Chicago School: Social Change

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Abstract
The Chicago School of sociologists theorized social change primarily through a set of theories referred to as the "organism metaphor." Organism metaphors of society have characterized society as a whole functioning together as a single organism, or have characterized societies as composed of a number of organisms functioning in an ecological system. Chicago School sociologists interpreted the organism metaphor as less functional and more conflict oriented. Their attention to the unequal distribution of social ills across cityscapes shifted away from a naturalistic, scientific, and cohesive view of social organisms toward a medical, interventionist, and struggling view of social organisms. The focus on eradication of social pathologies added a distinctly US style of sociology that viewed social life as in need of amelioration.

Keywords: Chicago School; city; collective behavior; deviance and social control; science; social movements and social change; social problems; sociological and social theory; spatial analysis; urban sociology

Introduction

Though there has been some debate about whether or not a "school" of sociology existed at the University of Chicago (e.g., Dear, 2002; Plummer, 1997; Fine, 1995), there is consensus that – at least during early part of the twentieth century, namely 1915–1930 – a number of faculty and graduate students at the University of Chicago demonstrated a high degree of similarity in their approach to studying sociology (e.g., Abbott, 1997; Bulmer, 1984; Faris, 1967). These scholars with their shared commonalities are referred as the "Chicago School sociologists," to underscore the importance of the scholars composing the department and resist reification of the institution itself. What these scholars shared in common was a general approach to and understanding of society. Many Chicago School sociologists were characterized by an intentional focus on asserting sociology to be a scientific discipline. One of the primary means through which this occurred was by studying society, and in particular the urban city, from an ecological perspective.

The organism metaphor is one that pervades much of social theory and generally views society as metaphorically comparable to an organism or set of organisms. The Chicago School is often accredited with being one of the primary articulations of the organism metaphor, especially in US sociology. In fact, many of the Chicago School sociologists explicitly or implicitly employed the organism metaphor in their investigations (e.g., Park and Burgess, 1970; Park, 1921, 1927; Wirth, 1930). The use of this metaphor stems from a desire in the Chicago School sociologists to study society from an ecological perspective. They did this primarily through investigations of the city as a social laboratory that investigated maps of the city for the ways

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people were located within their broader contexts. Their particular focus was on seeking to understand the ways these spatial locations affected their interactions with one another.

However, there are a number of misconceptions about the Chicago School when it comes to this ecological approach, primarily driven by many social scientists reading contemporary interpretations of the school rather than their original texts (e.g., Tomasi, 1998). For example, many social scientists have accused the Chicago School of having an environmental determinism in its ecological approach or of focusing solely on ecological relationships to the detriment of examining social processes more generally. Yet these are largely due to a misreading of the work of the Chicago School sociologists.

For example, Park and Burgess (1965) assert that a sociological study of ecology is distinct from a geographic view, which focuses on the material and environmental constitution, defining the sociological approach as distinct in incorporating an investigation of the relationship between context and social relations, processes, and culture. Burgess (1925, 1929) also asserted that the ecological approach was fading from the work of the Chicago School sociologists and was not nearly as predominant as it was formerly.

Intellectual and Social Context

A number of works published by the early Chicago School drew on the organism metaphor, and these works demonstrate a desire to integrate naturalism into the study of society as a scientific discipline. Within the US academic context at that time, science was viewed as a highly legitimate source of knowledge, and the Chicago sociologists wanted to claim legitimacy for the field by demonstrating the ways in which society could be studied using similar methods to the natural sciences. In particular, they were drawn to the successes of biological investigations, and especially to the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution, and wanted to apply similar concepts to understanding society.

Most sociologists at that time, Chicago School sociologists included, focused on the ways that the human population could be investigated as yet another species within the broader biological classifications of plants and animals. The goal was to focus in sociology on the particularities of the way people and the societal system operated, and how it was similar to or different from other species. This was accomplished by drawing heavily on the language of the natural sciences and applying many of the same approaches and techniques to studying society.

Another motivation behind the appeals to naturalism – within the Chicago School, sociology more broadly, and science more generally – was an intention to move away from supernatural explanations of phenomena in a desire to explain the world from a completely natural orientation. During the early twentieth century in the United States, the field of sociology still had a strong applied tone and practice to it, and there were many practicing sociologists who viewed the role of sociology as creating change within the social system, especially at a political level (Deegan, 1988). These so-called "do-gooders" were regarded as operating from a religious orientation that compelled amelioration of individuals and community based on religious ideals of salvation and redemption. However, the early Chicago School demonstrated a fundamental rift with this type of approach and intentionally worked on creating boundaries between themselves and sociologists taking this approach. The Chicago School sociologists wanted to rid sociology of religious undertones in a desire to establish the field on legitimate scientific grounds.

Naturalistic ways of explaining societal behavior became an avenue for demonstrating to the larger scientific audience that the field did not have such religious intentions and could, akin to other legitimate sciences, explore the social world from a disinterested and value-free

perspective. Applying the organism metaphor to the study of society became one acceptable means of carrying forward this goal and drawing upon legitimated scientific concepts in explaining society. However, metaphors are helpful in the same way they can be hurtful (Levine, 1995). Namely, metaphors allow for a coherent way to explain a great deal of complexity without the need for extensive explanation, but they are also necessarily wrought with ambiguity that allows for their interpretations to be applied in various, and sometimes contradictory, ways. The organism metaphor is no different, and so it can be used to in a number of different ways, simultaneously causing clarity and confusion on its orientation. Thus, in order to understand the organism metaphor of the Chicago School sociologists, it is important to understand the ways in which it is similar to or different from other influential uses.

One primary use of the metaphor is to view distinct groups in society as representing different organisms (e.g., Morton, 1989). This approach attempts to take a scientific approach to the study of society by asserting that particular social groups can be studied with the same detachment that a scientist can study an organism. The goal then is not to evaluate the relative worth of the organism but simply to understand its properties and relations to other organisms. From this perspective, society is composed of many organisms, which are born, mature, and die based on their ability to compete within the given environment.

Drawing heavily on the idea of natural selection, this view of society asserts that social groups – like racial and ethnic groups – should not be judged based on their relative or intrinsic worth – but rather should be understood as competing for scarce resources and potentially being more or less equipped to be able to do that. Society is seen as operating under a natural and self-perpetuating motion in which some groups will win out over other groups in the longer term picture, but in which no group should be seen as bad or invaluable for their loss in such a competition. While seemingly an attempt to overcome racial and other social group biases, this use of the organism metaphor still risks being applied toward a characterization of some social groups as inferior, or at least less capable of survival in the broader milieu. However, sociologists of this approach would tend to invoke such a judgment based on scientifically determined and naturally caused circumstances, rather than values or moral stances.

Another application of the organism metaphor is to view society as not composed of multiple organisms but rather to understand society as one larger entity, composed of many parts (Levine, 1995). Though not applying the metaphor uniformly, this is the approach more clearly adopted by Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim. A common idea among these theories was the notion that there existed a larger entity than individuals, and that this entity was dependent upon but also broader than any one individual's contributions. The idea was that society is a functioning whole that has multiple parts, which can be conceived of as either social groups or individuals.

The difference among the primary applicants of this version of the metaphor is what their holistic analogy conveyed about society or its parts. Comte argued that society, like an organism, could be understood as having a life-course maturation composed of oscillating periods of competition, dissolution, and reintegration. Spencer, especially as interpreted through Parsons, focused instead on the role that the parts play in composing the whole. Alternatively, Durkheim tended to focus on the ways in which society could be studied as an organism as it was studied in the medical field, searching for ways that the organism could act healthily or contain certain pathologies that needed to be regulated by the broader system in order to maintain health.

Regardless of the particularities of each of these approaches, both of these broader functionalist applications of the organism metaphor share in common an orientation to society as naturally functioning, working holistically as a singular organism or as multiple organisms in a

system. Both strands of functional approaches regard social processes as following a natural order and progression. In essence, social components work relatively well together toward the overall health of society. Any conflicts and competition that arise in the functional system are regarded as still working toward the long term perpetuation of the broader system or organism in a natural and unproblematic way.

Major Dimensions

The Chicago School sociologists applied the organism metaphor in ways that were similar to these influential functionalist approaches, but also in ways that differed from traditional functionalist approaches. The most dominant similarity is that Chicago School sociologists also thought it was useful to view society naturalistically and sought to do this, at least in part, through the application of the organism metaphor. Yet, the Chicago School sociologists also did not take a unified approach to metaphor application.

For example, Park and Burgess tended to apply the approach more in the way of Herder (Morton, 1989), by understanding society as composed of many organisms in competition with one another. Their focus on immigration and ethnic enclaves drove them to an examination of the ways that social groups compete with one another for scarce resources. In defining assimilation, Park and Burgess incorporated the idea that groups acclimated over time to their surroundings and took on characteristics of the dominant group as a way to survive. Alternatively, McKenzie tended to apply the metaphor more from the Durkheimian perspective, by viewing society as a unified entity with functioning parts.

Despite these applications, the Chicago sociologists did not apply the organism metaphor to the same extent as some of the influential functionalist theorists. This appears to be due to a strong influence on the Chicago School of Simmel – who Park studied under when in Germany. Simmel (1950; Simmel and Levine, 1971), influenced by Tönnies (2002 [1957]), theorized a more ambiguous stance on the state of modern, urbanized society than many functionalist scholars. In incorporating Simmel's perspective into his own approach, Park was much less definitive about society having a functionalist role, in the sense that society was not necessarily in the business of social order. Instead he, and his Chicago School colleagues, tended to focus on the pathologies in the system, highlighting the ways that modern life entailed conflict, disorganization, and social problems.

The organism metaphor was thus not applied by Chicago School sociologists in the same pervasive manner as functionalist scholars. The metaphor was instead characterized as a way of understanding some social processes, without a need to determinatively reduce all social processes to fitting within the metaphorical organism. Rather, the other naturalistic components of the urban society are pathologies that disrupt the broader social order.

Chicago School sociologists focused on social disorganization as existing within certain locations in the city, with unequal distributions across social space resulting in some groups being more prone to societal ills than others. Spatial inequalities were seen by many Chicago School sociologists as causing social groups to experience higher or lesser degrees of social integration, and thereby more or less social problems (e.g., Park, 1950). This marked an important evolution on the previous functionalist approach to societal organisms, which shifted the theory toward a conflict orientation. Similar to Simmel (1950; Simmel and Levine, 1971) and Tönnies (2002 [1957]), the urban environment was seen by many Chicago School sociologists as providing both freedom and autonomy, while at the same time also facilitating community breakdown, moral decay, and general pathologies in social life.

Changes over Time

One of the primary differences in the organism metaphor as applied by the Chicago School sociologists is the idea of social control, and the extent to which social control by the state or other organizations is needed to intervene in this pathological state of affairs. This is where Chicago School sociologists' interpretation of social control differs from that of Durkheim in not viewing social control as a natural occurrence within the system but rather one that needs to be exerted in response to some of the problems inherent to society. Ultimately then, the organism metaphor as applied by Chicago School sociologists continued to convey a naturalistic orientation to society, but simultaneously the Chicago School focused more on social change as causing disruption to the system, thereby lessening the degree of functionalism theorized by others. Rather, the naturalism of Chicago School sociologists has more of a conflict orientation.

Even in its application of a naturalistic orientation to society, Chicago School sociologists' organism metaphor focuses on analyzing social life not as inherently and naturally working toward social order, but rather in need of attention and intervention in order to facilitate societal health. Functionalist sociologists thus lean toward naturalist, scientific approaches to organisms, while Chicago School sociologists lean toward medical, interventionist approaches to organisms. While many of the Chicago sociologists were interested in shedding the ameliorative orientations of many of their colleagues, they still retained a more interventionist style of sociology. The key was to elevate this intervention from the perceptual ranks of social workers (Phelps, 1929) to the more esteemed perceived ranks of medical doctors, who worked to eradicate social ills through naturalistic, but nonfunctionalist, views of societal organisms.

In so doing, the Chicago School of sociologists caused major changes to the ways in which scholars interpreted and applied the organizational metaphor. Their contributions helped institutionalize a social problems orientation to social life and social change.

See Also: Chicago School; Mead, George Herbert (1863–1931); Park, Robert E. (1864–1944) and Burgess, Ernest W. (1886–1966); Parsons, Talcott (1902–1979); Pragmatism; Social Change; Structural Functional Theory; Znaniecki, Florian (1882–1958)

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Further Readings

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