
This reading is likely the single most famous synopsis of exchange theory. So why does it appear in a selection of writings on function(alism)? Homans, a functionalist? Besides, since functionalism is a macro theory and exchange a micro one, they must have nothing in common, right? Well, if functionalists argue that people keep their individual pursuits secondary to their conformity to group norms, then maybe these preconceptions should be revisited. Homans’s position is that people seek a normative balance between rewards and costs, not profit maximization at the expense of others. For example, individuals limit their pursuits of social acceptance by refusing to bear normatively unacceptable costs to their personal integrity. In accordance with a norm of “distributive justice,” one group’s members (e.g., unskilled laborers) accept lower pay than members of another group (e.g., doctors) given the responsibility-costs that the latter must bear relative to themselves. And self-sustaining dynamics evolve within task-groups whereby knowledgeable members balance the time that assisting others costs them with the appreciation gained for the assistance, while less knowledgeable members’ gains from this assistance must be balanced by corresponding costs to their self-confidence. Is there something functionalist in these tendencies to restrict ones rewards (acceptance, pay, appreciation, assistance) within normative bounds? You decide.