

Did Gregory Bateson say that the term “function” has no place outside mathematics?

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Abstract. A textbook by Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen tells us that Gregory Bateson criticized the use of the term ‘function’ in social anthropology on the following grounds: it has no place outside of mathematics. But consulting the Bateson text referred to, he does not say that in his section on function and even endorses certain uses of the term “function” in anthropology. I look into these and his criticisms of functionalism, responding to the criticisms.

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“Today you must extract the ore

From Gregory Bateson and George Bernard Shaw”

What is Norway? In my mind, a place of reliable efficiency. For many years I had seen Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s books and not opened them, but assumed that their content was in line with my preconception. Recently I have been opening them and my system of brief assessment is facing a crisis. One cause of the crisis is this statement:

Already in 1936, Gregory Bateson had written that the term ‘function’

is an expression from mathematics that has no place in social science.

(Bateson 1958 [1936]). (Eriksen 2015: 108)

I suspect “function” was used in everyday life before it was used in mathematics, in such statements as “The function of that shelf is to keep books.” And presumably the

Ancient Greeks registered the function of the chorus in their plays. Anyway, my focus is on whether Bateson actually made this criticism and what criticisms he did make.

Eriksen does not give any page reference for where in Bateson's book *Naven* to find the criticism, a book probably of interest given today's trends because of the custom it reports of men dressing as women and women dressing as men. I suppose the absence is not a major problem if the criticism is just in the chapter entitled "The Concepts of Structure and Function" and more specifically in the chapter section entitled "Function." But actually he distinguishes between different uses, and regarding one use says:

This is a perfectly consistent and logical use of the term and one which anthropologists might do well to adopt. (1936: 27)

There is then a direct contradiction between Bateson and Bateson as reported by Eriksen's textbook. That is a main point I wish to make. (It would not surprise me if Bateson said this, but where is the criticism?)

Below are some of the senses Bateson identifies for social anthropology,¹ the second sense being the one this sentence is about:

- (1) *Causal outcome*. That which is the causal outcome of a certain combination of factors in society can be described as a function of those factors. Bateson writes, "Using the term in this sense we might say that the naven ceremonies are a function of all those elements of culture or properties of society upon whose presence the existence of the ceremonies depends." (1936: 26)
- (2) *Integration* Something can be said to have a function in a society, in a second sense, if and only if it plays some part in achieving the integration of the society: of the different people or groups into one society, preventing it from

¹ The senses identified here may not be quite the same as those in his lists.

falling apart. (1936: 26; note Bateson later seems to distinguish between achieving the integration of a whole society and of members of a subgroup 1936: 31.)

(3) *Individual needs*. Something can be said to have a function in a third sense if and only if it meets a human individual's need, such as the need for food or shelter or an emotional need (1936: 27). It functions to meet that need.

(4) *Systemic role*. Something can be said to have a function if and only if a society or culture is a system of components and it plays some part in this system (1936: 27).

I think Bateson, in *Naven* at least, accepts all of these senses. It is just that he wants more disambiguation by the functionalist school.

Bateson does say that physics and chemistry benefitted from a pooling together of methods, but claims that we cannot validly infer a lack of benefit from separation in the past, and claims anthropology has suffered from the current sense of the unity of science (1936: 28). But that is far short of saying, "The term 'function' has no use outside of mathematics."

Two criticisms

I wish to look into two other criticisms Bateson makes apart from that insufficient disambiguation of the term "function" has occurred (1936: 27), but in reverse order of how they appear in his text.

1. An interesting criticism Bateson makes of the functionalist school is that different societies place different value on overall integration (or cohesion):

The truth of the matter is that different peoples attach very different values to these various effects... The "strength of traditional law" is

very important in some African communities, but the phrase is almost meaningless when applied to the Iatmul who have a highly individualistic culture and will readily respect the law-breaker if he have but sufficient force of personality. (1936: 31)

The functionalist, or the Radcliffe-Brownian structural-functionalist at least, is likely to respond as follows: “How long has the society existed for? If a long time, then whatever people explicitly value, there has to be some explanation for why the society does not fall apart. That is what the functionalist is ultimately after when examining its institutions. Why is this society not falling apart? And he or she works with the assumption that its institutions make some causal contribution to preventing that.”

2. Bateson thinks that the functionalist is likely to attribute functions to things while overlooking that the function attributed to one thing undermines the function of another:

The term is applied to such effects as: increase of sociability among individuals; increased solidarity of the community; increased family pride; the confirmation of the privileges of individuals and the enforcing of their rights and duties; substantiation of belief in magical efficiency and the strengthening of traditional law and order... But their usefulness becomes more problematical when we realize that many of these effects may be mutually antagonistic, that for example an increase in family pride may well disrupt the solidarity of the community... (1936: 21)

I suppose the structural-functionalist response would be to say, “The aim is to explain why the society does not fall apart: how its various institutions serve to prevent that. Bateson’s point is valuable, because there can be a temptation to forget that and just

say, 'This practice functions to increase family pride,' while overlooking the potential risk to cohesion as a whole.' But a good functionalist anthropologist should be able to avoid that oversight." I think Bateson would accept that; he is not aiming at a fundamental criticism. Bateson himself plans to build on functionalist research (1936: 29).

References

Bateson, G. 1936. *Naven*. London: Cambridge University Press. Available at:

<https://archive.org/details/naven033591mbp>

Eriksen, T.H. 2015 (fourth edition). *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.