

**abstract** Functionalism is one of the most prevalent modes of thinking in sociology. Although it is no longer regarded as the dominant theory, functional method is still frequently used, either implicitly or explicitly. This article focuses in the main on three types of functionalism, (1) the teleological theorization of Talcott Parsons, (2) the reflective methodology of Robert Merton and (3) the interpretative reformulation of Niklas Luhmann with its empirical studies.

**keywords** equivalence functionalism ♦ functional equivalent ♦ functional requirement ♦ latent function ♦ manifest function ♦ theory-ladenness of observation

### Overview

The name of 'functionalism' is very famous in sociology, but its content and logical framework are not so well known, or at least are ambiguously understood. In the following, we overview the history of functionalism during the past hundred years, clarifying its perspective and limitations, highlighting theoretical considerations and empirical applications, thereby underlining the axiomatics, the logics of functionalism.

There have been three major approaches to functionalism, each best represented by Parsons, Merton and Luhmann (in this chronological order). Functionalism is to be seen as being formed of an amalgam of component ideas, some of which are emphasized and focused on by those three scholars. So, the best way to introduce the reader to the main characteristics of those approaches, and to assessments of their strengths and weaknesses, is to address the basic component ideas common to all three approaches, then to point out further component ideas added by Parsons, Merton and Luhmann.

### Basic component ideas: Usages and meanings of the term 'function'

As noted above, the word 'function' has various meanings; in what follows we will trace the transformation of the meanings of 'function' over time.

- *Component idea one: Cause and effect:* In its broadest sense, 'function', as used mathematically in 'Y is a function of X', implies the situation where the states of, say, Y depend on the states of, say, X. This expression is nearly synonymous with 'X causes Y' in everyday language.

According to this basic idea, almost all the social sciences can be said to belong to functional analysis. In sociology, however, 'function of X' is usually used in a narrower sense, that is, with one or another of the following three further component ideas:

- *Component idea two: Part-whole idea*
- *Component idea three: Necessary condition idea*
- *Component idea four: Positive value idea*

In everyday life, we are likely to explain observed phenomena, using these ideas; albeit without an explicit use of the term of 'function'. For example:

- Any nation is only a part of the globalized world (= part-whole).
- A sufficient degree of subjective well-being is needed for the stability of a society (= necessary condition).
- Doing a relaxation exercise is useful for you to maintain health (= positive value).

In the social sciences 'function' originally implied the above four basic component ideas. For example, Radcliffe-Brown (1952), a British social anthropologist, explained that in so-called 'primitive' society,

magic and religious rituals are practised devoutly, despite the fact that, objectively speaking, they do not have the effect expected of them, because religious ritual contributes to the integration of society. His explanation fulfils the concepts of cause and effect, part-whole and positive value ideas.

Had he added the Durkheimian idea that 'Religious ritual activity is necessary to maintain a primitive society', then his explanation would also fulfil the necessary condition idea. Émile Durkheim, who was mainly interested in the 'function' of moral solidarity, elaborates a prototype of sociological functionalism consisting of all of the above four component ideas (Durkheim, 1895), and this is later taken up by Talcott Parsons.

Another type of functionalism in British anthropology is that of Malinowski (1944). His explanation regards 'effects' as fulfilling individual needs rather than the integration of society. Therefore, by contrast with Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, he excludes the part-whole idea. In sociology, Malinowski's 'instrumental functionalism' was adapted by 'social exchange theorists' later on (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958).

Needless to say, functionalism can be formalized in other ways too, for example in Sztompka (1974, 1979). His formalization is simple and comprehensive, but the formalization used here is adopted to cover non-teleological types of functionalism (see later sections).

## Parsonian structural-functionalism

Talcott Parsons (1951) marks the beginning of functionalism as a formal theory and method in sociology. His theory 'structural-functionalism' is based on the ideas of cause and effect, part-whole and necessary condition.

In structural-functionalism, the whole in the part-whole idea is a 'system' consisting of a large number of actions (or actors) as elements, each in an interdependent relationship with all the other elements.

- *Component idea five: Interaction idea:* The states of an actor depend on the states of another actor.

The interactive relationship in this idea is similar to that of cause and effect, but here actions are regarded as interdependent. Every actor in a system is influenced by every other actor within a system (see Comte's 'statique social' [1839] and Spencer's 'social statics' [1850]). Sociologists can, however,

observe only a limited part of the whole, so that a 'complete dynamic theory', however desirable, is impossible (Parsons, 1951: 19–20). Therefore, Parsons proposed the following approximate solution as a *second best* approach.

- *Component idea six: Constant relation idea:* Interaction may be, constant or inconstant.
- *Component idea seven: Functional requirement idea:* A constant type of interactive relations has a specific effect on the system, without which the system cannot maintain itself.

The constant type of interaction is a 'structure' and its specific effect is a 'function'. *The 'function' in structural-functionalism is the specific effect of constant interaction on the system, without which the system cannot maintain itself.* In other words, it is the necessary condition for the system to fulfil the function.

With the constant relation idea, Parsons proposed role-structure as an example of structure. As specific effects in the functional requirement idea, he proposed the four categories of 'adaptation' (A), 'goal-attainment' (G), 'integration' (I) and 'latency' (L) (Parsons et al., 1953). There are cases where the term 'structural-functionalism' includes the AGIL hypothesis, but the idea of functional requirement is independent of functional content.

To sum up, structural-functionalism is an approximate model based on the assumption that, on the grounds of the functional requirement of constant social relations, the behaviour of the whole system can be sufficiently known from partial information. If this requirement (= 'function') is fulfilled, the constant relation (= 'structure') and the whole system (= 'society') are maintained. If it is not fulfilled, structure and society must change.

## Evaluations and expansions of structural-functionalism

Parsons' theory resembles theoretical models in physics and economics in that it succeeds in defining within a single framework terms such as 'interaction (mutual effect)', 'structure' and 'function' that had previously been used in an ad hoc fashion. Mainly for this reason, structural-functionalism was considered the most promising sociological theory, especially in the USA, Western Europe and Japan until the early 1970s. Nonetheless various critiques emerged and revisions were proposed.

The charges against and modifications to structural-functionalism share two focal points (Turner

and Maryanski, 1979): their 'static' or 'conservative' character and their inherent inconsistency.

Attempts to overcome its static character (Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1957), necessarily focused on social change and conflict. Coser criticized Parsons' theory for its conservative attitude and proposed substituting 'conflict' for 'consensus' as the factor leading to change and innovation in society. But his proposal is logically equivalent to regarding 'conflict' as the constant type of relation. 'Conflict theories' are quite compatible with the functionalistic model (Sztompka, 1974: 65–7).

By contrast, social exchange theories (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958) regard personal needs as Y in necessary condition idea (see first section). They clearly deny part-whole relation, which implies the independence of the whole society from each of its individuals, and functional requirement of constant interaction.

Thus, structural-functionalism was reformed and developed, but this process of expansion meant at the same time one of theoretical decomposition and decline. Structural-functionalism becomes too vast not only for providing guidelines for empirical studies, but also as a reference point for theoretical struggles (Gouldner, 1970; Moore, 1978).

The fact is that in its logical makeup, structural-functionalism does not link up with any specific form of political thought. The functional requirement of constant interaction does not necessarily imply the positive value idea. As shown by Merton (1968) and Sztompka (1974), even Marxist theory can be translated into a functionalist formula.

Hence, the defect in structural-functionalism lies not in its political bias, but in the functional requirement of the necessary condition idea. According to the functional requirement idea, if a specific function is not fulfilled, the system cannot maintain itself. Under a multi-function hypothesis such as AGIL, however, there are cases where one function is fulfilled and others are not. What happens to the system in this case is left unspecified.

This problem could be avoided if a specific part of the structure corresponded to only one function (Parsons and Smelser, 1956). But this model contradicts the idea of constant relation. A system cannot change partially. When any of the elements of the system changes, the constant relation between it and other elements must change too. To clearly demonstrate this contradiction, we need to formulate structural-functionalism more strictly (Hashizume et al., 1984). Hashizume et al. point out that the multi-function hypothesis has the same problem as Arrow's general possibility theorem (Arrow, 1951).

The functional requirement must therefore be singular, but a single-function, when defined gener-

ally, becomes synonymous with saying, 'the system exists'. Explanation via a single function is thus tautological or ex post facto, and thus remains within the realm of teleology (Hempel, 1965; Merton, 1968). In short, the functional requirement idea is either logically inconsistent or trivial, and has no explanatory import, although it is redeemed in Bales' (1950) interaction process analysis, in which it has descriptive value for equilibrium and phase movements of small groups.

In this respect structural-functionalism has an affinity for the existing status quo in any given system. This affinity itself implies no political conservatism, because what ought to be sustained depends on the boundaries of the system. According to the interaction idea, furthermore, the most valid boundary is neither the power-structure nor the nation-state, but the whole time-space of human history, including the future. To sustain such a system is equivalent to sustaining the human race.

The so-called 'conservative' character of structural-functionalism is, then, a corollary of the vastness of the interaction idea. As seen above, the only proper definition of boundary in the theory is the whole time-space of human history, but such a system is senseless in empirical studies.

For instance, Aberle et al. (1950), who proposed an alternative definition of the functional requirement, regard 'society' at the most general level, as 'a group of human beings sharing a self-sufficient system of action', and induce eight functional requisites from concrete conditions terminating such groups. They assume that a society is terminated at the point that it is absorbed into another society and define 'the absorption of one society into another' operationally as 'the partial loss of identity and the self-sufficiency of the system' (Aberle et al., 1950: 104; Levy, 1952: 140). There are two different factors, semantic (= 'identity') and causal (= 'self-sufficiency'). Under the vocabulary of 'identity', they implicitly and illegitimately assume a specific community, political system, or nation-state as the 'system'.

The double definitions of system-boundary are found in Parsons too. He defines the social system also as a 'boundary-maintaining system' (Parsons, 1951). But this definition is contradictory to the interaction idea; maintaining the boundary implies constant interaction between its inside and outside. Parsons can provide no substantial mechanism to describe how the boundary-maintaining system is constructed, so that the boundary to be maintained is defined arbitrarily or ex post facto. In short, structural-functionalism is not politically conservative, but theoretically arbitrary. Arbitrary definitions of a system in this respect are not found only among

‘conservative’ structural-functionalists. The boundaries in ‘world-systems theories’ are also arbitrary (see later).

Parsons thought that structural-functionalism was a general theory with which the behaviour of the whole system could be known from partial information; but it is now thought of as a failure because of its inherent contradictions and tautologies.

### Merton’s functional methodology

From the first, there have been serious questions about the validity of the functional requirement idea as well as necessary condition idea in general (see Isajiw, 1968). Deliberating upon these questions, Robert Merton formulates functionalism in a different way in a paper written in 1948 (Merton, 1968: 137). This leads not only to the modification of structural-functionalism, but also to the reformulation of the notion of function itself.

Merton first reconsiders the various kinds of past functional explanations and re-names the ideas of part–whole, necessary condition and positive value, as ‘the postulate of functional unity’, ‘the postulate of indispensability’ and ‘the postulate of universalistic function’. Then, on the grounds that the latter two cannot be considered generally valid, he proposes two new concepts, substituting functional equivalence for necessary condition and three alternatives (positive/negative/neutral) for simple positive value, which are later named eu/dys/non functionality by Levy (1952).

- *Component idea eight: Functional equivalence idea:* Function and variable do not share a one-to-one correspondence. Variables that have the same effect on, say, Y can be multiple with joint effects of, say, X on Y.
- *Component idea nine: Multiple values for the whole idea:* The consequence of each effect makes for/lessens/is indifferent to the adaptation or adjustment of the system.

Hempel and Nagel point out that functional explanation tends to confuse the sufficiency with the necessity of observed occurrence (Hempel, 1965; Nagel, 1961). Even if the state of, say, X is beneficial to Y’s existence, that does not imply that this relation is the necessity of Y or X, because another variable can have the same effect on Y and it is always possible that, there, X or Y has another effect.

Accepting their criticisms concerning the tautology of teleological explanation in functionalism, Merton (1968: 106) excludes the necessary condition idea from the presuppositions of functional

analysis as ‘one of the cloudiest and empirically most debatable concepts in functional theory’. He renounces any general theory to explain the behaviour of the whole system approximately and redefines functionalism as a heuristics for the discovery and investigation of unknown causes and effects.

Merton’s functionalism consists of cause and effect, part–whole, functional equivalent and multiple value ideas. *With this definition, the meaning of ‘function’ is identical to causal relation* (see Isajiw, 1968; Stinchcombe, 1968).

On the other hand, by doing away with functionalism as a general theory, Merton effectively includes functionalism’s characteristics as a ‘folk theory’ in his formula (see first section). Not only sociologists, but participants too, frequently use functionalist arguments to explain and understand the social events and occurrences they observe. Merton calls such already recognized causal relations ‘manifest functions’.

Under the ideas of functional equivalence and multiple values, when a manifest function is found, it automatically requires a separate enquiry (a) for other effects of X on Y and (b) for another variable that has the same effect on Y. In other words, the observer is prompted to search for still unknown causes and effects that are in many cases broader and more complicated than manifest functions. Merton names these relations ‘latent functions’, to which he referred earlier as ‘unanticipated consequences of social action’ (Merton, 1936).

Pointing out the ambiguity of the necessary condition idea, Merton sent functionalism back to the enquiry of dependent relations under the concept of functional equivalency. He redefined functional analysis as a form of heuristics with which the sociologist efficiently discovers and investigates unknown relations surrounding a relation already recognized by participants.

### Luhmann’s comparative and interpretative approach

Niklas Luhmann (1970a, 1970b) reconsiders Merton’s formulations to reveal an entirely new formulation of functional analysis. He suggests:

- *Component idea ten: Meaning idea:* This idea says that selecting a part out of the whole from a specific viewpoint is inevitable in functional analysis. This selection must *precede* the identification of causality and, therefore, be value-oriented.

Following Merton, Luhmann also argues that the central concept of functional analysis lies in the

functional equivalence idea. Defined generally, then, 'functional analysis' is the practice of selecting and comparing variables from a specific viewpoint, for a specific effect to the system Y. 'Function' is the viewpoint from which variables are selected and compared (Luhmann, 1970a: 17). In other words, *the function' in Luhmann's reformulation is the point of reference under which various variables are commonly characterized as equivalent* (Luhmann, 1970b: 35).

On the other hand, in terms of the relationship between function and causality, Luhmann (1970a: 16) insists that the identification of specific causes and effects must be preceded by functional analysis. In a situation where the entirety of a varied and complex set of interdependent relationships cannot be known, the specification of cause and effect must include the task of selecting or cutting off only some of the cause and effect relationships from a particular point of view.

Such a selection must be subjective and thus value-constrained because it is dependent on a specific viewpoint. Luhmann himself names this a 'semantic scheme' (*Sinnschema* in German), evidence of the theory-ladenness of observation (Hanson, 1958). Smelser (1976) makes the same observation in his methodological study of comparative sociology.

Moreover, Luhmann (1970a) seemingly asserts that functional analysis abolishes causal sciences, but what he demonstrates there is not that the notion of function can take the place of causality, but that *a* causal research must be preceded by *a* functional analysis. Without such a scheme of causality, almost all forms of description, including sociology and systems theory, become senseless (Davidson, 1980).

Luhmann makes clear that functional analysis must always be premised upon meaning and selection. According to his reformulation, functionalism is not only research of causal relations but also clarification of social activity and institution compared with real and virtual alternative. It selects *a part* of the unknown dependent relations surrounding a recognized relation *from a specific viewpoint* and investigates them. Functional analysis is thus not explanation but *functional interpretation*.

## Empirical evidence of functional equivalence

Merton's functionalism is a method to discover and investigate still unknown relations (= latent function) *surrounding* the relation already recognized by participants (= manifest function) under the guidance of functional equivalence, which requires a separate enquiry for other effects of, say, X on Y and for

another variable that has the same effect.

According to Merton (1968: 118–25), the discovery of a latent function serves to:

1. Clarify the analysis of seemingly irrational social patterns;
2. Direct attention to theoretically fruitful fields of inquiry;
3. Represent significant increments in sociological knowledge;
4. Preclude the substitution of naïve moral judgements for sociological analysis.

His method continues even today to be a fundamental method for sociologists as 'a modern sociological classic' (Sztompka, 1986).

One of Merton's own studies was an analysis of the 'political machines' found in large cities in the USA during the first half of the 20th century (Merton, 1968: 126–36). Political machines were notorious for their unofficial control over city politics and were thought of as the cause of political and moral corruption. This is a manifest dysfunction.

But Merton also discovers that in return for their voting for a designated candidate, the political machine supported poor citizens, who were reluctant to accept public aid for any reason, in a manner that was not injurious to their 'self-respect'. From the viewpoint of providing social aid, the machine, the church and the official welfare agency were latently functionally equivalent.

Furthermore, the machine itself was the means and opportunity for these people, whose occupational prospects were almost entirely limited to manual labour, to rise in social and economic status. It provided 'alternative channels of social mobility for those otherwise excluded from the more conventional avenues for personal "advancement"' (Merton, 1968: 130), a latent (eu)function for urban society. Thus the machine was also equivalent to the school and the bureaucratic organization in terms of their function as channels of social mobility.

Merton's method is also useful for summarizing famous classic studies. For example, in Weber's (1920) 'The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism', Protestantism (= X) had been thought of as dysfunctional for a society with a market economy (= Y) because of its criticism of greed in capitalist society (= manifest function). But Weber discovered another latent function of the Protestant ethic. It provided social trust in business and calculated reinvestment benefits to business, both of which are indispensable for the rational management of modern enterprises, especially in the incipient phase of capitalism.

Merton's formulation of functionalism is simple and suggestive, but there remains a methodological

blank. According to the functional equivalence idea, there can always be another variable with the same effect of X to Y and another effect of X to Y. Merton gives us no direction as to where in the vast pool of possible relationships the relevant part is.

As stated earlier, if the function is really a dependent relation, then the boundary of the whole system will be the entirety of causal relations. For this reason, Wallerstein (1974) asserts that a world-system is the only valid system range, but even this is still too narrow. Strictly speaking, all of human history would have to be considered as a single system. It must contain an almost limitless number of elements and relations. Despite the fact that Merton properly urged sociologists to pay sufficient attention to the identification of the system, which he called a 'functional unit' (Merton, 1968: 84), he himself is also insufficiently sensitive to the theoretical definition of the system's boundary.

Luhmann succeeds and reforms Merton's method in this respect, too. In his empirical studies, Merton does not define the boundaries of a system in terms of causal relations. For example, in his functional analysis of the political machine, the whole system Y is the city of New York. The machine influences persons and organizations outside the city and is influenced by them as well. The system Y, that is 'the functional unit,' is not all the causal relations but a social institution.

Luhmann redefines a system-boundary as the border of an institution. The boundary of the system is given not by the end of causality, but by the inside/outside border of the social institution in the sense of Max Weber's *Anstalt* (Weber, 1980: 28). *Anstalt* implies a group or body that regulates specific behaviours inside its sphere, which is discriminated from the outside through an index such as geographical space (e.g. modern state) or membership (e.g. corporation). This sphere corresponds to inside the institution, and thus also the semantic boundary, meaning not causal (Luhmann, 1970b: 39), and thus is identified and recognized by participants.

With this redefinition Luhmann explicitly excludes double definitions of the system boundary as well as teleological points of view, both of which Merton did only implicitly and partially (see Sztompka, 1986: 140). He names his method 'equivalence functionalism' (Luhmann, 1970a: 15).

## An example: Functional analysis of social aid

Equivalence functional analysis is illustrated as follows.

As seen in the previous section, Merton found that (a) charity and public aid and (b) support of the political machine are functionally equivalent. There are three functional viewpoints in his finding. From the viewpoint of (1) providing economical resources for living, charity and public aid and support of the political machine are equal. But usually they are not seen as equivalent activities, because support of the political machine does damage to (2) political and moral fairness. It is informal and personal, and the 'Boss' of the machine always asks for a return on his support, for example, voting for the designated candidates and taking part in political campaigns. So his support is manifestly seen not as aid but as bargaining.

However, because it is seen as bargaining, support of the political machine (3) protects the self-respect of poor people. Bargaining is a mutual relation between two equal agents, as shown by social exchange theories, so it never damages self-respect. In other words, charity and public aid are often injurious to self-respect and self-reliance of those aided, because it is a unilateral relation and asks nothing in return. Such an asymmetrical relation easily implies hierarchical order. 'In contrast to the professional techniques of the welfare worker ... are the unprofessional techniques of the precinct captain who asks no questions, exacts no compliance with legal rules of eligibility and does not "snoop" into private affairs. ... The condescending lady bountiful can hardly compete with the understanding friends in need' (Merton, 1968: 128–9).

The finding of this third latent function is most important in this analysis. Charity and public aid and support of the political machine are not truly equivalent without it, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Two functions and two alternatives (non-equivalent)

Alternative	Function	
	Provision of resource	Political and moral fairness
Charity and public aid	+	+
Support of political machine	+	-

**Table 2.** Three functions and two alternatives (equivalent)

Alternative	Function		
	Provision of resource	Political and moral fairness	Protection of self-respect
Charity and public aid	+	+	-
Support of political machine	+	-	+

(a) has two positive aspects and (b) has one positive and one negative. So only (a) is manifestly seen as social aid. By addition of (3), (b) is equivalent to (a), as shown in Table 2.

Each has two positive aspects and one negative. The third latent function of protection of self-respect also has a latent function to make the two alternatives equivalent as social aid. To find functional equivalence is to find a new functional viewpoint, which raises a question. Is there any means of aid that fulfils all three functions with positive value? One possible candidate is (c) Microcredit. It is the

loan to poor people, especially to poor women in developing countries, with no mortgage to pursue entrepreneurial projects for helping them to better provide for themselves and their families.

The origin of Microcredit is in the Grameen bank in Bangladesh during the 1970s. In 2007, the total number of clients was 155 million, 71 percent women (Microcredit Summit Campaign, 2009: 3). It is said that Microcredit contributes to the empowerment of women with 'dignity' (Microcredit Summit Campaign, 2009: 2) and shows a high repayment rate.

**Table 3.** Three functions and three alternatives (non-equivalent)

Alternative	Function		
	Provision of resource	Political and moral fairness	Protection of self-respect
Charity and public aid	+	+	-
Support of political machine	+	-	+
Microcredit	+	+	+

Microcredit is able to provide (1) resources for living, (2) with political and moral fairness and (3) with protection of self-respect and self-reliance, as it is 'credit' to poor people (Table 3).

From this table a new question arises. Why do not all means of social aid use the form of Microcredit if it fulfils all functions with positive

value? There must be a fourth latent function. It may be the shortness of repayment limit, or some other unknown factor. For example, critics say that some of the repeat borrowers in Microcredit are dependent on loans for household expenditures and that women are often merely agents for the men in their families.

**Table 4.** Three functions and four alternatives (equivalent)

Alternative	Function			
	Provision of resource	Political and moral fairness	Protection of self-respect	?
Charity and public aid	+	+	-	+
Support of political machine	+	-	+	+
Microcredit	+	+	+	-

Table 4 is functionally equivalent to Table 2 in the analysis, so it is appropriate to look for a new unknown alternative which can fulfil all functions positively as was done after Table 2.

Equivalence functional analysis is a method for finding a new function and a new alternative *reciprocally* to deepen the understanding of each phenomenon (Luhmann, 1970a: 20–2). Such a functional relation cannot always be causal, because participants do not know all the alternatives. The poor people in American cities in the early 20th century did not know Microcredit, nor could they select support of the political machine from among three alternatives. But the comparison with Microcredit is very useful to make clear the characteristics of charity and public aid and support of political machine.

For instance, the private and secret support of a political machine protects self-respect and self-reliance of the aided, but every disclosure of this support harms them. The clients of Microcredit make up groups of five members who guarantee one another with peer pressure. Although they know why the other members borrow money, their self-respect is not damaged.

This fact suggests that the protection of self-respect in the support of a political machine is strongly connected with the notion of the ‘manly’, which is related to patriarchy or ‘homo sociality’ (Sedgwick, 1990) of poor people in American cities in the early 20th century. The informal and closed support of the political machine latently helped to exclude women from access to social aid and strengthened the patriarchal character of the immigrant family from East or South Europe. This aspect is totally ignored by Merton’s original analysis.

Because of the reciprocal findings of functions and alternatives, the distinction of (eu)/dys/non-functionality, that is, the idea of multiple values for the whole, has no essential meaning in equivalence functional analysis. Every functional alternative is

indeterminate in regard to whether it is totally eufunctional, dysfunctional, or neutral, because even the sociologist observer is unable to know all possible viewpoints a priori. Support of a political machine might be totally dysfunctional for urban society because of its gender inequality, or might be eufunctional because of other unknown causal relations.

### Evaluations

Parsons’ and Luhmann’s functionalism share a common starting point, namely that sociologists cannot know the entirety of dependent relationships. Parsons thinks there is a general theory that can adequately reduce the whole so as to direct the observer to which variables must be selected. Luhmann, on the contrary, thinks that such a reduction is a means of sense-making for the observer, whether she or he be scientist or native (see Weick, 1995). While they agree on the inevitability of a selective reduction of observed variables, Parsons’ theory is strongly deductive and teleological and Luhmann’s method is essentially inductive and empirical.

Based on his reformulation, Luhmann attempts to re-generalize Merton’s method. By definition, there is no universal viewpoint for selection, but one viewpoint can be more general than another. Thus, if a viewpoint that is more general than most is found, a *relatively* general frame of functional analysis can be constructed.

Luhmann proposes the ‘reduction of complexity’ as candidate for this viewpoint. His re-generalization presupposes the following:

- *Component idea eleven: Semantic boundary of system idea:* A system does not have a causal boundary, but is instead defined by a semantic boundary. So it is called a ‘meaning system’.

- *Component idea twelve: Reduction of complexity idea:* The reduction of complexity is relevant to maintaining the boundary of the system.

In accord with the above two ideas, the effect of variable Xi (or the relation between Xi and Xj) on Y can be compared from the reduction of complexity viewpoint. The system Y is a concrete social institution, such as a bureaucratic organization, a legal institution, the mass media and education.

Examples of empirical studies based on this approach may be found in Luhmann (1968) and in other works. The exclusion of teleological functionalism is not easy to achieve in empirical studies, especially those of organizations. That is one of the reasons why Luhmann (1968) is epoch-making. Teleological explanation has a long history in philosophy and social theory since Aristotle. Aristotle attempted to explain the structure of the *polis* (city-state in ancient Greek) from its *telos*, that is its purpose and terminal state. Luhmann (1968) reconsiders teleological explanation since Aristotle and focuses on the function of purpose-setting in organizations, and not of purpose itself.

Luhmann's model does not fulfil the necessary condition idea. If the effect of X that contributes to the reduction of complexity for Y disappears, it does not follow that X or Y disappears. Nor does his model satisfy the (eu)/dys/non-functionality in Merton's method, as stated in the earlier section.

Although Luhmann's theory of the meaning systems has many fruitful by-products, it is not successful in re-generalizing his equivalence functionalism. Even if all the consequences cannot be observed, the effect of the reduction of complexity still must be *specified* in itself. Otherwise, it cannot be asserted that the reduction of complexity is relevant to maintaining the boundaries of the system, and thus the reduction of complexity idea becomes trivially as tautological or ex post facto as a single-function hypothesis in structural-functionalism (see earlier section). Luhmann asserts that systems theory is inevitably tautological (Luhmann, 1990: 127). However, even in his theory, *trivial* tautology is seen as senseless and unproductive.

Luhmann fails to specify what effect the reduction of complexity has for the system (Habermas and Luhmann, 1971). Habermas criticizes that in Luhmann's theory it is unclear whether the system is the premise for the reduction of complexity or if the reduction of complexity is the premise for the system. Luhmann's response with the 'complexity from the world' (*Weltkomplexität*) concept asserts that the system must reduce complexity infinitely, because the circumstance of the system is always more complex than the system. But this argument makes the

reduction of complexity idea senseless, for the system exists whether or not complexity is reduced.

In spite of this shortcoming, Luhmann's methodological contribution is still important. He makes clear that (a) functional relations must be identified *on the premise of* a specific semantic scheme, so that not only (b) the scheme-ladenness of the *participant* who recognizes functional relations in everyday life (= manifest function), but also (c) the scheme-ladenness of the *observer* who identifies viewpoint of comparison in the social sciences (= latent function) are relevant for functional analysis. In short, like every practice in sociology, functional method and theory are never free from value-constraints (see Weber, 1904).

Luhmann filled in the blank of Merton's method. He redefined functional analysis as a comparative and interpretative method and the boundary of the social system as institutional and semantic. His equivalence functionalism is a heuristics for finding a functional viewpoint and a functional alternative reciprocally and iteratively. His reformulation not only refined functional analysis methodologically, but also opened up new fields such as the comparative and historical sociology of social semantics (Luhmann, 1980–95), although his attempt at a new general theorization of functionalism was not totally successful.

## Possible future directions

Retrospectively, the history of sociological functionalism can be said to be an experiment in resolving the problem raised by Talcott Parsons, namely that the sociologist cannot observe the entirety of a system's dependent relations.

At least at present, Merton's method as reformulated by Luhmann is the sole form of functionalism still alive and valid. It consists of functional equivalence, redefinition of function as meaning and semantic boundary of system, which presuppose manifest cause–effect relation and part–whole relation. This is a heuristic method with which sociologists can discover and investigate unknown relations surrounding a relation already recognized by participants. In research that employs this method, it is especially effective to focus on the relation associated with the semantic boundary of the institution. There are often gaps between manifest and latent functions and between insider and outsider, and functional analysis can take advantage of these.

Here as well, Merton's analysis of the political machine provides a good example. The citizens aided by the machine were peripheral habitants, such as immigrants and the lower class. Formally speaking,

they were insiders of the city, but in many respects maintained the status of outsiders or semi-outsiders. The machine exploited this gap. By providing informal means and a chance to cross over this boundary, the machine absorbed political power from them and thus dominated urban society.

Contemporary functional analysis is especially suitable for a comparative approach. Focusing on the construction of boundaries, discriminating relevant variables from a specific viewpoint, discovering and investigating the latent relations lying in the background of manifest causality – all of these make up functionalism in contemporary sociology. It can be used generally, of course, but is most effective in two cases.

One is (1) description and analysis of phenomena around the social boundary. As stated above, functional analysis has its own explanatory import on latent functions of the institutional border and so is interested in peripheral or semi-peripheral people living around it, such as the immigrant family in American cities in the early 20th century and women in developing countries.

The other is (2) comparative study of similar (but not identical) institutions and culture in societies having different origins. Here, there are opportunities for finding reciprocal functions and alternatives.

For example, in the studies of modernization of non-western societies like Japan, the equivalence of determinant factor of western society, such as Protestant ethics, has been questioned for (Bellah, 1957, among others). However, there is no dominant religion such as Protestantism in the modernization of Japan. Only dominant social ethics of industriousness and commercial fairness are there. Religion and ethics must be tightly combined in monotheistic culture, but can be loosely combined in others.

Structural-functionalists cannot consider such difference, because they identify the functions of relevant institutions a priori. Equivalence functional analysis is useful to identify the functions of religion and social ethics comparatively, and to enquire into the effects of this loose coupling in the importation of western institutions, political systems, corporations and education, into Japan.

In the globalization of economics and culture, there is increased international and domestic mobility of people, and imports of social institutions into different cultures are much more prevalent. Thus, functional analysis is likely to become indispensable in the future, despite the fact that sociologists using it are unable to account for all causal relations.

## Annotated further reading

Durkheim E (1895) *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

This is the earliest classic of modern sociology and functionalism. Durkheim's method can retrospectively be said to be a mixture of 19th- and 20th-century sociological thought, and thus shows how much functionalism owes to teleology and social organism theory.

Levy M Jr (1952) *The Structure of Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

This is a 'forgotten classic' of structural-functionalism. As stated above, I agree with neither Levy's definition of society nor his deduction of functional requirements, but his attempts are still suggestive and interesting for contemporary empirical study and formal theory.

Luhmann N (1968) *Zweckbegriff und Systemrationalität*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

This book is epoch-making for both functionalism and the theory of organization. Here Luhmann reconsiders teleological explanation since Aristotle and proposes a new paradigm for functional analysis on organizational behaviours.

Luhmann N (1970) *Funktion und Kausalität*.

*Soziologische Aufklärung 1*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

This paper is a methodological illustration of his equivalence functionalism. There are many useful and suggestive considerations not only for equivalence functionalism but also for functional analysis in general. It's a pity Luhmann's language is slightly difficult to read even for the German speaker.

Merton RK (1968) Manifest and latent function. *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 3rd edn. New York: Free Press.

This 'modern classic' is compulsory reading even today not only for functional analysis but for every sociological study. 'A paradigm for functionalism in sociology' is especially worthy of repeated reading. Almost all aspects of functionalism pointed out above are already referred to there.

Smelser N (1976) *Comparative Methods in the Social Sciences*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

This intensive methodological study focuses on the identification of causal relations in comparative and historical sociology, and so is a useful guide to reconsidering functionalism and also to reading classics written by Émile Durkheim and Max Weber.

Sztompka P (1986) *Robert K. Merton: An Intellectual Profile*. New York: St Martin's Press.

This book gives a good overview of Mertonian sociology and the interpretative turn in functionalism among sociologists using English during the 1970s–1980s.

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**résumé** Le fonctionnalisme est un des modes de pensée les plus répandus dans la sociologie. Bien que le fonctionnalisme ne soit plus considéré comme la théorie dominante, la méthode fonctionnelle est toujours fréquemment employée, de manière implicite ou explicite. Dans cet article, nous nous concentrerons en général sur trois types de fonctionnalisme: (1) la théorisation téléologique de Talcott Parsons, (2) la méthodologie réflexive de Robert Merton et (3) la reformulation interprétative de Niklas Luhmann et ses études empiriques.

**mots-clés** équivalence fonctionnelle ♦ exigence fonctionnelle ♦ fonction latente ♦ fonction manifeste ♦ fonctionnalisme d'équivalence ♦ théorie-ladennes de l'observation

**resumen** El funcionalismo es uno de las formas de pensamiento más frecuentes en la sociología. Si bien ya no se lo considera la teoría dominante, el método funcionalista todavía se utiliza con frecuencia, ya sea implícita o explícitamente. En este artículo nos centraremos principalmente en tres tipos de funcionalismo: (1) la teorización teleológica de Talcott Parsons; (2) la metodología reflexiva de Robert Merton; y (3) la reformulación interpretativa de Niklas Luhmann con sus estudios empíricos.

**palabras clave** carga teórica de la observación ♦ equivalente funcional ♦ función latente ♦ función manifiesta ♦ funcionalismo de equivalencia ♦ requisitos funcionales