the social exchange theory of Peter Blau.
- 10 Write in your own words whose social exchange theory is more practical and relevant in today's society. Which one do you find interesting?

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## 10.20 References

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## 10.21 Glossary

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- Cost** :The fundamental concept of the theory of social exchange is cost and rewards. This means that cost and reward comparisons drive human decisions and behavior. Costs are the negative consequences of a decision, such as time, money and energy.
- Investment** :The investment model was proposed by CarylRusbult. It is a useful version of social exchange theory. According to this model, investments serve to stabilize relationships.
- Communicative action** : Co-operative action undertaken by individuals based upon mutual deliberation and argumentation.
- Human interaction** :A social interaction is an exchange between two or more individuals and is a building block of society.
- Ethnography** :It is defined as an illuminative account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on multiple detailed observations of what people actually do in the social setting being observed
- Distributive justice** :In social psychology, distributive justice is defined as perceived fairness of how rewards and costs are shared by (distributed across) group members.
- Homans's Equity** : It proposes that individuals in social exchange relationships compare each other the ratios of their inputs into the exchange to their outcomes from the exchange.
- Coercive Power** :the ability of a manager to force an employee to follow an order by threatening the employee with punishment if the employee does not comply with the order.

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## **Unit - 11   □   General Arguments**

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### **Structures**

#### **11.1 Learning Objectives**

#### **11.2 Introduction**

#### **11.3 Definition: Interpretive Sociology**

#### **11.4 Historical and Philosophical Background/Context of Interpretive Sociology**

#### **11.5 Interpretive Sociology: General Arguments**

#### **11.6 Conclusion**

#### **11.7 Summary**

#### **11.8 Questions**

#### **11.9 References**

#### **11.10 Glossary**

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### **11.1 Objectives**

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- To introduce a specific perspective within sociological knowledge formation, namely, interpretive sociology to the students.
- To present interpretive sociology as an alternative to sociological positivism whereby the students will be made familiar with the critical discourse regarding methodological issues in social sciences.
- To understand the complexity and criticality involved in studying social sciences whose primary subject matter involves conscious thinking, acting and interpreting individuals.
- To be able to distinguish sociology from psychology irrespective of the focus on the subjective intent and motive of actors.



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## 11.2 Introduction

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Interpretive sociology is a specific domain of sociology that lays emphasis on the meaning and motive of social actions by individual social actors. The focus is on intentions behind human behaviour. It also considers that social life is a subjective reality and so it needs to be interpreted. Unit 1 explores how interpretive sociology emerged as an alternative perspective to positivism and countered the idea of sociology as a science studying objective social facts. The movement against blind acceptance of methods of natural sciences in social sciences started as back as 1880 through Neo-Kantianism. Proponents of Neo-Kantianism made it clear that social sciences study different form of reality and therefore the knowledge produced is not nomothetic (law giving) , rather social science involves human judgments, intents, values. Therefore social sciences cannot follow the same method as natural sciences. The failure of positivism to grasp the nature of social reality also paved the way for development of hermeneutic school by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. German Philosopher Droysen first used the term Verstehen to denote that the goal of human sciences is ‘understanding’ (Verstehen) in contrast to explanation which is the goal of natural sciences.

Dilthey, a prominent figure of the hermeneutic school along with Weber emphasized on the historical character of social knowledge and discussed on the methods on how to study such a reality. The following section discusses the basic premises of interpretive sociology in general in depth. The most fundamental idea behind interpretive sociology is that human action and behaviour involves meaning; behaviour and meaning are intrinsically connected and action logically entails intend. However the meaning involved cannot be explained in terms of universal causal laws. The meaning needs to be interpreted. Interpretation involves understanding based on empathy. Interpretive sociology is distinct from psychology. Individual actors is an important unit in interpretive analysis because unlike animals and lifeless objects, men can introspect, have intentions and motives and are capable of interpreting intent and motive of other men and thereby orient their action accordingly. Verstehen is also a central concept to interpretive sociology where in it can be regarded as a method, as an experiences ad as an explanation. Its significance lies in the fact that it demands empathy to understand subjective meaning of an action that is the meaning of the action for the actor himself. Interpretive sociology has influenced varieties of perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology etc.

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### 11.3 Definition: Interpretive Sociology

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Interpretive sociology involves a variety of forms of sociology (approach of Weber, Symbolic Interactionism, Sociological Phenomenology) united by an emphasis on the necessity for sociologist to understand and interpret actors' meanings. (Jary et al 2000: 313). All social reality is taken as pre-interpreted in that it only has form out of social actors' meanings. As a method interpretive understanding stresses on the importance of intentional human actions. What distinguishes the interpretive paradigm with any other account of interpretation is the recognition that any statement about the social world is necessarily relative to any other. The guiding principle of interpretive sociology is that social life is subjective and therefore it is amenable to interpretation.

Sociology, as a science of society was modeled upon natural sciences by positivist thinkers such as Durkheim in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is established that sociology is to study the objective 'social facts' external to the individual and a reality '*sui generis*'. This view was criticized by Max Weber. He outlined the basic premises of interpretive sociology while developing a theory of social action in *Economy and Society*, between 1911 and 1920. Weber perused the idea that a theory of society had to take a new direction and stated 'sociology is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of human social action' (Weber 1978:248). Social action is social because of the subjective meaning the acting individual associates with it and social because it takes behaviours of others into consideration while orienting its course. So interpretive sociology seeks to understand the society by studying how individuals attach meaning and interpret their social world, actions and identities.

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### 11.4 Historical and Philosophical Background/Context of Interpretive Sociology

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Interpretive sociology is formed as an alternative and critic to the adherence of methods of natural sciences in social sciences, in understanding human actions. This methodological controversy concerning over the supremacy of methods followed in natural sciences over social sciences dated back to 1880 till 1900, a period marked by dramatic growth of natural sciences in Europe (Morrison, 2008:330). There was open clash between natural sciences and social sciences over question of knowledge and historical and philosophical sciences such as economics, sociology, and political economy were being criticized as

being non-scientific, intuitive and speculative. In 1890, the movement referred to as Neo-Kantianism criticized the work of Kant and questioned the validity of scientific knowledge. Two central thinkers of neo-Kantian movement are Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. Windelband basically was the man who according to contemporaries started the war against positivism and scientific methodology. He stated that Kant in deciphering the steps for natural sciences to gain valid knowledge excluded historical and ethical dimension of human action from domain of legitimate knowledge. He made the following points: (a) natural and social science are distinct in terms of the type of knowledge they aim to investigate, i.e. they simply describe different levels of reality; (b) in case of natural sciences, there is fact and observable world where laws can be found but in case of social sciences there is knowledge of human values, ethics, which are products of human culture; (c) the methodological approach is different; natural sciences aim at providing laws (nomothetic or law-giving) and explain events through observation and deductive methods whereas the aim of social sciences is to focus on individual events such as development of capitalism, determine the causes and conjure the whole picture based on inductive method (ideographic); (d) human perception of the world involves judgment which involves interpretation, therefore human social action cannot be reduced to mechanistic motives of utility and sense of observation. Heinrich Rickert, a student of Windelband and a contemporary of Weber, concentrated on subject matter and method. According to Rickert the act of judgment precedes act of knowing, and physical reality only has substance through act of judgment, not through mere observation. He stated that observation is nothing but human judgment operating in the visible world. And so knowing itself is a kind of valuing and therefore has a basis in the empirical world. He made the following points: (a) social science explained individual non-recurring events (*ibid*:336) as distinct from lawfully recurring nature of the reality studied by natural sciences. Natural sciences explain empirical world by generalizing methodology in contrast to individualizing methodology of the social sciences; (b) human actions are guided by practical values and standards which are products of history. So, unlike natural sciences which search for facts, social sciences are concerned about knowledge of values.

Broadly speaking, thinkers in social sciences mostly either advocate positivism following natural scientific models or a more interpretive, hermeneutic model. Positivism followed a rejection of ontology in favor of epistemology, an empiricist epistemology, and a deductive-nomological account of scientific explanation. That is, it focused on arguments about “what

is” toward those about “what can be known”. (Gimbel, 2016:73). Empiricist epistemology derives knowledge from observation and validity of our knowledge is directly associated with validity of observations. Validity of the observations that require conscious interpretation on the part of the researcher remains a suspect. Another basic belief of positivism is scientific knowledge is objective and value-neutral (ibid: 74). The difficulty with Positivism is that the objects of social scientific study are themselves conscious subjects and unlike the objects of natural scientific studies, they have their own notions of how they should behave. The history of sociological theory is an ongoing struggle between positivism and hermeneutic positions. The hermeneutic school arose as a prominent anti-positivist position towards the end of nineteenth century, being influenced by German idealistic philosophy. German philosopher Droysen was first to use the terms understanding (*verstehen*) as the goal of human sciences in contrast to explanation (goal of natural science). Dilthey, as a proponent of hermeneutic school sought for a foundational science that would serve the human sciences as mathematics and mechanics served the natural sciences- as the shared, universal basis that provided methodological coherence to the disparate sciences of physics, chemistry, and so on. Dilthey took the task of establishing coherence, legitimacy and independence within the domain of human sciences. According to him, the human sciences need to complement the natural sciences but must remain separate from them. Unlike explanation through causal laws, Dilthey’s hermeneutics sought understanding. This distinction between explanation and understanding, borrowed in part from Droysen, is Dilthey’s most important and controversial contributions to the philosophy of science. The historical debate within the philosophy of science between positivism and Dilthey’s hermeneutics serves as the frame of reference based on which contemporary discourse within social sciences seek to understand whether interpretation as a method is valid and whether it can yield objective science. Both Dilthey and Weber were leading thinkers for whom the historicity of human existence and the historical character of knowledge was a central problematic.

To put Weber in this context, he attended the disputes in social sciences that threatened the validity of its methods. The discourse also involved question of subject matter, whether values will dominate over facts; choice in type of investigating method to be used in social sciences and the decision about what is the main purpose and aim of social science. Weber was highly influenced by idealist philosophy and sought to establish a middle ground

between positivism and idealism. According to Gimbel (2016), Weber did acknowledge the difference between the sciences of nature and the sciences of man; the peculiarities of human social behaviour as a subject for science, but believes it possible to allow for them without compromising scientific method (ibid: 75). So, Weber's philosophy of social science manages to incorporate features of both positivist and humanist visions of science. He maintains a place in the social sciences for causal, explanatory laws, but also attempted to incorporate the concept of interpretation into his account of social-scientific explanation. He retains a place for the interpretation of subjective intentions and the subjective understanding of meanings as well as allowing for the subjective orientations of the scientist, but stated that the research in the cultural sciences cannot only have subjective results, being valid for one person and not for others.

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## **11.5 Interpretive Sociology: General Arguments**

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The following points outline the general arguments of interpretive sociology in depth.

- (a) Interpretive analysis means an attempt to understand and explain human action in terms of the intention it expresses (Hayes 1985:1). The presupposition is, human action involves meaning and there is intrinsic connection between behaviour and meaning associated with it. But it cannot be claimed that intent causes action. Intent and action cannot be regarded as logically independent of each other as it is defined in case of cause and effect relationship. For example, one cannot logically separate the action of waving to someone with the intention of waving to someone. It is also important to note that, to intent to act is not same as to act and to intent to act does not always entails performance of the act, as in case of some resolution taken but not performed. In cases where the intention is followed by performance of work, even then the intent cannot be regarded as cause of the action as the action logically entails the intent.

Causal analysis and interpretive analysis as two genres within the broad spectrum of sociological theory are irreconcilable, from the beginning. Causal analysis and positivism followed by Saint Simon, Comte and Durkheim regarded human activities as 'a piece with the rest of the nature' (ibid: 2) in that it shows same form of regularities and uniformities that is explainable in terms of invariable and causal laws. Here the elements are considered to be extrinsically related and therefore same method of inquiry as in natural sciences can be applied. Therefore the 'positivists' try to explain social phenomena

by presupposing the existence of universal causal regularities or laws. On the other hand, for hermeneutic theorists such as Hegel, Dilthey and Gadamer, the most important aspect of human activity is how they express 'meaning', a quality of life that cannot be adequately explained in terms of universal causal laws and therefore the methodological inquiry of human science need to be significantly different from that of natural sciences. The hermeneutists use interpretive analysis to understand and explain human action.

- (b) Interpretive sociology is not regarded as being part of psychology. This is so because in case of instrumentally rational action which has the most understandable meaning structure, both the actor and the observer the action is subjectively, rationally, rigorously oriented to means that are unequivocally held adequate to fulfill clearly comprehended ends. One cannot infer about such action from psychic data. Rather one should infer from ones subjective expectation related to behaviour of objects and from expectations formed on the basis of valid experiences. In case of irrational processes (where objectively correct condition of instrumentally rational action is not considered) in order to know which aspects of such action is psychologically explicable, it is necessary to understand how pure ideal-typical rationality would have proceeded. It is possible then to determine objective and subjective irrational components of the action. Interpretive sociology is also distinct from dogmatic disciplines such as logic, jurisprudence and therefore meaning do not refer to objective meaning which is 'true' or 'valid' in some metaphysical sense.
- (c) Weber defines Interpretive Sociology as a science concerned with interpretive understanding of social action as well as causal explanation of its course and consequences. Individual behaviour (overt or covert; omission or acquiescence) is regarded as action when the actor attaches subjective meaning to it (Weber, 1978:4). Interpretive sociology focuses on the unique nature of human behavior whereby it is possible to 'intelligibly interpret' (Weber, 1981:151) its relational contexts and regularities. Understanding the context and verifying it through causal attribution ensures validity of the 'intelligible explanation'. Action is identified as significant for Interpretive Sociology. It consists of behaviour that: (a) in terms of the subjectively intended meaning of the actor, is related to the behavior of others, (b) is codetermined in its course through this relatedness, and thus (c) can be intelligibly explained in terms of this (subjectively) intended meaning. (ibid:152) An action is regarded as social when its subjective

meaning takes others' behaviour into account and it is oriented in its course accordingly (Weber, 1978:4). The "others" may be an individual person, someone known or an indefinite unknown plurality (ibid:22).

Interpretative sociology considers the individual and his action as the basic unit. In sociology, concepts such as 'state', 'association', 'feudalism' are regarded as certain categories of human interaction. Hence it is the task of sociology to reduce these concepts to 'understandable' action, of participating individual men (Gerth and Mills 1946: 55). Max Weber incorporated the problem of understanding in his sociological approach, which, he emphasized as one type of sociology among other possibilities. Interpretive sociology, as conceptualised by Weber was largely influenced by philosophical thoughts associated with Enlightenment, where his point of departure and most important unit of analysis is the individual person (ibid:55). This way of thinking was opposed to the existing dominant influence of Hegel and Ranke, according to which emphasis is given on the interpretation of the union between the comprehensive totality and its part. The individual, institution, act, all is seen a document and manifestation of the whole. To Weber, 'Understanding' was a unique approach of the moral or cultural sciences, dealing with man and not with other animals or with lifeless nature. Man can introspect and understand his own intentions and at the same time can interpret the motives behind the actions of other men in terms of their professed or ascribed intentions.

- (d) The concept of *verstehen* is central to interpretive sociology. Introduced by Droysen and used by Dilthey, *verstehen* is a concept that differentiates social sciences as opposed to natural sciences. Usually *verstehen* is described as something related to the explanation of human action; it may be an experience, a method or an explanation (Bourgeois, 1976: 26). *Verstehen* involves the idea that a social scientist must empathize with his subjects in order to understand his subjects' actions as social actions. Though there is a tendency among proponents of *verstehen* to make empathy as a quintessential feature of social sciences, Nagel is a prominent exception to this rule. Nagel puts forward *verstehen* as a heuristic tool, "a way of generating suggestive hypotheses for explaining social action" (ibid:28). According to Natanson, *verstehen* is interpretive understanding. Here again one needs to refer to Weber to get a clear idea about *verstehen*. Weber maintains that the primary task of the sociologist is to understand the meaning an act has for the actor himself, not for the observer. The kind of

understanding involved is precisely that of *verstehen* (ibid: 29). *Verstehen* is not only a skill of the sociologist. According to Schutz, it is the particular experiential form in which commonsense thinking takes cognizance of the social cultural world (Parsons 1978:1). The social agent is a “sociological person” or practical sociologist, as Schutz referred to him, who relies upon the techniques of *verstehen* in his routine social relations.

- (e) Recent research in interpretive sociology is informed by a variety of perspectives, among them are sociolinguistics (Hymes), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, Denzin) ethnomethodology (Goffman) and phenomenology (Schutz). In spite of significant differences, all these approaches to the study of society have emphasized on two significant and interrelated insights. First, the everyday social actor does not merely internalize norms whose implementation are not as automatic as the stimulus response behavior sequences learned in operant conditioning (as functionalists emphasizing the importance of functional integration and social consensus often imply); rather, the actor is a conscious agent continuously mindful of and responsible for the active application of normative codes in the interpretation of social reality. In this view, society is not the unfolding of pre-established behavior patterns in (an assumed) highly stable environment of others and material objects but the creative production of interacting and interdependent agents who are skillful at interpretively understanding and communicating the sense of their own social worlds. Second, these approaches point to the importance of interpretation not only in sociological inquiry, as does the tradition of interpretive sociology to which they often trace their inspiration, but in the particular social reality under study (Parsons 1978:111).

Schutz is acknowledged as the pioneer in the new approaches of interpretive sociology since he accentuated the importance of *verstehen* in the everyday world in *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (ibid: 112). Many recent works in interpretive sociology by Garfinkel, Goffman, Schutz and Wilson, have drawn extensively from the phenomenological tradition. An incorporation of phenomenological insights is a wise strategy for interpretive sociology since if interpretive sociology focuses only on the methods for the construction and communication of meaning it gets restricted. Incorporation of phenomenological insights takes into consideration the substantive senses of the meanings upon which actors/agents rely (ibid: 114).



Interpretive sociology has also influenced the emergence of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. Interpretive sociologists often employ ethnography, participant observation and interviewing in order to empirically situate analyses with the lived experiences of social actors in their social world. Often set in contrast to more structural or critical perspectives, interpretive sociology is concerned with how people go about defining and making sense of their situations, others and themselves. Such a mandate lends itself to inquiry that is more sensitive to qualitative methodologies and subjectively based analysis. Rather than establishing specific correlations between operationalized variables and causation, analytical attention is given to the processual nature of the human lived experience as it relates to people's everyday lives. Data is collected and analyzed through various forms of participant observation, interviewing, and historical documents.

Symbolic Interactionism as a perspective and methodology was formulated by Herbert Blumer, his inspiration came from the American pragmatists, including Charles Pierce, William James, John Dewey and, most notably, George Herbert Mead. These thinkers developed concepts which emphasized human life as one of shared understandings between reflective and interpretive members. Blumer proposed that sociologists should focus on the subjective and interpretive aspects of peoples' shared meanings. He argued that social structures are ongoing accomplishments of 'joint action', and emphasized human agency to shape social contexts that are never completely external to the individual or obdurate in their influence and impact (Adorjan et. al., 2017:3). It is not roles and values that guide action, but our perceptions and interpretations of these that matter. Blumer's focus on shared meanings emphasized the examination of language and interaction, leading to his endorsement of the direct examination of the empirical world through ethnography, participant observation, as well as life history (i.e. the examination of diaries and letters), and interviews. Pragmatism and Symbolic Interactionism led to the formulation of grounded theory, by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. Glaser and Strauss emphasized a comparative method that avoids mapping empirical data onto pre-existing theory. Unlike natural science methodology (which, due to its emphasis on validity and reliability require antecedent operationalization), grounded theory seeks to push researchers to perpetually revise their ideas regarding social life by going back and forth between the empirical world and their own concepts

and ideas. Grounded theory allows methodology to take precedence insofar as it informs theoretical generation through ongoing comparison.

Harold Garfinkel formulated ethnomethodology based on interpretive sociology during 1950, which centered on the 'method' that people engage in to uphold their every day sense of identity, action and continuity between individual and society (ibid:4). Garfinkel asked how, within our daily actions, is society perpetuated; how are transactions of equilibrium enacted. Similar to symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology seeks to capture the real lived experiences of members within society, favouring the direct observation of people, especially focusing on microinteractions. Both perspectives emphasize negotiation and interpretation, and suggest that only through direct participation can researchers explicate the life world of members. Thus interpretive sociology emerged as an alternative paradigm to positivism and objectivism practiced within sociology. It established the importance of understanding subjective meaning and influenced a whole gamut of theoretical perspectives and methodological dispositions within social science domain.

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## 11.7 Summary

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Interpretive sociology involves a variety of forms of sociology (approach of Weber, Symbolic Interactionism, Sociological Phenomenology) united by an emphasis on the necessity for sociologist to understand and interpret actors' meanings. All social reality is taken as pre-interpreted in that it only has form out of social actors' meanings. As a method interpretive understanding stresses on the importance of intentional human actions. What distinguishes the interpretive paradigm with any other account of interpretation is the recognition that any statement about the social world is necessarily relative to any other. The guiding principle of interpretive sociology is that social life is subjective and therefore it is amenable to interpretation. Interpretive sociology is formed as an alternative and critic to the adherence of methods of natural sciences in social sciences, in understanding human actions. Interpretive analysis means an attempt to understand and explain human action in terms of the intention it expresses. The presupposition is, human action involves meaning and there is intrinsic connection between behaviour and meaning associated with it. Weber defines Interpretive Sociology as a science concerned with interpretive understanding of social action as well

as causal explanation of its course and consequences. The concept of *verstehen* is central to interpretive sociology.

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## 11.8 Questions

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### Answer briefly (6 marks)

- i. Briefly define interpretive sociology.
- ii. Briefly state the basic premises of interpretive sociology.
- iii. What is the significance of neo-Kantianism in history of social science?
- iv. Briefly explain role of hermeneutic school with reference to Weber.
- v. Discuss the relationship between interpretive sociology and psychology.
- vi. Define verstehen.

### Answer in detail (12 marks)

- i. Describe the historical and philosophical context of interpretive sociology.
- ii. Analyze the significance and centrality of verstehen to interpretive sociology.
- iii. Discuss the various perspectives influenced by interpretive sociology.

### Essay Type Question (20marks)

- i. Discuss the basic arguments of interpretive sociology.

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## 11.10 Glossary

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**Enlightenment:** The period of intellectual ferment leading up to the French Revolution, which was distinguished by a fundamental questioning of traditional modes of thought and social organization, and sought to replace these with an exclusive reliance on human reason in determining social practices.

**Ethnomethodology:** The theoretical and specialist approach within sociology initiated by Harold Garfinkel, that sets out to uncover the methods and social competence that we, as members of social groups, employ in constructing our sense of social reality.

**Hermeneutics:** A theory and method of interpreting human action and artefacts. Dilthey used the term to refer to 'cultural sciences' i.e. the subjects that forge 'shared understanding' between creator and the interpreter.

**Interpretive analysis:** An attempt to understand and explain human action in terms of the intention it expresses. The presupposition is, human action involves meaning and there is intrinsic connection between behaviour and meaning associated with it.

**Neo-Kantianism:** In 1890, this movement began through criticism of the work of Kant and questioned the validity of scientific knowledge. Two central thinkers of neo-Kantian movement are Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. Windelband (1848-

1915) basically was the man who according to contemporaries started the war against positivism and scientific methodology. He stated that Kant in deciphering the steps for natural sciences to gain valid knowledge while excluding historical and ethical dimension of human action from domain of legitimate knowledge.

**Phenomenology:** A Philosophical approach particularly associated with Edmund Husserl in which philosophy is seen to rest fundamentally on the introspective examination of one's own intellectual processes in the experiencing of phenomena. Alfred Schutz's Social Phenomenology involves a critical appropriation of Husserl's approach and an application of this to the study of the assumptions involved in and the constitution of everyday social knowledge.

**Positivism:** The doctrine formulated by Comte which asserts that the only true knowledge is scientific knowledge i.e. knowledge which describes and explains the coexistence and succession of observable phenomena, including both physical and social phenomena.

**Sociolinguistics:** The study of the sociological aspects of language. The discipline concerns itself with the part language plays in maintaining the social roles in a community. The basic notion underlying sociolinguistics is quite simple: Language use symbolically represents fundamental dimensions of social behavior and human interaction

**Symbolic Interactionism:** A theoretical approach in US sociology which seeks to explain action and interaction as the outcome of the meanings which the actors attach to things and to social action, including themselves.

**Verstehen:** The concept is central to interpretive sociology. Introduced by Droysen and used by Dilthey, verstehen is a concept that differentiates social sciences as opposed to natural sciences. Usually verstehen is described as something related to the explanation of human action; it may be an experience, a method or an explanation. It involves the idea that a social scientist must empathize with his subjects in order to understand his subjects' actions as social actions.

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## **Unit - 6   □   Contributions of Weber**

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### **Structure**

#### **12.1 Learning Objectives**

#### **12.2 Introduction**

#### **12.3 A Brief Biography of Max Weber**

#### **12.4 Interpretive Sociology of Max Weber**

##### **12.4.1 Definition**

##### **12.4.2 Methodological Foundations of Interpretive Sociology**

#### **12.5 Interpretive Sociology: Contribution of Max Weber**

#### **12.6 Conclusion**

#### **12.7 Summary**

#### **12.8 Question**

#### **12.9 References**

#### **12.10 Glossary**

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### **12.1 Objectives**

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- To raise certain questions to the learners which Weber has asked and has tried to find answers such as :
- What is the nature of reality in case of social or human sciences?
- How is this reality to be studied?
- How to determine the validity of such knowledge?
- In short, how to assess the contributions of Weber?

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### **12.2 Introduction**

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We will focus on the contribution of Max Weber towards interpretive sociology. The section begins with a brief biography of Weber which enables the reader to understand

how Weber's scholarship was nurtured by his sociological conditions and family background. The following section provides the in-depth discussion on interpretive sociology of Max Weber. The subject matter and methodology of interpretive (*verstehenden*) sociology involves a discussion of how Weber defines the various categories such as social action, types of social action, social relationship, association, institution and so on. The last section specifies the unique contribution of Max Weber in delineating the methodology of sociology. He successfully focused on both human understanding as well as causal adequacy. He integrated both hermeneutical concern and explanatory objectives in his methodological deliberations.

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### 12.3 A Brief Biography of Max Weber

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Max Weber was born in Erfurt, Thuringia in 1864. His father, Max Weber, Sr., was a trained jurist and municipal counselor. In 1869 the Weber family moved to Berlin where, Weber, Sr. became a prosperous active politician. It is important to note that young Weber, his family residing in west-end suburbs of Berlin, came to know many academic and political notables who visited their family, such as Dilthey, Mommsen, Julian Schmidt, Sybel, Treitschke, and Friedrich Kapp. Weber's mother, Helene Fallenstein also belonged to a cultured and liberal family background (many were teachers and small officials) and was of Protestant faith. She was tutored in the several humanist subjects by Gervinus, the eminent liberal historian and a close friend of her family. Max Weber corresponded with her in long, intimate, and often learned letters, until she died, in 1919 (Gerth and Mills 1946:3).

Exploring Weber's biography helps a reader understand how personal experiences, relationships, political and cultural contexts and struggles shaped Max Weber as a thinker. To begin with, observing the differences between his parents and the deceptive processes within a Victorian patriarchal family, it was clear to young Weber that no words or actions could be taken on face value (ibid: 5). That, in order to get to truth one need to access direct, first-hand knowledge. Weber showed religious indifference from an early age and did go against the authority of his elders and his father. He went to Heidelberg and enrolled as a student of law. Along with law, he studied history, economics, and philosophy under eminent scholars, participated in the theological and philosophical controversies of the day. At the age of 19, Weber moved to Strassburg in order to serve in the army but he did not give up his intellectual pursuits. The military year was over in 1884 and at the

age of 20 Weber resumed his university studies in Berlin and Goettingen, where, two years later, he took his first examination in law. During his years at Strassburg, Weber experienced friendship, profound emotional experience and intellectual discourse in the company of his familial relations (his mother's sisters were married to Strassburg professors and his mother's side of the family was prone to mystical and religious experiences). From his experiences with these relationships, Weber came to learn how to appreciate and sympathize to diverse values. He also took to pragmatic view that it is not fruitful to stick to one's introspective awareness but focus the consequences of various decisions and course of actions (ibid: 9). After finishing studies, Weber took up service in the law courts of Berlin. His interests rested around the field in which economic and legal history overlapped. His Ph.D. thesis (1889) was based on the history of trading companies during the Middle Ages. In 1890 he passed his second examination in law and established himself as a scholar on commercial, German, and Roman law. His treatise titled *The History of Agrarian Institutions* (1891) covered a sociological, economic, and cultural analysis of ancient society. It is subjects to which Weber remain occupied with, throughout. In the spring of 1892, a grand niece of Max Weber, Sr., came to Berlin in order to educate herself for a profession.

Weber married his grand niece Marianne Schnitger in 1893. After marriage Weber lived a life of active and successful young scholar in Berlin. Filling in for ill teacher of economics, he spent hours in lecture hall and seminar. He was active consultant and worked for government agencies. In 1894, he accepted a full professorship in economics at Freiburg University. From this time Weber put himself under enormous work load. Weber accepted a chair at Heidelberg in 1896. He thus became the colleague of former teachers, Fischer, Bekker, and others. His circle of friends included Georg Jellinek, Paul Hensel, Karl Neumann, the art historian, and Ernst Troeltsch, the religionist, who became one of Weber's greatest friends and intellectual companions (ibid:11). Max Weber's father died in 1897, and hereafter crisis in his personal life and health began. Weber considered himself guilty of his father's death (his father died in few days after a heated discussion with Weber, an unrectifiable act of hostility in his own opinion). Shortly after this, Weber fell ill with fever and psychological maladies. As the academic year began, he collapsed from tension, remorse, exhaustion, sleeplessness and anxiety. For the rest of his life he suffered intermittently from severe depressions, punctuated by manic spurts of extraordinarily intense intellectual work and travel; every mental effort, especially speech, was felt to be detrimental to his entire



being (ibid:12). Weber recovered during his vacation in Italy and could return to Heidelberg in 1902 to resume into a light schedule of work. At this time he read extensively on art history, economics, politics and the economic history of monastic orders (ibid:14). But there were again set back and at his request Weber was removed from professorship and made a lecturer. At this juncture he was able to start writing again.

He first focused on problems of method in the social sciences. At the same time he edited along with Sombart in the leading social science journal in Germany (*Archiv fur Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*). This editorship connected Weber with a wide circle of scholars and politicians and aided in broadening the focus of his own work. By 1904, he published essays on the social and economic problems of Junker estates, objectivity in the social sciences, and the first section of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. During his travels in America Weber became interested on the role of bureaucracy in a democracy. He was drawn into academic politics and tried to open up opportunity for scholars such as Georg Simmel and Robert Michels, who were victims of anti-Semitism. In Heidelberg, during 1906 to 1910, Weber participated in intense intellectual discussions with eminent colleagues such as his brother, Alfred Weber, Otto Klebs, Eberhard Gothein, Wilhelm Windelband, Georg Jellinek, Ernst Troeltsch, Karl Neumann, Emil Lask, Friedrich Gundolf, and Arthur Salz (ibid:20). Weber was also regularly visited by Robert Michels, Werner Sombart, the philosopher Paul Hensel, Hugo Münsterberg, Ferdinand Tönnies, Karl Vossler, and, above all, Georg Simmel. Among the younger scholars to whom Weber acted as mentor were Paul Honigsheim, Karl Lowenstein, and Georg Lukacs.

Weber's circle included the non-academic also such as Mina Tobler, the musician to whom Weber dedicated his study of Hinduism and Buddhism, Karl Jaspers, a psychiatrist who later turned into philosopher and H. Gruhle, a psychiatrist interested in modern art. In 1908 Max Weber was active in establishing a sociological society. He decided the level of discussion at the meetings and defined the scope of future work. He motivated research works on voluntary associations (ranging from athletic leagues to religious sects and political parties), on a methodical study of the press and on industrial psychology. After First World War, in April 1918, he moved to Vienna for a summer term at the university where he gave his first university lectures after nineteen years titled, 'A Positive Critique of the Materialist Conception of History,' where he presented his sociology of world religions and politics. His lectures were stupendously successful, attended by professors, state officials, and politicians. A whole series of academic positions were offered to him, he accepted the Munich offer in 1919. His last lectures were worked out at the request of his students and have been published as General Economic History. He died in June 1920.

According to Gerth and Mills (1946) there are definite sociological conditions that account for kind of scholarship Weber displayed. His early education equipped him in many Indo-Germanic languages, his intellectually stimulating family background made it possible for him to study an unusual combination of specialized subjects (ibid: 24). He was a lawyer as well as a well-equipped economist, historian, and philosopher. Max Weber's intellectual orientations took shape within a context characterised by conflicting classes, parties, and intellectual currents (ibid: 46). As a result, when his analytic conceptions and broad historical views are studied, one finds an assimilation of conservative, liberal, and socialist elements of thought that has been transformed and integrated in his work. Max Weber spent the early years of the twentieth century engaged in a series of methodological debates within the Neo-Kantian tradition. Along with a few of his contemporaries, Wilhelm Dilthey and Heinrich Rickert, Weber sought to establish a valid social science that possessed a methodology that was better suited to study the social world than the positivist models provided by the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*).

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## 12.4 Interpretive Sociology of Max Weber

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Max Weber outlines the basic tenets of interpretive sociology by laying down its subject matter and methodological foundations. In order to delineate how Weber conceptualizes "Interpretive (*“verstehenden”*) Sociology", his book *Economy and Society, Volume 1* (1978:3-29) and his article, *Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology* (1981) have been referred. In the following section, the propositions and arguments made by Weber have been discussed. In prefatory note to his deliberations on laying the foundations of Interpretive Sociology, Weber acknowledges the influence of Karl Jaspers, Heinrich Rickert and Simmel in conceptualizing 'understanding'. However Weber departs from Simmel in methods by distinguishing between subjectively intended and objectively valid meanings. Ferdinand Tonnies and his work *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* is also mentioned in this note.

### 12.4.1 Definition :

Weber defines Interpretive Sociology as a science concerned with interpretive understanding of social action as well as causal explanation of its course and consequences. Individual behaviour (overt or covert; omission or acquiescence) is regarded as action when the actor attaches subjective meaning to it (1978:4). Interpretive sociology focuses on the unique

nature of human behavior whereby it is possible to ‘intelligibly interpret’ (1981:151) its relational contexts and regularities. Understanding the context and verifying it through causal attribution ensures validity of the ‘intelligible explanation’. Validity is important here because human behaviours can be based on varied ‘constellation of motives’ (ibid: 151) in spite of being similar in its external course and results. An understanding of human behaviour is based on varying degrees of specific qualitative ‘self-evidence’. The instrumentally rational interpretation has high measure of ‘self-evidence’ as it is exclusively oriented to subjective means to attain fully comprehended subjective goals. It is also possible to understand the typical course of emotion and its consequences for behaviour. Some behaviours such as those involving ecstasy or mystical experiences, that of children and that having psychopathic context may not be understandable and amenable to interpretive explanations. The course of memory and intellectual exercises are only partly understandable. Interpretive sciences treat the ascertainable regularities of such psychic processes just as they treat physical laws of nature.

### **Definition of Social Action:**

Action is identified as significant for Interpretive Sociology. It consists of behaviour that: (a) in terms of the subjectively intended meaning of the actor, is related to the behavior of others, (b) is codetermined in its course through this relatedness, and thus (c) can be intelligibly explained in terms of this (subjectively) intended meaning. (Weber 1981:152) An action is regarded as social when its subjective meaning takes others’ behaviour into account and it is oriented in its course accordingly (1978:4). The “others” may be an individual person, someone known or an indefinite unknown plurality (Weber 1978:22). “Social action” (*Gemeinschaftshandeln*) is for us the behaviour of individuals, either (a) historically observed or (b) theoretically “possible” or “probable”, behavior related to the actual or anticipated potential behaviour of other individuals (Weber 1981:160). Overt action is not social if it is oriented solely to behaviour of inanimate objects. Subjective attitudes constitute social action when it is oriented to the behaviours of others. For example a solitary prayer, a religious behaviour is not social. But an economic behaviour becomes social when the actor assumes that others will respect his actual control over goods. Not every type of human contact can be termed social but only those that are meaningfully oriented to others. For example, two cyclists colliding is not social reality but their attempt to avoid any form of conflict over the collision is social action. Social action is not identical

to similar action of many persons or with every action influenced by others. It will be an action conditioned by crowd when many people take out umbrella apprehending it to be raining anytime. Action influenced by media is also caused by the fact that the individual is member of the 'mass' of which he is aware of. Imitation of action of others is also not social action as it is purely reactive with no meaningful orientation. An example will be imitation of fashion as some objective facts. However, if the actor imitates as because the actions of others are traditional or fashionable then it is social action because it is meaningfully oriented to action of the third person or the source of the imitation or both. The boundary is not always very distinctive. The reason behind this indefiniteness is that the actor is not fully self-conscious of the meaning that he attributes to his actions. Weber stated that social action may be oriented in four ways (ibid: 24); (a) Instrumentally Rational that is determined by expectations related to the behavior of object in the environment and that of other humans. These expectations are regarded as conditions to means with the help of which the actor will attend his rationally calculated ends; (b) Value-Rational, that is determined by a conscious belief in the value in itself leading to ethical, esthetic, religious behaviors which are independent of its prospects of success; (c) Affectual (emotional) that is determined by the specific affects and state of feelings of the actor and (d) Traditional that is determined by ingrained habituation.

Traditional behaviors and affectual behavior both are close to borderline of what can be termed as meaningfully oriented action. In case of traditional behavior it is often an automatic reaction to habitual stimuli whereby the behavior is repeatedly followed. On the other hand affectual behavior may consist of uncontrolled reaction to exceptional stimuli. Value-rational action is distinguished from affectual action as it is a clearly self conscious formulation of values that governs the action and the action's planned orientation to these values. An example of value rational orientation will be the action of individuals who in spite of being aware of the probable cost to themselves, act according to their convictions, such as those actions driven by duty, honor, loyalty and so on. In case of instrumentally rational action, the ends of the action, the means to the ends and the secondary results are all rationally taken into accounts and weighed. In here alternative courses of action are considered. However, actual cases of social action which are oriented in one or another of the ways mentioned above, are unusual to find. The above classification is also not exhaustive; it is only useful for the purpose of investigation.

**Definition of Social relationship:**

Social relationship consists of a probability that there will be a meaningful course of social action irrespective of the basis of probability. It existed, exists and will exist appropriate to the meaning. The meaning here is the meaning attributed by the parties involved in a given concrete case on the average or in a theoretically formulated pure type. The subjective meaning may not be same for the parties involved in case of 'asymmetrical' social relationship but there is still mutual orientation as one party assumes an attitude towards himself by the other party and orient his action according to that expectation. In case of symmetrical relation both the parties cater to same meaning. However, completely corresponding meaning among parties to social relationship is a limiting case in reality. The subjective meaning of a social relationship may change; from solidarity to conflict. It may partly change when acquiring a new meaning and partly remain constant. The aspects of meaning which remains constant can lead to formulation of maxims which the parties expect to be adhered to on an average. The meaning of social relationship is also agreed upon by mutual consent when parties make promises about their future behaviour towards each other. In part the actor orients his promise rationally and in part he is driven value-rationally by a sense of duty.

Interpretive sociology does not include physiological phenomena such as pulse rate or psychic conditions such as feeling tension. It is concerned about typical meaningful relationships of action. As such instrumentally rational action is taken as an ideal type which in turn makes it possible to assess the significance of irrational action. Subjectively intended meaning of action relationship is regarded as designating the inner state of human behaviour, thus ensuring that interpretive sociology consider each phenomena inside out. However, this does not mean that one needs to enumerate psychic conditions. For identical relationship of meaning may not be linked to completely opposite psychic constellations. It also does not mean that purely psychic facts are sociologically irrelevant because they are not subjectively related to the behaviours of others. Nor can one isolate an economic actor from his orientation to the outer world. The relevance of these processes to sociology which are devoid of subjective meaning is that they act as conditions and consequences towards which meaningful action is oriented. The processes of heredity cannot be understood in terms of subjectively intended meaning, in case of which interpretive sociology has to interpretively explain as to what are the intelligible consequences this (heredity-conditioned) effort has had upon the meaningful behavior of others (Weber 1978: 153).

**12.4.2 Methodological Foundations of Interpretive Sociology:**

- (a) Weber begins with his deliberation on meaning that is to be interpreted and understood in case of social action. Meaning here can be actual meaning in a concrete case of an actor or it can be meaning the average meaning attributed by a plurality or this meaning can be a theoretically abstract one attributed to hypothetical actors. Sociology as an empirical science of action is distinct from dogmatic disciplines such as logic and jurisprudence and therefore meaning does not refer to objective meaning which is 'true' or 'valid' in some metaphysical sense. Sociologically relevant purely rational actions are often reactive behaviours with no subjective meaning attached to it and it is often not empirically distinguishable from meaningful action. Weber suggests that in such cases action may include intermingled understandable and non-understandable components.
- (b) All interpretations (like scientific facts) need to have clarity; all insights and comprehensions need to be verifiable. This certainty can be achieved through either rational method or one can be certain of one's understanding by being emotionally empathic or artistically appreciative. Accuracy in case of the latter is possible if through sympathetic participation one can understand the emotional context in which the action took place. However some values and ends of human action though intellectually grasped, may not be fully understandable and may not show the certainty of interpretation as in case of rationally purposeful actions. The more the values and ends of an action are different from those who are interpreting the more difficult it is to empathically understand actions. In such cases Weber states that one needs to be content with its purely intellectual understanding or accept them as given data. The more one is exposed to emotional reaction such as love, jealousy, anger, anxiety and the irrational behaviour growing out of it, the more it is possible for them to empathize with such behaviour. A purely rational course of action serves as an ideal type for the sociologist. It has clear understandability and is less ambiguous. All irrational actions are deviation from purely rational action; by comparing with it one can understand the irrational factors. According to Weber, ideal type is a methodological device; it should not represent rationalistic bias of sociology for it does not say anything about the predominance of rationalistic factors in human life.

- (c) Human actions governed by stimulus are those which are devoid of subjective meaning. That is actions which are not associated with intended purpose. Only stimulus is present, favoring or hindering circumstances. For example, there are the actions which are oriented towards human mortality. Other actions associated with psychic or psycho-physical phenomena such as fatigue or sudden state of euphoria are all devoid of subjective meaning. However, the actor and the sociologist both should accept them as data and take them into account.
- (d) Two kinds of understanding are mentioned and explained by Weber. Firstly there is direct observational understanding of the subjective meaning of a given act; such as observational understanding of irrational emotion of anger through facial expression or rational observational understanding of the act of a woodcutter. Secondly, there is explanatory understanding of actions. In here, one understands in terms of motive as to what meaning the actor attaches to his actions. Here one tries to understand what makes an actor act in a particular way, at a particular moment, under particular circumstances. This form of understanding places the act in an intelligible and inclusive context of meaning. For example direct observational understanding of a man firing may be interpreted as that the man has been commanded to do so but understanding motive can reveal the presence of underlying irrational emotions such as rage or revenge which can be in turn be explained (that they may be caused by insult or jealousy). In all cases understanding involves interpretive grasp of meaning of actions present in one of the following contexts: firstly, as actually intended meaning for concrete individual action (historical approach); secondly, average or approximation to the actually intended meaning (sociological mass phenomena) and thirdly, meaning appropriate to a scientifically pure type (ideal type). Weber places a word of caution stating that no matter how clear an interpretation appears, based on meaning, it should be regarded as a plausible hypothesis, as the motives are often not revealing to actors themselves. Actions which are similar may be caused by various motives having absolutely opposite interpretations.
- (e) Interpretation of a logical, consistent course of action is considered to be subjectively adequate (adequacy on the level of meaning) when it constitutes a typical complex of meaning based on habitual modes of thought. For example, the interpretation of action such as correct answer to an arithmetic problem is subjectively adequate being based on correct norms of calculation. In case of a sequence of events, the interpretation

is said to causally adequate if it is based on established generalizations derived from experiences. For example, the causally adequate interpretation of the above mentioned action (correct arithmetic answer) would be the statistical probability that it will actually always occur in the same way. Correct causal interpretation of an action is possible when the overt action and the motives both have been correctly apprehended and their relationship is meaningfully comprehensible.

- (f) Statistical uniformities are understandable action but they constitute sociological generalizations only when they are manifestations of understandable subjective meaning of a course of action. Some statistics of processes are devoid of subjective meaning such as death rates and amount of rainfall. But in regard to crime rates, occupational distributions, the phenomena are meaningful and therefore sociologically relevant. It is for one or more individuals, action exists as a subjectively understandable orientation of behaviour. The psychic elements of individuals and their behaviour are not understandable subjectively as they are formulated from the point of view of natural sciences. In case of subjective understanding of action in sociology, collectivities such as state, associations, Business Corporation are to be treated as solely the resultant modes of organization of particular acts of individual persons. This is so because; (a) similar concepts and terminology are used such as the 'state' is used both in legal terminology and in everyday speech to denote the legal concept of state as well as a phenomena of social action to which legal rules are relevant, (b) these collectivities have a meaning in the minds of actors who orient their action to them and the ideas have power enough to causally influence action (normative prescriptions and prohibitions), (c) it is necessary to go beyond functional analysis of these collectivities so that sociology can interpret the subjective understanding of the actions of the component individuals. In comparison to external observations, interpretive understanding is hypothetical and provides fragmentary results but nevertheless Weber asserts that subjective understanding is the specific characteristic of sociological knowledge.
- (g) Sociological generalizations are typical probabilities that confirm through observation that under given conditions an expected course of social action will occur. Generalizations are highly definite in case of rigorously rational pursuits with clearly defined goals, when actors have no alternative course of action. According to Weber this case demonstrates why it will be an error to consider any kind of psychology as the foundation of sociological interpretation of knowledge. For psychology employs methodological approach of natural sciences to distinguish between the 'physical'



and the 'psychic'; something which is alien to disciplines concerned with human behaviour. Also the error lies in the concept of psychic and that everything which is not physical is regarded as psychic. But in case of rational action the train of mathematical reasoning that a person carries out is not psychic.

However psychology that employs method of subjective understanding, can contribute in explaining irrational actions sociologically. The relationships of interpretive sociology to "psychology" are formed differently in each individual case. Objectively correct rationality serves sociology as an ideal type in relation to empirical action; instrumental rationality as an ideal type in relation to what is psychologically understandable; the meaningful as an ideal type in relation to "meaningless" action (Weber 1981: 157). Through comparison with the ideal type, the casually relevant irrationalities (different on each level) can be established for the purpose of causal attribution.

- (h) Weber distinguished between sociology and history stating that whereas history seeks causal analysis and explanation of action and structures having cultural significance, sociology seeks to formulate types, concepts and generalized uniformities of empirical process.
- (i) Sociological concepts and generalization contribute to causal explanation of historically and culturally important phenomena. Sociological concepts being abstract strive for highest degree of adequacy at the level of meaning. In case of both rational and irrational (affectual modes of actions) actions, sociological analysis abstracts from reality and helps to understand it. It shows with what degree of approximation concrete historical phenomena can be included in one or more sociological concepts. As such, the sociologist necessarily needs to formulate pure ideal types of corresponding actions. Ideal types involve highest possible degree logical integration as they have high degree of adequacy at the level of meaning. And so it is not possible to ever find real phenomena that correspond to an ideal type. Ideal type does not refer to average type because motives behind actions are highly heterogeneous. Ideal types are used to understand deviation in actions caused by traditional restraints, affects and so on. Ideal types are also applied to subjective processes. In majority of cases actual action takes place in a state of unconsciousness of its subjective meaning. This fact needs to be taken into consideration at the time of sociological and historical investigation.
- (j) Following Weber, "*Verstehen*" is the key to understand why within interpretive (*verstehenden*) sociology, the single individual and his action is the basic unit (atom).

Other disciplines treat the single individual as a complex of psychic, chemical, or other “processes”. For sociology everything that is below the threshold of meaningfully interpretable behaviour, oriented toward inner or outer objects, is considered as the processes of nature; they are not the condition neither the object of orientation for the actor. For the same reason, the individual is, for interpretive sociology, above this threshold and the only agent of meaningful behavior. Concepts such as the “state”, “association”, “feudalism” and the like generally indicate for sociology categories of certain kinds of joint human action. For Weber, it is the task of sociology to reduce these concepts to “understandable” action; as the action of the participating individuals. This is not necessarily true for disciplines such as Jurisprudence.

- (k) Social action is referred to as “associational action” (*Gesellschaftshandeln*) when and insofar as (a) it is oriented in meaning toward expectations that are held on the basis of rules (*Ordnungen*), (b) formulation of these rules has resulted purely rationally (*zweckrational*) in view of the expected action of those associated (*Vergesellschaftete*), and (c) the meaning orientation is subjective. (Weber 1981: 160). The association exists so long and insofar as an action oriented toward the rules in accordance with their average intended meaning, still occurs within a practically relevant range. But this is a fluid situation. The rational ideal type of association is the “voluntary association” (*Zweckverein*). It entails associational actions where in all participants have rationally agreed on an order defining the purpose and the methods of their joint act (ibid: 163).
- (l) Weber explains actions based on Consensus (*Einverständnis*). These are the complexes of social action, which in the absence of a rational agreement or an order, (a) may in effect operate as if such an agreement has taken place and (b) in which this specific effect is codetermined through the nature of the meaning of the action of the individuals (ibid:164). Consensus is evident in instrumentally rational exchange of money. In here, the individual act of associating with the exchange partner includes a relationship to the future action of an indistinctly perceived and conceivable group of actual and potential owners, collectors, and traders of money. Individual’s action is oriented toward the expectation that makes the use of money possible; that others will also ‘accept’ money. Another example will be a language community where individual instances of social action are oriented toward the expectation of reaching an “understanding” of an intended meaning with another person. Thus consensus is a situation where an action is oriented toward expectations about the behavior of others and the expectations has an empirically realistic chance of being fulfilled because of

the objective probability that these others will treat those expectations as meaningfully “valid” for their behavior, despite the absence of an explicit agreement. Social action oriented toward such “consensus” probabilities is referred to as “consensual action”. The transition from consensual action to associational action is fluid (ibid: 171).

- (m) Weber designates “institutions” or compulsory associations (*Anstalten*) as such communities which are; (a) characterized by ascribed participation in contrast to the voluntary association on the basis of purely objective facts independent of declarations by those persons ascribed; (b) they are not amorphous, in contrast to consensual social relationship because they lack an intentional rational order; here action is co-determined by rational man-made rules and coercive apparatus. A language group into which one is born is not an “institution” as they lack the rational status. Example of “institution” will be political community designated as “state”.
- (n) The institution or compulsory association with its rational statutes is related to the organization (*Verband*). Organizational action (*Verbandshandeln*) is oriented toward consensus. It is a consensual action wherein (a) the ascription of participation of the individual follows from consensus, without his own rational effort toward that end; (b) despite the absence of a formally enacted order, certain persons (power holders) issue consensually effective rules for the action of those consensually counted participants of the organization; and (c) the power holders themselves or other persons are prepared to use any kind of physical or psychic coercion against those participants who violate the consensus.

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## 12.5 Interpretive Sociology: Contribution of Max Weber

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Weber was one of the first sociologists to recognize the role ‘human understanding’ and interpretation plays in social action and the fashioning of social order without losing sight of what he terms ‘causal adequacy’. He argued that sociology is a science that “attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects” (Weber 1978: 4). Although committed to causal analysis, Weber believed that it was inappropriate to apply the hypothetico–deductive model to the study of history, culture, society and individual motive.

A majority of Max Weber’s work focused on exploring the unique significant cultural conditions that gave rise to specific historical outcomes. This line of inquiry moved him to design a methodology within the social sciences that integrated both hermeneutical concerns

and explanatory objectives. Because human beings have a subjective inner world, a different methodology and conceptual framework was necessary. He stressed that sociology must reject the presumption that understanding and causal explanation have no relationship to each other. It was Max Weber's use of ideal types, as a conceptual apparatus, that allowed him to establish various forms of causal understanding and interpretation within his diverse substantive areas of study. Weber's philosophy of social science manages to incorporate features of both positivist and humanist visions of science (Gimbel 2016:76). In his methodological deliberations, he maintains a place for causal, explanatory laws as well as incorporated the concept of interpretation into his account of social-scientific explanation within social sciences. Thus he bridged the chasm that Dilthey and others had created between 'explanation' and 'understanding'.

Max Weber's most popular application of his *Verstehen* style of sociology can be found in his book entitled *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Weber acknowledged that economic factors could influence how people define themselves and their world. However, he presented an alternative subjective causal explanation, for example by demonstrating that a group's interpretive schema could also affect material reality. Weber, in contrast to Karl Marx's historical materialism, believed that people's interpretation and implementation of societal ideas and values (i.e. *weltanschauung*), could have a dramatic impact on economic and social change. The "Protestant work ethic" is perhaps Weber's most famous ideal type as it best exemplifies his commitment to a methodology that is sensitive to the integration of causal analysis with human subjective meaning. His interpretive analysis of how a group of people shaped the world with their beliefs inspired generations of sociologists to acknowledge the power subjective meaning making activities have on the social construction of reality.

For philosophers and social scientists, the works of Weber are significant because of the view that empathy is somehow essential to the social sciences. Weber's position finds its strongest statement in the essay, '*Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy*' (1904). Here he states that an objective analysis of cultural events which reduces the empirical reality to laws (according to the thesis of ideal science) is meaningless. According to Weber the transcendental presupposition of every cultural science does not lie in our finding a certain culture or any culture in general to be valuable but rather in the fact that we are cultural beings, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to lend it significance (Bourgeois 1976:29). Thus *verstehen* as an

empathic explanation is needed. The objective analysis of cultural events does not account for (unverifiable) presence of intentions, attitudes and values in the subjects of study. Without knowing which it is not possible to empathize with the subject and therefore one fails to understand his actions. Weber actually prescribes a combination of both empathic explanation and statistical regularities to give an account of a social event because he considered *verstehen* as logically incomplete and it needs to be supplemented by different method such as the collection of statistics.

Many theorists tried to cover the gap between positivism and hermeneutic and to develop theories with both nomological and interpretive elements. For example, Weber defined sociology as science which is to provide interpretive understanding of social action and thereby the causal explanation of its course and consequences. Marx too was interested in both the position. But satisfactory integration of the positions is yet to be achieved. Relevant passages from Weber's *Economy and Society*, volume 1, deliberates on the criteria of adequacy for the explanatory interpretation of a course of conduct but in here it is not clear as to how it is to be shown that causal and interpretive understanding is complementary and mutually reinforcing. For example, Weber writes that *verstehen* enables us to understand why a course of action is taken place in terms of putative motive or intended meaning but to be sure that this is the true explanation we need to establish a causal correlation between motive and action, by comparing with concrete course of events. Following Weber, interpretive understanding without causal explanation remains a plausible hypothesis, and causal explanation without interpretive understanding will not be sociologically relevant. Given such attempt to integrate, in analyzing a course of action one will be needing to specify those theoretical units which are both organized as 'a complex of meaning' and 'a sequence of events' as one need to understand which of these relations are intrinsic and which are extrinsic under specific theoretical description. Such an idea provided by Weber is seen as a job left in an 'extremely rough-hewn state' (Hayes 1985:3).

Fulbrook (1978) evaluating Weber's work on religion claims that he has not followed his own methodological dispositions in his own work. Summarizing Weber's methodology in few words, Fulbrook states that it consists of interpretive understanding of a meaningful complex of action, causal explanation of this action in terms of motives and the verification or validation of this explanation by referring to typical courses of action that occur normally (ibid: 72). Weber considered that sociological explanation is important to explain the causal chain behind historical developments. But how much in his actual attempt to understand

and analyze the role of ideas, motives and meaning in comparative-historical studies of world religion did he followed his own conception of sociology. In his definitional work and construction of types Weber explicitly focused on motives and modes of orientation but to what extent this focus is consistent in his comparative historical study of world religion, where his purpose was to understand the unique attributes of western modern capitalism need to be examined.

Parsons supported Weber stating that Protestant ethic as a religious factor did attain causal influence in Weber's explanation of socio-cultural and economic development. However, Giddens disagrees with Parsons and criticized interpretation of Weber's work stating what Weber actually stressed on was a combination of mental and ideal factors rather than independent influence of beliefs and ideas. Fulbrook goes beyond Giddens' criticism to state that in Weber's study of religion the role of motives and meaning remains an intermediary one; they act as intervening variables that is they influence the direction of the action but they do not in themselves constitute a sufficient explanation of the action and its outcome (ibid: 73). Weber, according to Fulbrook actually investigated the structural conditions under which certain forms of idea systems and associated meanings and motivations can arise and achieve historical efficacy. Fulbrook analyzes this disparity between Weber's conception of interpretive sociology and his actual practice to suggest that may be while emphasizing on meaningful behaviour of actors and its consequences, Weber underplayed the structural aspects involved in sociological explanation. His methodology was an attempt to address the controversies of his time regarding positivism and hermeneutic debate. It can be argued in support of Weber that in his substantive work he was able transcend this demarcations and so he did not followed his own methodological precepts in his own work.

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## 12.6 Conclusion

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Weber defines Interpretive Sociology as a science concerned with interpretive understanding of social action as well as causal explanation of its course and consequences. Individual behaviour (overt or covert; omission or acquiescence) is regarded as action when the actor attaches subjective meaning to it. Interpretive sociology focuses on the unique nature of human behavior whereby it is possible to 'intelligibly interpret'. Action is identified as significant for Interpretive Sociology. It consists of behaviour that: (a) in terms of the subjectively intended meaning of the actor, is related to the behavior of others, (b) is codetermined in its course through this relatedness, and thus (c) can be intelligibly explained

in terms of this (subjectively) intended meaning. An action is regarded as social when its subjective meaning takes others' behaviour into account and it is oriented in its course accordingly. Weber stated that social action may be oriented in four ways (a) Instrumentally Rational, (b) Value-Rational, (c) Affectual (emotional) and (d) Traditional. Following Weber, "Verstehen" is the key to understand why within interpretive (verstehenden) sociology, the single individual and his action is the basic unit (atom). Other disciplines treat the single individual as a complex of psychic, chemical, or other "processes". For sociology everything that is below the threshold of meaningfully interpretable behaviour, oriented toward inner or outer objects, is considered as the processes of nature; they are not the condition, neither the object of orientation for the actor. For the same reason, the individual is, for interpretive sociology, above this threshold and the only agent of meaningful behavior.

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## 6.7 Summary

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A majority of Max Weber's works focused on exploring the unique significant cultural conditions that gave rise to specific historical outcomes. This line of inquiry moved him to design a methodology within the social sciences that integrated both hermeneutical concerns and explanatory objectives. Because human beings have a subjective inner world, a different methodology and conceptual framework was necessary. He stressed that sociology must reject the presumption that understanding and causal explanation have no relationship to each other. For philosophers and social scientists, the works of Weber is significant because of the view that empathy is somehow essential to the social sciences.

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## 12.8 Questions

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**Answer briefly (6 marks).**

- i. Define social action following Max Weber.
- ii. Define social relationship following Weber.
- iii. What is associational action?
- iv. What is consensual action?
- v. Define consensus.
- vi. Define institution.

**Answer in detail (12 marks)**

- i. Define social action and discuss the types of social actions.
- ii. Discuss methodology of interpretive sociology following Weber.
- iii. Discuss the categories of interpretive sociology following Weber.
- iv. Evaluate the contribution of Weber with reference to interpretive sociology.

**Essay Type Question (20marks)**

- i. Evaluate significance of Weber in delineating methodology of social sciences with special reference to interpretive sociology.
- ii. Critically analyze interpretive sociology of Max Weber.

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**12.9 References**


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## 12.10 Glossary

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**Ideal type:** It refers to any conceptualization (idealization) of a general or particular phenomenon which, for analytical and explanatory purposes, represents this phenomenon only in its abstracts or 'pure', 'idealized' form(s).

**Interpretive Sociology:** It is a specific domain of sociology that lays emphasis on the meaning and motive of social actions by individual social actors. The focus is on intentions behind human behaviour. It also considers social life as a subjective reality and so it needs to be interpreted. Interpretive sociology involves a variety of forms of sociology (approach of Weber, Symbolic Interactionism, Sociological Phenomenology) united by an emphasis on the necessity for sociologist to understand and interpret actors' meanings. Weber defines Interpretive Sociology as a science concerned with interpretive understanding of social action as well as causal explanation of.

**Social Action:** An action is regarded as social when its subjective meaning takes others' behaviour into account and it is oriented in its course accordingly. The "others" may be an individual person, someone known or an indefinite unknown plurality

**Social relationship:** Social relationship consists of a probability that there will be a meaningful course of social action irrespective of the basis of probability. It existed, exist and will exist appropriate to the meaning.

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## **Unit - 13 □ General Arguments**

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### **Structure**

#### **13.1 Objectives**

#### **13.2 Introduction**

#### **13.3 Linguistics as a Major Starting Point of Structuralism**

#### **13.4 The Scope of Structuralism**

#### **13.5 Fundamental Concepts of Structuralism**

#### **13.6 Structuralism: Basic Assumptions**

#### **13.7 Conclusion**

#### **13.8 Summary**

#### **13.9 Questions**

#### **13.10 References**

#### **13.11 Glossary**

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### **13.1 Objectives**

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- To understand the concept of Structuralism
- To understand Linguistics as a major starting point of Structuralism
- To understand the scope of Structuralism
- To learn about and analyze the fundamental concepts of Structuralism

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### **13.2 Introduction**

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Things can be understood and meanings about it can be constructed within a certain system of relationships or structure. For example, a word which is a linguistic sign (something that stands for something else) can only be understood within a certain conventional system of signs, which is language, and not by itself. A particular relationship within a society (e.g., between a male offspring and his maternal uncle) can only be understood in the context of the whole system of kinship (e.g., matrilineal or patrilineal). Structuralism holds

that, according to the human way of understanding things, particular elements have no absolute meaning or value: their meaning or value is relative to other elements. Everything makes sense only in relation to something else. An element cannot be perceived by itself. In order to understand a particular element we need to study the whole system of relationships or structure. A particular element can only be studied as part of a greater structure. In fact, the only thing that can be studied is not particular elements or objects but relationships within a system. Our human world, so to speak, is made up of relationships, which make up permanent structures of the human mind.

Structuralism obviously involves a focus on structures, but they are not in the main the same structures that concern the structural functionalists. While the latter, indeed most, sociologists, are concerned with *social structures*, of primary concern to structuralists are *linguistic structures*. This shift from social to linguistic structures is what has come to be known as *linguistic turn* which significantly altered the nature of the social sciences. The focus of a good many social scientists shifted from social structure to language or more generally to signs of various sorts.

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### 13.3 Linguistics as a Major Starting Point of Structuralism

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One of the earliest influences in the development of structuralism was Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, a text published posthumously in 1916 that was compiled by his colleagues from students' notes of a series of lectures he gave at the University of Geneva from 1906 to 1911. Saussure applied structural analysis only to linguistic systems but many philosophers and intellectuals chose to apply his reasoning more widely, and his assumptions and methods were subsequently modified and extended to other disciplines and to nonlinguistic phenomena. Structuralism was increasingly taken up within fields such as anthropology, psychoanalysis, literary theory, and architecture, to the extent to which it became an influential intellectual movement that, by the 1960s and 1970s, had to a large extent eclipsed phenomenology and existentialism. From the late 1940s through the 1970s (and to a diminished extent beyond), structuralist thought had a significant and explicit purchase on disciplines such as Anthropology, Cognitive Development, Literary Criticism, Mathematics, Political Science, and Sociology.

Structuralism assumes that all human social activities – the clothes we choose to wear, the books we write, the cultural rituals we practice – constitute languages and that their regularities can therefore be codified by abstract sets of underlying rules. Thus, for example,

the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan asserted that the unconscious was structured like a language, and Michel Foucault's early writings characterized knowledge as what can be spoken of in a discursive practice. Structuralism emerged from diverse developments in various fields. The source of modern structuralism and its strongest bastion to this day is linguistics. The work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) stands out in the development of structuralism in various other fields. According to Saussure, language is structured prior to its realization in speech or writing. Language consists of a set of *signs*, each of which is constituted by a *signifier* (a sound or inscribed image) and a *signified* (a concept or meaning). Other scholars use different words for *signifier* and *signified*, and most add a third aspect to Saussure's linguistic *sign* so as to include nonlinguistic objects or referents. For Saussure, signs are arbitrary because a word (*signifier*) is linked to a concept or meaning (*signified*) by the conventions and common usages of a particular speech community. Signs do not exist outside of a system and a word's meaning is determined by its relationships to, and differences from, other words, with the result that binary distinctions or oppositions tend to determine the content and normative commitments of the structure. Saussure also distinguished *langue* (language) from *parole* (speech) and his structural linguistics focuses on language (the totality of signs that constitute a natural language, such as French or English) and not on particular utterances. Of particular interest to us is Saussure's differentiation between *langue* and *parole* which was to have enormous significance. *Langue* is the formal, grammatical system of language. It is a system of phonic elements whose relationships are governed, Saussure believed, by determinate laws. The existence of *langue* makes *parole* possible. *Parole* is actual speech, the way that speakers use language to express themselves.

*Langue*, then, can be viewed as a system of signs – a structure – and the meaning of each sign is produced by the relationship among signs within the system. Especially important here are relations of difference, including binary oppositions. Structuralism holds that understanding can only happen if clearly defined or 'significant' differences are present which are called oppositions (or binary oppositions since they come in pairs). This means that meaning is not something absolute but relative and depends on binary oppositions. We cannot understand something unless we first perceive how it is different from something else, or its 'opposition'. For example, there is no meaning 'hot' unless there is also 'cold', no 'good' without 'evil', no 'male' without 'female' and so on. All terms, so to say, 'generate' their opposites. In fact, it is this selection of the significant differences or opposites

that create the world of objects for our mind. Another very important area where oppositions or significant differences are crucial is language where oppositions between sounds or words are crucial for understanding. For example, the only sound that makes the words ‘dog’ and ‘dock’ different is the last letter. If we make sounds ‘g’ and ‘k’ indistinguishable in pronouncing them, we distinguish these two words: it means that the distinction in pronunciation of ‘g’ and ‘k’ is a significant difference or opposition that is crucial to understanding. On the other hand, even if we pronounce the word ‘rock’ with a rolling R (as Italians or Russians do), we can still understand it: therefore ‘r’ or ‘R’ is not a significant difference or opposition crucial to our understanding. Therefore, what determines our understanding of someone’s accent is whether the person can create enough difference between sounds that constitute binary oppositions that are significant for the structure of the language. Thus, instead of an existential world of people shaping their surroundings, we have here a world in which people, as well as other aspects of the social world, are being shaped by the structure of language. These observations prove the existence of a structural principle in language: in language what makes any single item meaningful is not its particular individual quality but the difference between this quality and that of other sounds or words, or its position within the structure (system of relationships). These observations were made by Ferdinand de Saussure, in the *Course in General Linguistics*.

The term “structuralism” was coined in the ongoing work in Linguistics, Semiotics, and Literary Analysis of Roman Jakobson. In this development, structuralism should be seen as a subdivision or a methodological field in the larger area of semiotics that finds its origins in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure’s work was an attempt to reduce the huge number of facts about language discovered by the 19<sup>th</sup> century historical linguistics to a manageable number of propositions based upon the formal relationships defining and existing between the elements of language. Saussure’s systematic re-examination of language is based upon three assumptions:

- i. The *systematic* nature of language, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts
- ii. The *relational* conception of the elements of language, where linguistic ‘entities’ are defined in relationships of combination and contrast to one another
- iii. The *arbitrary nature* of linguistic elements, where they are defined in terms of the function and purpose they serve rather than in terms of their inherent qualities.

All three of the above assumptions gave rise to what Roman Jakobson came to designate as 'Structuralism' in 1929.

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### 13.4 The Scope of Structuralism

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Structuralism is not just limited to or about language and literature. When Saussure's work was 'co-opted' in the 1950s by the people we now call structuralists, their feeling was that Saussure's model of how language works was 'transferable', and would also explain how all signifying systems work. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied the structuralist outlook to the interpretation of myth. He suggested that the individual tale (the *parole*) from a cycle of myths did not have a separate and inherent meaning but could only be understood by considering its position in the whole cycle (the *langue*) and the similarities and difference between that tale and others in the sequence.

Contextually, it can be stated that fashion, for instance, can be 'read' like a language. Separate items or features are added up into a complete 'outfit' or 'look' with complex grammatical rules of amalgamation: we don't wear an evening dress and carpet slippers, we don't come to lectures in a military uniform, etc. Likewise, each component sign derives its meaning from a structural context. Of course, many fashions in clothing depend on breaking such rules in a 'knowing' way, but the 'statement' made by such rule-breaks (for instance, making outer garments which look like undergarments, or cutting expensive fabrics in an apparently rough way) depends upon the prior existence of the 'rule' or convention which is being conspicuously flouted. In the fashion world today, for instance, the combination of such features as exposed seams, crumpled-looking fabrics, and garments which are too big or too small for the wearer signifies the fashion known (confusingly, in this context) as deconstruction. Take any one of these features out of the context of all the rest, however, and they will merely signify that you have your jacket on inside out or don't believe in ironing. Again, these individual items have their place in an overall structure, and the structure is of greater significance than the individual item.

The other major figure in the early phase of structuralism was Roland Barthes, who applied the structuralist method to the general field of modern culture. He examined modern France (of the 1950s) from the standpoint of a cultural anthropologist in a little book called *Mythologies*, which he published in France in 1957. This looked at a host of items which had never before been subjected to intellectual analysis, such as: the difference between boxing and wrestling; the significance of eating steak and chips; the styling of the Citroën

car; the cinema image of Greta Garbo's face; a magazine photograph of an Algerian soldier saluting the French flag. Each of these items he placed within a wider structure of values, beliefs, and symbols as the key to understanding it. Thus, boxing is seen as a sport concerned with repression and endurance, as distinct from wrestling, where pain is flamboyantly displayed. Boxers do not cry out in pain when hit, the rules cannot be disregarded at any point during the bout, and the boxer fights as himself, not in the elaborate guise of a make-believe villain or hero. By contrast, wrestlers grunt and snarl with aggression, stage elaborate displays of agony or triumph, and fight as exaggerated, larger than life villains or super-heroes. Clearly, these two sports have quite different functions within society: boxing enacts the stoical endurance, which is sometimes necessary in life, while wrestling dramatizes ultimate struggles and conflicts between good and evil. Barthes's approach here, then, is that of the classic structuralist: the individual item is 'structuralized', or 'contextualized by structure', and in the process of doing this layers of significance are revealed.

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### 13.5 Fundamental Concepts of Structuralism

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The impact of Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas on the development of linguistic theory in the first half of the 20th century cannot be overstated. Two currents of thought emerged independently of each other, one in Europe, the other in America. The results of each incorporated the basic notions of Saussurian thought in forming the central tenets of structural linguistics. In Europe, the most important work was being done by the Prague School. Most notably, Nikolay Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson headed the efforts of the Prague School in setting the course of phonological theory in the decades following 1940.

Although it is difficult to find a set of common criteria on which all structuralists would agree, a number of general principles seem to unite at least Saussurean structuralism and the various schools which developed from it after World War I. These principles were interpreted in various ways by different scholars who supplemented them with own theoretical and epistemological assumptions. In very general terms, then, the following principles may be said to hold at least for the European structuralists:

*Firstly*, languages should be studied as systems, and the relations constituting a language system have priority over the linguistic units they generate. Structuralism constitutes a radical rejection of the atomism of the neo-grammarians who dominated the latter decades of the 19th century linguistics.

*Secondly*, languages should first be studied from a synchronic point of view, not a diachronic one, since the latter is dependent on the former. From the synchronic viewpoint a language is a system of signs for its speakers. Again, this was a reaction to the predominantly historical perspective of the 19th century linguistics.

*Thirdly*, structuralists tend to stress the autonomy of the language system vis-a-vis other aspects of language, such as sociological, psychological and pragmatic or discourse factors, which are considered 'external'. Different structuralist schools, however, held different opinions on this particular issue. The view that language is an autonomous, self-contained system also entails that there are as many particular systems as there are languages (which, of course, does not exclude cross-linguistic similarities or the existence of language universals).

*Fourthly*, European structuralists put particular emphasis on the view that meaning is an inherent aspect of the language system, not reducible to external factors or reference. Moreover, they postulated that meaning can be analyzed with the methodology they had been developing for analyzing languages into phonemes. Again, this is a reaction to the 19th century linguistics, in particular to a strong positivist tendency which can be traced back to the work of such linguists as A. Schleicher (who believed language to be a natural organism), and, again, the neo-grammarians.

*Fifthly*, structuralism grew out of the finding that from the vantage point of linguistics language is not a substance but rather a form or, more generally, a structure. A linguist, therefore, should not study language with the methodology of the natural sciences but develop new methods appropriate to the requirements of the linguistic object he has in mind. For a considerable period of time, structuralism was viewed as a genuine 'paradigm shift' in linguistics, and, in Europe at least, Saussure's *Cours de linguistique generale* (CLG) was read as a revolutionary work full of novel ideas. This had two effects. First, many linguists tended to overestimate the originality of Saussure's work, forgetting that he stood in a long tradition. Conceptual correspondences (and, occasionally, direct influences, although this has been a hotly debated issue) have been convincingly demonstrated between Saussure and W. von Humboldt, W. D. Whitney, J. Baudouin de Courtenay, E. Durkheim and other scholars. This lack of awareness of the historicity of Saussure's thought also resulted in uncritical interpretations of the CLG which attempted to downplay its ambiguities and inconsistencies (which nevertheless were often, as is not uncommon in a major seminal work, highly thought-provoking). Second, from the late 1960s onwards, linguists started



to neglect structuralism because of its supposed over-abstract concepts and mistaken overall view on language. This not only resulted in an occasionally deplorable ignorance of the basic tenets of structural linguistics, especially among younger generations of linguists, but also in the unduly negative connotation from which the term ‘structuralism’ suffers today, notwithstanding the lasting value of the scholarly work of many structural linguists.

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### 13.6 Structuralism: Basic Assumptions

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By the early 1960s, many Continental scholars were working with structuralist ideas, although many resisted being labeled as such and some eventually became more identifiable as poststructuralists. For example, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida explored structuralist approaches to literary criticism (although Derrida now is chiefly associated with deconstruction, which is a complex response to several theoretical and philosophical movements, especially phenomenology, psychoanalysis and structuralism) and, as already noted, Jacques Lacan applied Saussure’s structuralism to psychoanalysis. Methods of structural analysis (as distinct from structuralist assumptions) appear to have informed Jean Piaget’s studies in developmental psychology, although he is more likely to have described himself as constructivist. Foucault explicitly denied his affiliation with structuralism in his later works, but his 1966 book, *The Order of Things*, seeks to explain how structures of epistemology (*episteme*) in the history of science have determined the ways in which we imagine knowledge and knowing. Thomas Kuhn also investigated the structured production of scientific knowledge and methods in his 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which demonstrated how the conventions of scientists’ speech communities shape standard practice and discourage deviations from ‘normal science’ under most circumstances.

Structuralism is basically the study of a text as a whole and the kinds of interrelationships or contrasts that the system builds into it to make it meaningful. Contrasts are often times highlighted by calling attention to their basic oppositional or binary structure. Structuralism as a concept is grand, controversial and elusive. For critical purposes, it can be understood at two levels of generality:

1. As a broad intellectual movement, one of the most significant ways of theorizing in the human sciences in the twentieth century;
2. As a particular set of approaches to literature.

Structuralism, thus, can be defined as the study of the elements of consciousness. The idea is that conscious experience can be broken down into basic conscious elements, much as a physical phenomenon can be viewed as consisting of chemical structures that can, in turn, be broken down into basic elements. In order to reduce a normal conscious experience into basic elements, structuralism relied on a method called 'introspection'. An important principle of introspection is that any given conscious experience must be described in its most basic terms, so that a researcher could not describe some experience or object as itself, such as describing an 'apple as an apple'. Such a mistake is a major introspection faux pas and is referred to as the "stimulus error". Therefore, it can be stated that the premise of structuralism is human activity and its products - even perception and thought itself - are constructed and not natural. Structure is the principle of construction and the object of analysis, to be understood by its intimate reference to the concepts of system and value as defined in Semiotics (Science studying Signs). Structuralism, therefore, is an aesthetic theory which is based on certain key philosophical assumptions which are as follows:

- a. All artistic works of art or 'texts' possess a fundamental deep structure.
- b. Texts are organized like a language with their own grammar.
- c. The grammar of a language is a series of signs and conventions which draw a predictable response from human beings.
- d. The signal-response model forms the basis of all textual operations.

Following from these key philosophical assumptions, the basic assumptions of the structuralist theory can be traced as under:

- (a) According to the structuralist theory, meaning is not a private experience, as Husserl thought, but the product of a shared system of signification. A text is to be understood as a construct to be analyzed and explained scientifically in terms of the deep-structure of the system itself. For many structuralists, this 'deep-structure' is universal and innate.
- (b) One should make it clear at the back of his mind that literature is not only the work of art, but there are several forms like painting, sculpture, music etc. apart from literature. And structuralism can be applied to all these forms.

- (c) If we consider the application of structuralism to art and extend the monetary analogy, we can think of paintings as comprised of many languages or sets of conventions that play a role in the exchange of signs. For example, the language of western academic painting can be contrasted with the language of African sculpture or Japanese brush painting. Just as one word in the English language is paired with a concept, so a visual image, icon, or symbol is paired with a concept or idea that it is said to 'express'. Such a study of signs in the most general sense, whether visual or verbal, is called Semiotics. In the West, art schools are the institutions that have the function of passing on these visual conventions.
- (d) It should be noted that in structuralism, the individual is more a product of the system than a producer of it. Language precedes us. It is the medium of thought and human expression. Thus, it provides us with the structure that we use to conceptualize our own experience.
- (e) Since language is arbitrary, there is no natural bond between words and things. There can be no privileged connection between language and reality. In this sense, reality is also produced by language. Thus, structuralism can be understood as a form of idealism.

Therefore, it is clear from what we've just said that structuralism undermines the claim of empiricism that what is real is what we experience. It can also be seen as an affront to common sense, especially to the notion that a text has a meaning, that is, for all intents and purposes, straightforward. This conflict with common sense, however, can be favourably compared with other historical conflicts. In other words, things are not always what they seem. Thus, the idealist claim of structuralism can be understood in the following way: Reality and our conception of it are 'discontinuous'. This view has important implications. According to the structuralist theory, a text or utterance has a "meaning", but its meaning is determined not by the psychological state or "intention" of the speaker, but by the deep-structure of the language system in which it occurs. In this way, the subject (individual or "author") is effectively killed off and replaced by language itself as an autonomous system of rules. Thus, structuralism has been characterized as Anti-humanistic in its claim that meaning is not identical with the inner psychological experience of the speaker. It removes the human subject from its central position in the production of meaning much as

Copernicus removed (decentered) the Earth from its position at the centre of the solar system. And since language pre-exists us, it is not we who speak, but “language speaks us”.

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### **13.7 Conclusion**

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Structuralism rose to prominence in France through the application by the French Anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, of Saussurean structural linguistics to the study of such phenomena as myths, rituals, kinship relations, eating conventions. Literature seemed especially appropriate to a structuralist approach as it was wholly made up of language. Structuralism does not make a difference between literature and other forms of writing or value judgments between good and bad literature. Working from Saussure’s perception that meaning is relational, structural anthropology identifies the binary oppositions in a culture as they are manifested in story and ritual. In so far as stories mediate between irreconcilable oppositions, myth making is a survival strategy. Ironically, structuralism has had to sustain the opposing charges that it lacks humanity because it subjects literature to scientific analysis, and it is over-idealistic because it searches for universals and gives greater privilege to synchronic systems than to historical change.

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### **13.8 Summary**

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Structuralism is an approach that grew to become one of the most widely used methods of analyzing language, culture, and society in the second half of the 20th century. ‘Structuralism’, however, does not refer to a clearly defined ‘school’ of authors, although the work of Ferdinand de Saussure is generally considered a starting point. Structuralism rejected existentialism’s notion of radical human freedom and focused instead on the way that human behaviour is determined by cultural, social, and psychological structures. Broadly, Structuralism seeks to explore the inter-relationships of elements (the ‘structure’) in, say, a story, rather than focusing on its contents, through which meaning is produced within a culture. It is also accepted as a distinctive methodological theory in science, humanities and philosophy, began to develop in the Czech region in the mid-20s of the century. The Postmodernists themselves prove, more than any other group, that, in terms of the generation of meaning, structuralism is the Westerner’s first and foremost ontological and epistemological foundation.

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## 13.9 Questions

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1. What do you understand by Structuralism? Discuss.
2. Discuss Linguistics as a major starting point of Structuralism.
3. Elucidate the concepts of Langue and Parole as discussed by Ferdinand de Saussure.
4. Analyze the basic assumptions of Structuralism.

### Answer in Brief:

5. What is Langue?
6. What are the three basic assumptions of Saussure?
7. Where was the book '*My Theologies*' published?
8. Why are signs arbitrary?

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## 13.10 References

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## 13.101 Glossary

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**Structuralism** - It holds that, according to the human way of understanding things, particular elements have no absolute meaning or value: their meaning or value is relative to other elements. Everything makes sense only in relation to

something else. An element cannot be perceived by itself. In order to understand a particular element we need to study the whole system of relationships or structure.

**Linguistics -** It is the scientific study of language. It involves analysis of language form, language meaning, and language in context, as well as an analysis of the social, cultural, historical, and political factors that influence language.

**Kinship -** It is the web of social relationships that form an important part of the lives of all humans in all societies, although its exact meanings even within this discipline are often debated. The study of kinship is the study of what man does with these basic facts of life – mating, gestation, parenthood, socialization, sibling ship etc. Human society is unique, he argues, in that we are working with the same raw material as exists in the animal world, but [we] can conceptualize and categorize it to serve social ends. These social ends include the socialization of children and the formation of basic economic, political and religious groups.

**Myth-** It is a folklore genre consisting of narratives that play a fundamental role in a society, such as foundational tales or origin myths. The main characters in myths are usually gods, demigods or supernatural humans. Stories of everyday human beings, although often of leaders of some type, are usually contained in legends, as opposed to myths.

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## **Unit-14 □ Contributions of Claude Levi-Strauss**

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### **Structure**

#### **14.1 Objectives**

#### **14.2 Introduction**

#### **14.3 Claude Levi-Strauss: His Life and Works**

#### **14.4 Structuralism as a Method**

#### **14.5 Levi-Strauss and his Contributions**

#### **14.6 Levi-Strauss's Idea of Totemism**

#### **14.7 Summary**

#### **14.8 Conclusion**

#### **14.9 Questions**

#### **14.10 References**

#### **14.11 Glossary**

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### **14.1 Objectives**

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- To understand the concept of Structuralism as a method
- To understand and analyze Claude Levi-Strauss's interpretation of Structuralism
- To get acquainted with the life and works of Claude Levi-Strauss
- To learn about and analyze Levi-Strauss's idea of totemism
- To develop a sociological conception of Levi-Strauss's idea of totemism as a structure

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### **14.2 Introduction**

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Structuralism is the name given to a method of analyzing social relations and cultural products, which came into existence in the 1950s. Though it had its origin in linguistics, particularly from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, it acquired popularity in anthropology, from where it impacted the other disciplines in social sciences and humanities. It gives primacy to pattern over substance. The meaning of a particular phenomenon or system comes through knowing how things fit together, and not from understanding things in

isolation. A characteristic that structuralism and structural-functional approach share in common is that both are concerned with relations between things. However, there are certain dissimilarities between the two. Structural-functional approach is interested in finding order within social relations. Structuralism, on the other hand, endeavours to find the structures of thought and the structure of society. Structural-functional approach follows inductive reasoning; from the particular, it moves to the general. Structuralism subscribes to deductive logic. It begins with certain premises. They are followed carefully to the point they lead to. Aspects from geometry and algebra are kept in mind while working with structuralism. For structuralism, logical possibilities are worked out first and then it is seen, how reality fits. For true structuralists, there is no reality except the relations between things.

Language is not the only area where structural principles can be applied. Anthropologists apply them to societies and kinship systems. Claude Levi-Strauss also tried to apply structural principles to cultural phenomena such as mythology. According to him, myth can be organized according to a certain structure, just as language. In language this structure can be roughly called “grammar” which is based on its system of significant differences or oppositions. Myth also has its system of oppositions and ‘grammar’. If we know this ‘grammar’ of myth well enough we might be able to decipher the ‘message’ that myth is trying to convey to us. When we master the grammar of myths we can read their hidden messages, much as we can read ‘between the lines’ for political statements and agendas in newspapers. However, in order to ‘read’ myths successfully, we must know the whole system of relationships in a particular myth, or its structure. This is what Levi-Strauss is attempting to do in his “Story of Asdiwal”.

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### 14.3 Claude Levi-Strauss: His Life and Works

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Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) is often described as the ‘last French intellectual giant’, the ‘founder of Structuralism in Anthropology’, and the ‘Father of Modern Anthropology’. Born on 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1908, in Belgium, he was one of the greatest Social Anthropologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ruling the intellectual circles from the 1950s to the 1980s. Levi-Strauss studied at the University of Paris. From 1935-39, he was the Professor at the University of Sao Paulo making several expeditions to central Brazil. From 1942-1945, he was the Professor at the New School for Social Research. In 1950, he became the Director of Studies at the ‘Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes’. In 1959, Levi-Strauss assumed the Chair of Social Anthropology at the College de France. His books include ‘*The Raw and the Cooked*’, ‘*The Savage Mind*’, ‘*Structural Anthropology and*



*Totemism*'. In 1949 Levi-Strauss published his first major work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*'. He attained popular recognition in 1955 with *A World on the Wane*', a literary intellectual autobiography. Other publications include the revised edition entitled *'Structural Anthropology'* in 1961, *'The Savage Mind'* (1962), and *'Totemism'* (1962). His massive *Mythologiques* appeared in four volumes: *'The Raw and the Cooked'* (1964), *'From Honey to Ashes'* (1966), *'The Origin of Table Manners'* (1968), and *'The Naked Man'* (1971). In 1973, a second volume of *'Structural Anthropology'* appeared. In 1983, he published a collection of essays, *'The View from Afar'*. In this connection, it can very well be stated that Levi-Strauss's structuralism was an effort to condense the vast amount of information about cultural systems to what he believed were the prerequisites, the formal relationships among their elements. He viewed cultures as systems of communication, and he constructed models based on structural linguistics, information theory, and cybernetics in order to interpret them.

Later, the popularity of his method, known as structuralism, became suppressed with the new approaches and paradigms taking its place, but he never went to the backseat. Even when structuralism did not have many admirers, it was taught in courses of Sociology and Anthropology and the author whose work was singularly attended to was none other than Levi-Strauss. Each year he was read by scholars from Anthropology and the other disciplines with new insights and transformed interests. He was one of the few Anthropologists whose popularity spread beyond the confines of Social Anthropology. He was (and is) read avidly in literature. Although he did not do, at one time, it was thought that every social fact, and every product of human activity and mind, of any society, simple or complex, could be analyzed following the method that Levi-Strauss had proposed and defended. In 1935, Levi-Strauss got an appointment at the University of Sao Paulo to teach sociology. His stay in Brazil exposed him to the 'anthropological other'. By then he had already read Robert Lowie's *'Primitive Society'* and formed a conception of how anthropological studies were to be carried out. Contextually, Levi-Strauss (1962) said:

I had gone to Brazil because I wanted to become an anthropologist. And I had been attracted to an anthropology that was very different from that of Durkheim, who was not a fieldworker, while I was learning about fieldwork through the English and the Americans... (p.46)

During the first year of his stay in the University, he started ethnographic projects with his students, working on the folklore of the surrounding areas of Sao Paulo. He then went to the Mato Grosso among the Caduveo and Bororo tribes; Levi-Strauss (1968) described his first fieldwork in the following words:

I was in a state of intense intellectual excitement. I felt I was reliving the adventures of the first sixteenth century explorers. I was discovering the New World for myself. Everything seemed mythical; the scenery, the plants, the animals... (p.34)

A big article that Levi-Strauss wrote on the Bororo attracted the attention of Robert Lowie, who invited him to the New School of Social Research to take up a teaching assignment. Levi-Strauss's stay in New York was extremely fruitful. He had a chance to look at the rich material that the American anthropologists had collected on the Indian communities. He went about analyzing it, but at the same time carried several short first-hand field studies, although they were not of the same league as was the masterly fieldwork that Bronislaw Malinowski had carried out among the Trobriand Islanders. However, whatever fieldwork he carried out, he thought, was enough to give him an insight into the 'other'. He saw himself as an analyst and a synthesizer of the material that had already been collected. Since his aim was to understand the working of the human mind, he wanted to have a look at the ethnographic facts and the material cultural objects from different cultural contexts. In other words, Levi-Strauss was not interested in producing a text or a monograph on a particular culture, but a text that addressed the understanding of the 'Universal Man' rather than the 'particular man'. Some reasons for his extreme popularity are identified in his rejection of history and humanism, in his refusal to see Western civilization as privileged and unique, in his emphasis on form over content and in his insistence that the savage mind is equal to the civilized mind. Levi-Strauss appeals to the deepest feelings among the alienated intellectuals of our society.

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#### **14.4 Structuralism as a method**

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Claude Levi-Strauss, a leading French Philosopher, Social Theorist and Anthropologist, is associated with the development of structuralism as a method in both the social sciences and humanities. Aside from a period spent teaching in Brazil before World War II and a few years as an academic and diplomat in the United States during and after the war, Levi-Strauss has lived and taught in France. His researches have focused on the massive amount of ethnological materials collected by field-workers worldwide. In the tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century French sociology (which included anthropology), pioneered by figures such as Emile Durkheim, Levi-Strauss is a theorizer on a grand scale. By developing a sophisticated means of analyzing the cultural artifacts of preindustrial, non-literate peoples, he has sought to discover underlying structures of thought that characterize not only the so-called primitive societies — the anthropologist's specialty - but also the

formal structures of general human mentality. In other words, Levi-Strauss's ethnological work has been at the origin of structuralism's success - and literary criticism. Relying on the work of Roland Barthes, Levi-Strauss concluded first of all an interpretation of the most pronounced social phenomenon - kinship - which he elaborates on the basis of the Jakobsonian linguistic model, having transposed the latter onto the ethnological plane.

Levi-Strauss derived his structuralist method from structural linguistics. Considering the perspective of structural linguistics appropriate for culture and thought, as well as for language, he attempted to demonstrate that the cultural features of tribal societies were assemblages of codes, in turn reflecting certain universal principles of human thought. Structuralism actually came into being as a distinct method of investigation through Levi-Strauss's anthropological investigations. His innovative analysis of myth (ancient Greek myths, but also Amerindian ones), representing a response to the former psychologically oriented interpretations, was made much the same way linguistics studies sentences in order to discover their "grammar". Unlike previous analysts of myth, Levi-Strauss holds that meaning does not reside in the essential significance or representation of a particular element in a mythical story. Rather, a myth's meaning is hidden in the underlying relationships of all its elements, which can be discovered only through structuralist analysis. As Levi-Strauss's works became available in English in the 1960s, his structuralist method gained popularity in the United States in such fields as sociology, architecture, literature, and art, as well as anthropology.

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### **14.5 Levi-Strauss and his Contributions**

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Levi-Strauss derived structuralism from a school of linguistics whose focus was not on the meaning of the word, but the patterns that the words form. Levi-Strauss's contribution gave us a theory of how the human mind works. Man passes from a natural to a cultural state as he uses language, learns to cook, etc... Structuralism considers that in the passage from natural to cultural, man obeys laws - he does not invent it's a mechanism of the human brain. Levi-Strauss views man not as a privileged native of the universe, but as a passing species, which will leave only a few faint traces of its passage when it becomes extinct. In addition, Levi Strauss is also known for his structural analysis of mythology. He was interested in explaining why myths from different cultures from around the globe seem so similar. He attempted to answer this question not by the content of the myths, but by their structure. To make this argument, Levi-Strauss insists that myth is a language because myth has to be told in order to exist. A myth is almost always set some time

long ago, with a timeless story. He says myth is actually on a more complex level than language and it shares certain characteristics with language. Firstly, it's made of units that are put together according to certain rules, and secondly, these units form relationships with each other, based on opposites, which provide the basis of the structure.

It provides a means to account for widespread variations on a basic myth structure, and is logical and scientific. This was important for the scientist in Levi-Strauss. He says that repetition, in myth as in oral literature, is necessary to reveal the structure of the myth. Because of this need for repetition, the myth is told in layer after layer. However, the layers aren't the same, and it's eventually shown that the myth "grows" as it is told, but the structure of the myth does not grow.

Between 1964 and 1971 was published Levi-Strauss's magnum opus, the four volume *Mythology* series. In total, these volumes, running into two thousand pages, analyze 813 myths and their more than one thousand versions. *The Raw and the Cooked* analyzes myths from South America, particularly central and eastern Brazil. The second volume, *From Honey to Ashes* is also concerned with South America, but deals with myths both from the south and the north. *The Origin of Table Manners* begins with a myth that is South American, but from further north. The final volume, *The Naked Man*, is entirely North American. The interesting fact Levi-Strauss finds is that the "most apparent similarities between myths are found between the regions of the New World that are geographically most distant." Beginning with the mythology of central Brazil and then moving out to other geographical areas, and then returning to Brazil, Levi-Strauss realizes that "depending upon the case, the myths of neighbouring peoples coincide, partially overlap, answer, or contradict one another." Thus, the analysis of each myth 'implied that of others'. Taken as the centre, the myth 'radiates variants around it.' It spreads from one neighbour to another in 'several directions at once.' His book, *The Jealous Potter*, was also a part of the series on the analysis of myths. The important fact here is that in spite of his widely acclaimed volumes on mythology, Levi-Strauss thought that the science of myths was in its infancy.

According to structural theory in anthropology and social anthropology, meaning is produced and reproduced within a culture through various practices, phenomena and activities that serve as systems of signification. A structuralist approach may study activities as diverse as food-preparation and serving rituals, religious rites, games, literary and non-literary texts, and other forms of entertainment to discover the deep structures by which meaning is produced and reproduced within the culture. Contextually, Levi-Strauss analyzed in the 1950s cultural phenomena including mythology, kinship (the alliance theory and the incest

taboo), and food preparation. In addition to these studies, he produced more linguistically focused writings in which he applied Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* in his search for the fundamental structures of the human mind, arguing that the structures that form the 'deep grammar' of society originate in the mind and operate in people unconsciously.

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### 14.6 Levi-Strauss's Idea of Totemism

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Levi-Strauss's *Totemism*, was published in French in 1962. A year later came its English translation, done by an Oxford anthropologist, Rodney Needham, and it carried more than fifty pages of Introduction written by Roger C. Poole. In appreciation of this book, Poole wrote:

In *Totemism* Levi-Strauss takes up an old and hoary anthropological problem, and gives it such a radical treatment that when we lay down the book we have to look at the world with new eyes (p.9).

Before we proceed with Levi-Strauss's analysis, let us firstly understand the meaning of totemism. Totemism refers to an institution, mostly found among the tribal community, where the members of each of its clans consider themselves as having descended from a plant, or animal, or any other animate or inanimate object, for which they have a special feeling of reverence, which leads to the formation of a ritual relationship with that object. The plant, animal, or any other object is called 'totem'; the word 'totem', Levi-Strauss says, is taken from the Ojibwa, an Algonquin language of the region to the north of the Great Lakes of Northern America. The members who share the same totem constitute a 'totemic group'. People have a special reverential attitude towards their totem – they abstain from killing and/or eating it, or they may sacrifice and eat it on ceremonial occasions; death of the totem may be ritually mourned; grand celebrations take place in some societies for the multiplication of totems; and totems may be approached for showering blessings and granting long term welfare. In other words, the totem becomes the centre of beliefs and ritual action.

Levi-Strauss does not believe in the 'reality' of totemism. He says that totemism was 'invented' and became one of the most favourite anthropological subjects to be investigated with an aim to find its origins and varieties, with the Victorian scholars in the second half of the nineteenth century. Contrastingly, Levi-Strauss's study is not of totemism; it is of *totemic phenomena*. In other words, it is an 'adjectival study', and not a 'substantive study', which means that it is a 'study of the phenomena that happen to be totemic' rather than 'what is contained in or what is the substance of totemism'. Interestingly,

Levi-Strauss has the same data that were available to his predecessors, but the question he asks is entirely new. He does not ask the same question that had been repeatedly asked earlier by several scholars, vis. 'What is totemism?' His question is 'How are totemic phenomena arranged?' The move from 'what' to 'how' was radical at that time (during the 1960s); and Levi-Strauss's interpretation of totemism was a distinct break with the earlier analyses of totemism (whether they were evolutionary, or diffusionistic, or functional). It is because of this distinctiveness that Poole (1963) writes that with Levi-Strauss, "the 'problem' of totemism has been laid to rest once and for all." (p.9)

Levi-Strauss offers a critique of the contemporary explanations that had been (and were) in vogue at that time. Firstly, he rejects the thesis that the members of the American school (Franz Boas, Robert Lowie, A.L. Kroeber) put forth, according to which the totemic phenomena are not a reality *sui generis*. In other words, totemism does not have its own existence and laws; rather it is a product of the general tendency among the 'primitives' to identify individuals and social groups with the animal and the plant worlds. Levi-Strauss finds this explanation highly simplistic. He also criticizes the functional views of totemism; for instance, Durkheim's explanation that totemism binds people in a 'moral community' called the church, or Malinowski's idea that the Trobrianders have totems because they are of utilitarian value, for they provide food to people. Malinowski's explanation, according to Levi-Strauss, lacks universality, since there are societies that have totems of non-utilitarian value, and it would be difficult to find the needs that the totem fulfils. Durkheim's thesis of religion as promoting social solidarity may be applicable in societies each with a single religion, but not societies with religious pluralism. Moreover, the functional theory of totemism deals with the contribution the beliefs and practices of totemism make to the maintenance and well-being of society rather than what is the structure of totemism, and how it is a product of human mind.

Levi-Strauss says that totemism covers relations between things falling in two series – one natural (animals, plants) and the other cultural (persons, clans). For Levi-Strauss, the 'problem' of totemism arises when two separate chains of experience (one of nature and the other of culture) are confused. Human beings identify themselves with nature in a myriad of ways, and the other thing is that they describe their social groups by names drawn from the world of animals and plants. These two experiences are different, but totemism results when there is any kind of overlap between these orders. Levi-Strauss actually stressed on the importance of a particular 'structure' and believed that this structural activity is rooted in all societies. Therefore, it can be said that totemism isn't a phenomenon of 'primitive' man, but one kind of manifestation of the same structure all humans obey.

Levi-Strauss writes: ‘The natural series comprises on the one hand *categories*, on the other *particulars*; the cultural series comprises *groups* and *persons*.’ He chooses these terms rather arbitrarily to distinguish, in each series, two modes of existence – collective and individual – and also, to keep these series distinct. He says that any term could be used provided they are distinct.

NATURE ...	Category	Particular	
CULTURE...	Group	Person	(Levi-Strauss 1962:16)

The above table depicts binary oppositions in “nature” / “culture”, “category” / “particular”, and “group” / “person”. These terms can be combined in four ways (1962, p.17) and every logical relation between man and nature that form totemic systems is covered in this table. It is here that his structuralist approach becomes clearer. If a greater range of societies with totemic systems were studied with reference to the four possible combinations of what constitutes totemism, anthropologists would see the system or thought structure to be more widely spread than was originally thought when only the first two combinations were considered. Levi-Strauss continues by applying this method to look at his first ethnographic examples on which he demonstrates his structural thesis.

Consequently, Levi-Strauss reflects his structuralism in his opposition to functionalism. He says that the questions asked of ‘totemism’ by functionalists (especially Malinowski) are biological and psychological. They are no longer in the sphere of anthropology as they do not consider “why totemism exists where it exists...” (1962:58). He does however sympathize with Radcliffe Brown’s functionalism and his proposing of universality as it is a step towards structuralism away from other generalizations submitted by less objective and more affective theories of totemism. Throughout his study, Levi-Strauss presents functionalist arguments and de-bunks them through careful analysis of many different sources of ethnography but also through the ethnographies of the writers who have formed the ideas he thinks are flawed and reveals their contradictions. In this way, his structuralist approach is reflected by opposing functionalism.

Later, Levi-Strauss applauds the attempt of Firth and Fortes, for they move from a point of view centred on subjective utility (the utilitarian hypothesis) to one of objective analogy. However, Levi-Strauss goes further than this: he says ‘it is not the resemblances, but the differences, which resemble each other’ (p. 149). In totemism, the resemblance is between the two systems of differences. After these two authors are patted on the back for seemingly making headway towards a synthesis of structuralism but not quite making it all the way,

Levi-Strauss discusses Radcliffe Brown's theory of totemism. Radcliffe-Brown realizes the necessity of an explanation which illuminates the principle governing the selection and association of specific pairs of species and types used in classification. In addition, in his analysis of Nuer religion, Evans-Pritchard shows that the basis of totemic phenomena lies in the interrelation of natural species with social groupings according to the logically conceived processes of metaphor and analogy. These two ideas, Levi-Strauss thinks, help in the reintegration of content with form, and it is from them that he begins.

Totemism, for Levi-Strauss, is a mode of classification. Totemic classifications are regarded as a 'means of thinking' governed by less rigid conditions than what we find in the case of language, and these conditions are satisfied fairly easily, even when some events may be adverse. The functions that totemism fulfill are cognitive and intellectual. The problem of totemism disappears when we realize that all humans, at all points of time, are concerned with one or the other mode of classification, and all classifications operate using mechanisms of differentiation, opposition, and substitution. Totemic phenomena form one aspect of a 'general classificatory ideology'. If it is so, then the problem of totemism, in terms of something distinct that demands an explanation, disappears. Jenkins (1979) writes: 'Totemism becomes analytically dissolved and forms one expression of a general ideological mode of classification'. (p. 101) However, it does not imply that totemism is static. Although the nature of the conditions under which totemism functions have not been stated clearly, it is clear from the examples that Levi-Strauss has given that totemism is able to adapt to changes.

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## 14.7 Summary

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To sum up, totemic phenomena are nothing but modes of classification. They provide tribal communities with consciously or unconsciously held concepts which guide their social actions. Food taboos, economic exchanges and kinship relations can be conceptualized and organized using schemes which are comparable to the totemic homology between natural species and social characteristics. Levi-Strauss (1962) also extends this analysis to understand the relation between totemism and caste system. Totemism is a relationship between man and nature. Similarities and differences between natural species are used to understand the similarities and differences between human beings. Totemism, which for people is a type of religion, is a way of understanding similarities and differences between man and nature. That is the reason why Poole says that with Levi-Strauss, the problem



of totemism has been laid to rest once and for ever. To quote Poole : “If we talk about ‘totemism’ any more, it will be in ignorance of Levi-Strauss or in spite of him.” (p.9)

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## 14.8 Conclusion

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Levi-Strauss thought that anthropology was not an ‘endangered science’; however, its character would be transformed in future. Perhaps, it would not be an ‘object of fieldwork’. Anthropologists would become philologists, historians of ideas, and specialists in civilizations, and they would then work with the help of the documents that the earlier observers had prepared. Regarding his own work, Levi-Strauss said that it ‘signaled a moment in anthropological thought’ and he would be remembered for that. Levi-Strauss created a stir in anthropology. Some scholars set aside their own line of enquiry for the time being to experiment with his method, whereas the others reacted more critically to his ideas. But nowhere was his impact total and complete – he could not create an ‘academic lineage’. His idea of ‘universal structures’ of human mind has been labeled by some as his ‘cosmic ambition’, generalizing about human society as a whole. While British anthropologists (especially Edmund Leach, Rodney Needham) in the 1950s and 1960s were impressed with Levi-Strauss, they were not in agreement with his abstract search for universal patterns. They tended to apply structuralism at a ‘micro’ (or ‘regional’) level.

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## 14.9 Questions

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1. Discuss the salient aspects of the works of Claude Levi-Strauss.
2. Delineate the features of the structural method.
3. What is totemism? Give its structural analysis.
4. How does Levi-Strauss’s analysis of totemism differ from that of the others? Discuss.

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## 14.10 References

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## 14.11 Glossary

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- Totemism :** A totem (Ojibwe *doodem*) is a spirit being, sacred object, or symbol that serves as an emblem of a group of people, such as a family, clan, lineage, or tribe. While the term *totem* is derived from the North American Ojibwe language, belief in tutelary spirits and deities is not limited to indigenous peoples of the Americas but common to a number of cultures worldwide. Totemism is a belief associated with animistic religions. The totem is usually an animal or other natural figure that spiritually represents a group of related people such as a clan. Early anthropologists and ethnologists identified totemism as a shared practice across indigenous groups in unconnected parts of the world, typically reflecting a stage of human development.
- Lineage :** A lineage is a unilineal descent group that can demonstrate their common descent from a known apical ancestor. Unilineal lineages can be matrilineal or patrilineal, depending on whether they are traced through mothers or fathers, respectively. Whether matrilineal or patrilineal descent is considered most significant differs from culture to culture.
- Ethnology :** Ethnology (from the Greek: —θνος, *ethnos* meaning ‘nation’) is the branch of anthropology that compares and analyzes the characteristics of different peoples and the relationships between them (compare cultural, social, or sociocultural anthropology). In France and Québec, the word “ethnologie” is commonly used to refer to cultural and social anthropology.