

## ***Dysfunction: the lost concept***

The influence of biology on structural functional thinking within the discipline of Sociology cannot be overstated. When a biologist examines the parts of the biological organism, the question asked is not typically, “what harm are these parts doing to this organism?” On the contrary, the biologist is most likely asking what positive contribution this part makes to the maintenance of this organism. This is not a completely safe approach to take when studying the social world. It is a reasonably safe bet that a component within a biological entity is making some positive contribution to the maintenance of that entity.

There are occasional exceptions to this claim but they are pretty rare. The same cannot be said for the components of social entities. Under what circumstances, therefore, might a biological component of an organism be considered dysfunctional rather than functional? Typically, dysfunction does not apply to the components of biological organisms unless the biological organism is damaged in some particular way. For example, if a kidney is cancerous it has become dysfunctional to the survival of the body that contains it, and it will most likely have to be removed.

This issue is more complicated within larger biological structures that contain many organisms, like an ecosystem. Here we see greater similarity between Biology and Sociology. As humans increasingly interfere with the evolving biological world, biologists have had to more frequently look for dysfunction within biological systems, as well as function. Sociologists employing structural functional thinking must also learn to do the same. That is, they must look for dysfunction at least as much as function within social structures. For example, one might ask if certain foreign policy programs are functional or dysfunctional to the maintenance of the social entities contained

within the social structure of the United States.

A parallel question is whether accommodating multinational corporations with our international policies is functional or dysfunctional to the security of the people contained within the United States? Are tax breaks for the wealthy functional or dysfunctional to the well-being of the people who make up the vast majority of the United States? If the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is engaging in activities on behalf of multinational corporations that result in generating extreme hatred towards the United States, is the CIA functional or dysfunctional to the security of the people of the United States?

These questions and many others like them can be and should be examined from within the theoretical perspective of structural functionalism. The tendency in Sociology, however, has been to focus predominantly on function as biologists might focus on the function of a part within a single organism. For structural functionalism to be useful to the study of social reality, especially social problems within social reality, that tendency should be changed.

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