FUNCTIONALISM AND THE MEANING OF SOCIAL FACTS

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Abstract

This paper defends a social functionalist interpretation, modeled on psychological functionalism, of the meanings of social facts. Social functionalism provides a better explanation of the possibility of interpreting other cultures than approaches that identify the meanings of social facts with either mental states or behavior. I support this claim through a functionalist reinterpretation of sociological accounts of the categories that identify them with their collective representations. Taking the category of causality as my example, I show that if we define it instead in terms of its functional relations to moral rules, it becomes easier to recognize in other cultures.

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A functionalist approach to the meaning of social and cultural facts that is analogous to functionalism in the philosophy of mind makes it easier to explain how it is possible to interpret other cultures. This social functionalism provides a better explanation of the meaning of social facts than do attempts to reduce them to either behavior or the mental states of the members of the society in question. Also, it does not leave their meaning dependent on the interpretations of ethnographers. It defines social facts in terms of their functional relationships to other social facts, environmental conditions, and types of actions. Much as psychological functionalism emphasizes that the same type of mental state can be instantiated in multiple types of brain states, social functionalism emphasizes that a type of social fact can be instantiated in multiple types of mental states. Hence, somewhat ironically, where the relative strength of psychological functionalism over behaviorism and materialism derives from its appeal to the content of mental states, the strength of social functionalism comes from keeping such mental contents at arm's length. I will illustrate the strength of this approach through a functional re-interpretation of Durkheimian sociology of knowledge. Specifically, I will show that identifying the concept of causality with its social functions rather than with its collective or cultural representations makes it easier to recognize this concept in other cultures.

Durkheim originally conceived collective representations as a type of mental entity shared by the members of a society. He included among a culture's collective representations not only its religious and moral ideas but also its categories of causality, substance, space, and time. For instance, Durkheim and Mauss (1903) identified the Zuñi category of space with their collective representation of the division of space into seven regions named for the seven clans in their tribe. On my account, it is not necessary for the Zuñi all to have the same type of mental representation in order for them to understand this division of space. It is sufficient that they are able to participate

in social functions that require their being able to specify and agree upon locations. Similarly, to say that the Chinese traditionally conceived time as cycles of yin and yang is not to say that all the members of this society must have the same representation of time. The meaning of the division of the year into periods of yin and yang has to do with such things as the organization of agricultural and domestic labor (Granet 1922). Also, although social life depends on moral rules that assume that people are causally responsible for their actions, it is not necessary that everyone in the same society represent the concept of causality to himself or herself in the same way. What is important, however, is that they are able to agree on assignments of moral responsibility.

I do not mean to suggest that social scientists still adhere to Durkheim's mentalist sense of the term "collective representation," or even that there is a univocal meaning of this term in the social sciences, for indeed there is not. Radcliffe-Brown (1952), for instance, regarded collective representations as explicit, public representations such as myths, cosmologies, ritual statements, symbols, concrete images, artifacts, or gestures. Yet some who identified collective with public representations thought that we could infer how people in other cultures thought from an analysis of these representations. Indeed, the assumption that the analysis of myths and cosmological ideas sheds light on how people think goes back to Tylor and Frazer, and continues through Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl, and Lévi-Strauss. Although this assumption has lately come under increasing attack (Bloch 1977:290; Boyer 1994:112; Cole and Scribner 1974:143; Holy and Stuchlik 1983:100ff; Jahoda 1982:219), some of its critics nevertheless continue to locate culture and meaning in the minds of individual members of society. To cite but one of many possible instances, Holy and Stuchlik hold that "the term `culture' refers, to put it bluntly, to what is in people's heads, to the knowledge they have" (1983:21).

Geertz rejects the mentalistic conception of culture, arguing that meaning and hence culture is public (1973:12). Public expressions of one's culture, however, far from defining social facts, are among the very social facts that need to be interpreted. Geertz makes this point through the use of the distinction between "thin" and "thick" descriptions of behavior. He discusses the example

of distinguishing mere twitches of the eye from winks, parodies of winks, practice winks, and fake winks. All share the same thin description of a rapid contraction of the eyelid. What separate them are thick descriptions of their meanings in some public, social context (1973:6-7). A thick description is a construction imposed on a social action by an anthropologist and not necessarily the meaning that it has for the agent herself. The most important issue for appraising such an interpretation, he says, is how well it sorts things into kinds, how well, for example, it sorts "real winks from mimicked ones." For Geertz, one sorting appears to be better than another just to the extent that it brings us into closer "touch with the lives of strangers" (1973:15-16). Presumably, then, he does not think that we can impose any arbitrary interpretation on a culture: there are real world constraints on the way we sort cultural items.

However, Geertz offers the reader no clue as to how we know when an interpretation has sorted actions into real and not just fictional kinds, or indeed what separates social actions into real kinds if it is not the meanings they have for their agents. Perhaps, then, a functionalist approach to the meaning of social facts will at least provide us with a heuristic for sorting actions into kinds, a heuristic that depends on their meaning neither for their agents nor for their ethnographic interpreter.

Social and Psychological Functionalism

As I indicated above, the functionalist approach to the meaning of social facts that I advocate derives by way of analogy from psychological functionalism. It does not derive from the functionalism of Malinowski or Parsons or include any hypotheses about the functional unity of a society or culture. To try to avoid confusion with older sociological functionalisms, I will use the term "social" functionalism as a name for my approach to the meaning of social facts. Psychological functionalism, as the members of this audience well know, does not identify types

of mental states with either types of brain states or types of behavior. Rather, it defines them in terms of their functional relationships to other mental states, sensory inputs, and behavioral outputs. Similarly, my social functionalism does not identify types of social facts with types of representations, whether mental or public. Instead, it defines types of social facts in terms of their functional relationships to other social facts, environmental inputs, and behavioral outputs. Two facts are of the same type when they bear the same such relationships.

Psychological functionalism allows for multiple physical instantiations of the same functionally defined type of mental state. Whether a group of mental phenomena constitutes a type of mental state is determined by whether some psychological generalization holds true of them. On the other hand, whether some group of neural phenomena constitutes a type of brain state is determined by whether some neurophysiological generalization holds true of them. Even if every individual mental state is an individual brain state, there is no reason to believe that the laws of psychology and neurophysiology will divide these states into the same classes. Two people who share the same type of mental state, defined in terms of its psychological function, do not thereby share the same type of brain state.

The earliest functionalist theories in the philosophy of mind tended to explain the multiple instantiability thesis through analogies with computers and other machines (e.g., Putnam 1967; Block and Fodor 1972). A common objection to this machine functionalism was that in defining types of mental states purely in terms of their functional relations, it would allow computers and other devices as well as minds to have mental states (e.g. Block 1978). This objection, I think, rests on an equivocation regarding the notion of function. When we talk about the functional relationships among mental states, we are using "function" in the sense we invoke when we explain the existence and structure of something in terms of the purpose it serves. In living organisms, not all the causal relations a structure has are functional relations, but only those where the effect somehow feeds back to maintain the organism and thus the structure in existence. We may try to write a program that represents all the functional relationships among our mental states,

but the relationship between one step in the program and another would be functional, strictly speaking, only in the mathematical sense of the term. When we run the program on a computer, these mathematical relationships are physically realized as causal relationships among machine states. We only ascribe purposes to computers that are not really their own. Thus, it would be entirely out of place to provide a functional explanation, in the psychological or biological sense, of the state of a computer. It is difficult to see how a mind and a computer could then be said to be in the same type of state if we could not explain that state in the same way for each.

We can then generalize the multiple instantiability thesis to include the relationship between social facts or institutions and their psychological realizations. Members of a society may share moral rules, religious beliefs, and other concepts that are all the same from the point of view of their social functions. However, there is no reason to believe that all the individual members of this society thereby have the same kinds of mental states, defined in terms of their psychological functions. Psychological functions are distinct from social functions. Also, just as the same type of brain state may instantiate different psychological functions in different individuals, the same type of mental state can instantiate different social functions. There is a many-to-many relationship between types of social facts and types of mental states, just as there is between types of mental states and types of brain states. Hence, there seems to be little reason for the social sciences to invoke the notion of collective representations, when these are understood as shared mental states.

Sperber might object that in allowing for only token-token identities between social facts and psychological states, my social functionalism undermines the possibility of naturalizing the social sciences. As he sees it, laws or generalizations in the social sciences must be about types, not tokens (1996:6). Hence, he opts for a "materialist" ontology of mental representations, which he regards as "brain states described in functional terms," and the causal chains that connect them (1996:26-27). In reply, I would argue that there is no reason that functional types at one level of explanation must be the same as those at another. If there were any merit to Sperber's objection, it would seem to have to be valid all the way down. That is, there could then be no generalizations

about organs, tissues, cells, cell organelles, and so on unless they could be expressed in terms of the natural kinds of physics, which is absurd, as functional kinds do not even exist at that level. Furthermore, Sperber's approach presents an obstacle to cross-cultural interpretation. For Sperber, one's mental representation is of the same type as another person's only if it belongs to the same causal chain. Presumably, when an ethnographer encounters an entirely new culture, none of the representations in that culture will then belong to the same causal chains as the ethnographer's. This would then lead to a radical conceptual relativism, in which the ethnographer would be unable to say that that culture had any representations of the same type as hers, including any representations of causality, time, permanent substance, space or place, and so on.

The multiple instantiability thesis still holds if we re-interpret collective representations as public representations or behavior. That is, the same type of social fact, functionally defined, may have more than one sort of public representation. Also, the same behaviors, words, and symbols may have different meanings in different social contexts. There are multiple behavioral correlates for any meaning and the same observable behavior can have many different meanings.

Social functionalism has advantages over behaviorism in so far as it provides a way of articulating the contextual meaning of behavior by bringing out its systematic relationships with other social facts. To identify the presence of a moral norm with the expression of indignation at its violation, as behaviorist sociologists are wont to do, is much too crude. Even putting aside the problem of the presence of moral rules when they are not being violated, sociological behaviorism fails to distinguish moral rules properly so-called from other kinds of norms. Concertgoers may express indignation at the performance of a new work of music and sports fans may be outraged by an umpire's call. I do not wish to deny that there may be some similarities among these kinds of situations. Nevertheless, they are different and behaviorism fails to bring out these differences. It is not even clear that behaviorism allows one to distinguish indignation from other sorts of anger. The very terms "indignation" and "outrage" carry the connotation that there are reasons for the expression of anger connected with the violation of norms, rules, or expectations, whether

these be moral, artistic, epistemic, or athletic. The mere observing of anger will not indicate whether there are such reasons.

To distinguish indignation from anger and to distinguish the different forms indignation may take, we must appeal to the meanings of these expressions of emotion. Of course, their meanings for the individual social actors who express these emotions may include their conscious awareness of their mental representations of these meanings. However, the meaning of the action for the individual may not be the same as its social functional meaning. Furthermore, even if it is the same, this social functional meaning may be represented in more than one way. For instance, there is no reason to assume that all the social actors expressing indignation at the violation of a norm will all represent this norm to themselves in the same way.

One may think that what I am arguing for is merely a functionalist reinterpretation of the notion of collective representations and that I would be over-stating my case to claim that the social sciences may dispense with collective representations entirely. I want to resist this interpretation of what I am doing. If the meaning of a social fact is just a node in a network of functional relationships among social facts, why should we consider it a representation at all? What does this node represent? How does it represent? To whom does it represent? I do not see answers to such questions as readily forthcoming and I see no reason to trouble ourselves with them or to hold out for answers to them.

It may help to recall that for Durkheim, collective representations were states of the collective consciousness. Because it opened him up to the group mind interpretation and objection, Durkheim dropped the term "collective consciousness" midway through his career and left the question of to whom collective representations are present an open question. This question continues to go unanswered by many contemporary social scientists, who postulate collective representations in order to give rational interpretations of what would otherwise appear to be irrational behavior. As Boyer explains, these collective representations "do not describe thoughts that occur to actual people; they describe thoughts that people might entertain, in the

anthropologist's view, if they wanted to make sense of what they actually do and say" (1994:51). Why then call these notions collective representations? I do not mean to deny that a social scientist may represent to herself a network of functional relationships, but then this would be an individual and not a collective representation.

Functionalism and the Sociology of Knowledge

The sociology of knowledge may be the social science that stands most in need of a functionalist re-interpretation. The identification of the categories of causality, substance, space, and time with their collective representations is an important premise in the arguments of those who maintain that reality is a culturally variable construction. This position, if true, would rule out any possibility of interpreting other cultures, for how could one make sense of the actions of people who lived in a different reality? Of course, this constructivist conclusion also depends on additional premises. These include the assumption that these categories shape our perception of the world, that collective representations depend on social causes and thus are culturally variable, and that the individual mind comes into the world as a blank slate and passively acquires a set of collective representations from her culture. Of course, as Tooby and Cosmides (1989), Cole and Scribner (1974), and Hallpike (1979) have argued, there is absolutely no basis in experimental psychology for the last assumption. However, the whole constructivist edifice crashes to the ground once we remove the premise that the categories of the understanding are collective representations.

To identify the meanings of the categories with their social functions, on the other hand, would help us to explain how communication with and interpretation of other cultures is possible. Consider, for example, a functionalist interpretation of the category of causality that identifies this concept in other cultures through its relations to moral and legal rules. Human society as we know it would not be possible without such rules. To have rules, people must be held accountable for

their actions, but that assumes that in some sense they are the cause of their actions. Hence, all societies must have some concept or other of causality. Some may object that human societies exercise social control through sanctions or the threat of sanctions. Sanctions, however, are applied as the result of the violation of a rule. Also, even the threat of sanctions is not always immediately present and in their absence most people nevertheless continue to follow the rules. Of course, many of these rules may be only implicitly understood and not carefully articulated in a legal or moral code. Nevertheless it would not be possible to have even implicit moral rules without some notion of responsibility.

Durkheim, in fact, argued that our concept of a causal relation originated from our notion of moral obligation. For Durkheim, a causal relation is a necessary relation. He held that the notion of a necessary relation derived from the obligation of members of society to participate in religious rites. In certain rites exemplified by indigenous Australians, for instance, one imitates a certain species of plant or animal at an appropriate time of year in order to make it reproduce and flourish. Society imposes the obligation to imitate this species because a social interest is at stake. To obligate the members of a society to imitate an animal or plant so that it will reproduce is to presume that performing the rite necessarily leads to the flourishing of the species that is being imitated. If society allowed people to doubt this causal relationship, Durkheim argued, it could not compel them to perform the rite (1912:524ff [1995:370ff]). To be sure, in this example Durkheim may have been less than clear about whether he was providing an account of the causal origins or the function of the concept of causality. However, I think we can separate out a functional account that would include the premise that society cannot obligate someone to do something without some concept of causality.

Similarly, Lévy-Bruhl described a notion of participation that plays the functional role of causality in so-called "primitive" societies. In accordance with this notion of participation, people are held responsible for all sorts of things for which we would not blame them. For example, according to Lévy-Bruhl, for the primitive there is no such thing as an accidental death or death by

disease or other natural causes. All death is due to witchcraft. Witchcraft assumes a notion of participation, according to which one is supposed to be able to harm one's intended victim through actions taken against his or her bodily fluids, hair, nails, footsteps, image, articles of clothing, utensils, etc. because all these things "participate" in the victim. People who perform such witchcraft may be held responsible for the death of their victims (Lévy-Bruhl 1910:321ff [1985:276ff]; 1922:20ff [1978:37ff]; 1927 [1928:114ff]). Although we may not hold people to account for murder through witchcraft, nevertheless the relation of the notion of participation to moral responsibility allows us to recognize participation as a causal concept. Boyer, however, questions whether different cultures actually do have different concepts of causation and asserts that "people do not plow their fields . . . in terms of `participation'" (1994:129). To the extent that he is right, however, this fact merely shows that there may be more than one concept of causality operating even in one and the same so-called "primitive" society, a point that Lévy-Bruhl would have readily conceded (1922:517 [1978:442-43]).

That these various peoples cited by Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl may have been mistaken about these particular causal relationships is beside the point. The point of these examples is that the category of causality is necessary for imposing moral obligations. By interpreting the category of causality in terms of its social functional role, I do not mean to suggest that the concept of causality is the same for all societies. My everyday notion of causality, for instance, has nothing to do with morally culpable death caused by witchcraft or with any obligation to imitate totemic species. Many in our society may conceive causality as a statistical rather than a necessary relationship between cause and effect. There may even be functional explanations of the cultural differences among concepts of causality that appeal to the specific roles these concepts play in each society. Nevertheless, it is their functional relationships to moral rules that bring various concepts under the category of causality and thus that allow for the cross-cultural interpretation of concepts like participation as causal concepts.

Of course, a society may impose obligations on its members that may not be necessary for

its continued survival. This concession, however, does not stand in the way of providing a functional account of the category of causality. The category of causality may be presupposed by superfluous rules as well as those rules necessary for the maintenance of the society in question. However, the society is better off having these extra rules than having no concept of causality and thus no rules at all. The persistence of societies depends on moral rules and thus the category of causality helps to maintain the society.

Indeed, even for someone to think that he or she is not obligated to perform a rite because it does not work or to deny responsibility for witchcraft would involve a negative use of the category of causality. The notion of working suggests that we may want to generalize our functional account of the category of causality to include its relations to rules of technique and hygiene as well as moral rules. In fact, Lévy-Bruhl suggested that in non-literate societies, it might be difficult to distinguish purely technical procedures from moral and religious rules. For example, he described how in making an ax, the primitive must first propitiate certain spirits before cutting down the tree from which he will obtain the wood for the handle (1928:26).

My functional account of the category of causality should be understood not merely as some sort of transcendental argument regarding the necessary conditions for social life or for its interpretation. Rather, it can also be read as reasoning to an empirically testable hypothesis. Questions as to which categories are functional and which not and what social functions they serve are topics for empirical investigation. One way to test the claim that the category of causality has the function of holding society together by making moral and other rules possible is to see whether in fact the category is universal, that is, whether in fact all societies have some concept or other of causality. In testing this claim, as Boyer (1994:112) points out, we must be careful not to rely solely on ethnographic accounts of the myths, cosmologies, and religious beliefs of various cultures. Typically, mythologies deliberately violate people's intuitive expectations about events and their causes. The concepts that people in various societies actually have, Boyer argues, should be elicited through the same kind of cognitive psychological experiments that we would use to

investigate how people in our own society think (1994:291-92). Such experiments could also be used to determine whether certain categories are even universal within our own society, or whether they are lacking in certain pathological cases in which individuals have difficulty with social relationships.

Some may object that experimental subjects, finding the cognitive science testing situation highly artificial, will provide responses that do not reflect their true thinking (e.g. Holy and Stuchlik 1983, ch. 4). Subjects from non-Western societies especially tend to give either the answers that they think are expected of them or those that will quickly bring to a close discussions of topics they are not interested in pursuing. This problem, however, strikes me as a technical and methodological difficulty rather than an insuperable barrier for this program of research. Furthermore, the results of cognitive experiments could be controlled by investigations into whether there are corresponding syntactic categories in the language of the culture in question. Of course, from the facts that the syntactic categories make language possible and that language makes human social life possible, it does not follow that all of the syntactic categories have social functions. Gender in modern European languages is a notable counter-example. Hence, the analysis of languages alone could not reveal the social functions of the categories but must be pursued in conjunction with cross-cultural studies of cognition.

However, even if a category could be shown to be universal among human cultures, such evidence would not suffice to establish that it had a social function. We need some way to distinguish genuine functional accounts from cases in which it would merely appear that having a certain concept benefits society. There must be some account of how these purported benefits help maintain the society in existence. If we give a natural selectionist account, one might argue, it would be necessary to assume that this beneficial concept was actually represented in the individual minds of the members of the society that it benefited. For example, I have been arguing that one of the functions of the category of causality is to make moral rules possible. In order for the individual members of society to follow these rules, they must be able to represent the concept of

causality to themselves. What this objection shows, however, is that individual mental representations may play a role in mediating functional explanations of the categories. It in no way establishes a role for collective representations. Natural selection may favor an ability to represent causal concepts without selecting for any particular causal concept or for members of a social group to represent this concept in the same way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the meanings of social facts should be understood in terms of their functional relationships with other social facts, environmental conditions, and behavioral outputs. Social functionalism relates the meanings of social facts to behavior without reducing them to behavior. Allowing for the instantiation of social facts in multiple types of psychological states, social functionalism dispenses with the notion of collective mental representations. Individual mental representations, however, may still play a role in explaining the relationship between the individual and society, in mediating functional explanations, and in explaining individual actions.

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