CHAPTER - 4

SOCIOLOGICAL THINKERS (TALCOTT PARSONS)

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979)

Parsons thought of himself as an action theorist. He seemed to focus on actors and their thoughts and actions. But by the close of his 1937 work, Parsons sounded more like a structural-functional theorist focusing on large-scale social and cultural systems.

Parsons's Methodology

- Parsons was influenced by the work of Weber, and Kant. He offered critique to Marx.
- Parsons stated that Sociology must be a distinct discipline and have a reservoir of distinct terminology.
- He believed mega theories must be developed similar to natural theories.

Social Order

Social life is characterized by mutual cooperation rather than hostility. Using Hobbesian analysis, Parsons examines how social order can be established in the society. He states that Hobbesian indicates that consequences determine the state of action, to which he retorts that a moral commitment is a much larger necessity that binds a society.

Social action

His theory of *Social Action* borrows ideas from economic sociology, culturology and psychology and combined them he developed a grand theory of social action that claims to capture every possible human behavior in time and space

In contrast to Weber's four ideal types of social action, Parsons developed the 'structure of social action'. He considers that all possible empirical action of the people can be arrested into a universal theoretical framework.

According to Parsons, social action is any act which is consciously performed Parsons gave four criteria for a social action

- Social Aspect- It occurs in a social situation i.e. actor is a member of society while performing a social action
- Motivational Aspect- It is oriented towards attainment of a particular goal i.e. actor is motivated
- Value aspect- Action is regulated by norms and values
- Biological Aspect- It involves investment of energy

Social Action – Categories

Voluntaristic Action : A situation in which the actor is conscious about situational constraints such as their race, gender, ethnicity. Every actor however is rational and uses apt means to achieve goals, or makes modifications.

Motives

- **Cognitive** Stimulate an actor for gratification of rational needs.
- **Cathartic** Cultural aesthetic. Doing things that lead to happiness.
- **Psychological –** Feeling appreciated.

Actions

- **Cognitive Values lead to Instrumental Action –** To meet objective needs, one may decide to read books and engage in intellectual discussions.
- **Cathartic Values lead to Expressive Action –** Where aesthetic happiness is derived through music, dance, and art.
- **Psychological Values lead to Evaluative Action –** In the pursuit of appreciation and psychological satisfaction.

Social Structure

Social System

A system is an organized whole where plurality of individuals interact with each other.

Parsons uses AGIL to explain Social System.

Social actions don't occur in isolation, but in constellation. Such constellation in the form of institutionalized social interactions is called 'Social System'.

According to Parsons, a social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the "optimization of gratification" and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols

Despite his commitment to viewing the social system as a system of interaction, Parsons did not take interaction as his fundamental unit in the study of the social system. Rather, he used the status-role complex as the basic unit of the system. The actor is viewed not in terms of thoughts and actions but instead as a bundle of statuses and roles.

Status refers to a structural position within the social system

Role is what the actor does in such a position, seen in the context of its functional significance for the larger system.

In addition to a concern with the status-role, Parsons was interested in such large-scale components of social systems such as collectivities, norms, and values.

Functional pre-requisites of a social system according to Parsons

- Social systems must be structured so that they operate compatibly with other systems.
- To survive, the social system must have the requisite support from other systems.
- The system must meet a significant proportion of the needs of its actors.
- The system must elicit adequate participation from its members.
- It must have at least a minimum of control over potentially disruptive behavior.
- If conflict becomes sufficiently disruptive, it must be controlled.

◎ A social system requires a language in order to survive.
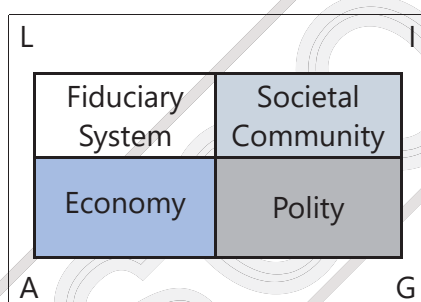
AGIL scheme of Parsons

Parsons's structural functionalism starts with the four functional imperatives for all action systems —adaptation (A), goal attainment (G), integration (I), and latency (L) or pattern maintenance. Together, these four functional imperatives are known as the AGIL scheme. In order to survive, a system must perform these four functions-

Adaptation- A system must cope with external situational exigencies. It must adapt to its environment and adapt the environment to its needs. The behavioral organism is the action system that handles the adaptation function by adjusting to and transforming the external world.

Goal attainment- A system must define and achieve its primary goals. The personality system performs the goal-attainment function by defining system goals and mobilizing resources to attain them

Integration- A system must regulate the interrelationship of its component parts. It also must manage the relationship among the other three functional imperatives (A, G, L). The social system copes with the integration function by controlling its component parts

Latency (pattern maintenance)- A system must furnish, maintain, and renew both the motivation of individuals and the cultural patterns that create and sustain that motivation. The cultural system performs the latency function by providing actors with the norms and values that motivate them for action.
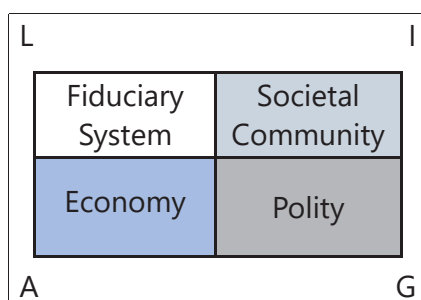

Society as a social system

Parsons applied the AGIL scheme on society and identified four structures or subsystems in terms of the functions they perform.

The economy is the subsystem that performs the function for society of adapting to the environment through labor, production, and allocation. Through such work, the economy adapts the environment to society's needs, and it helps society adapt to these external realities

The polity (or political system) performs the function of goal attainment by pursuing societal objectives and mobilizing actors and resources to that end.

The integration function is performed by the societal community (for example, the law), which coordinates the various components of society

The fiduciary system (for example, in the schools, the family) handles the latency function by transmitting culture (norms and values) to actors and allowing it to be internalized by them.

University as a social system

L	I
Counsellors, peers and the culture of university and society	Rules and regulations of the university,senior-juniorinteraction, celebrations
Accounts Department, Grants from government, fees from students	Governance bodies, Chancellor, Student organizations within the university
A	G

Actors and the Social System-

Parsons was interested in the ways in which the norms and values of a system are transferred to the actors within the system. Given his central concern with the social system, he studied internalization and socialization as key processes of integration.

In a successful socialization process these norms and values are internalized; that is, they become part of the actors' consciences. As a result, in pursuing their own interests, the actors are in fact serving the interests of the system as a whole

Socialization is conceptualized as a conservative process in which need-dispositions (which are themselves largely molded by society) bind children to the social system, and it provides the means by which the need-dispositions can be satisfied. Parsons assumed that actors usually are passive recipients in the socialization process. Children learn not only how to act but also the norms and values, the morality, of society. He believed socialization to be a life-long process.

Cultural System

Parsons considers himself a cultural determinist. Culture is a major binding force in the society. It mediates interaction among actors and integrates the personality and the social systems. It is found in the components of the other systems as well. In the social system, culture is embodied in norms and values, and in the personality system it is internalized by the actor.

According to him, culture is a patterned, ordered system of symbols that are objects of orientation to actors, internalized aspects of the personality system, and institutionalized patterns in the social system

Culture can move from one social system to another through diffusion and from one personality system to another through learning and socialization. It gives culture the ability to control Parsons's other action systems

Personality System

The personality is defined as the organized system of orientation and motivation of action of the individual actor. The basic component of the personality is the 'need-disposition'.

Need-dispositions are drives that are shaped by the social setting. Parsons differentiated among three basic types of need-dispositions.

๏ The first type impels actors to seek love, approval, and so forth, from their social relationships.

๏ The second type includes internalized values that lead actors to observe various cultural standards.

๏ Finally, there are the role expectations that lead actors to give and get appropriate responses.

The personality system is controlled not only by the cultural system but also by the social system.

Parsons paints a passive image of actors who is dominated by culture

Behavioral Organism

It is the source of energy for the rest of the systems. it is based on genetic constitution of the individual.

Social Control Mechanisms

Social control mechanisms are employed to induce conformity. He considered it strictly as a second line of defense. According to Parson, a system should be flexible to tolerate some variations ie deviance. A flexible social system provides a wide range of role opportunities that allow different personalities to express themselves without threatening the integrity of the system.

Social control mechanisms can be of two types-

- Formal mechanism includes laws, rules, regulations and other coercive methods like police action
- Informal mechanism includes counseling, persuasion and peer interactions

Socialization and social control are the main mechanisms that allow the social system to maintain its equilibrium. Modest amounts of individuality and deviance are accommodated, but more extreme forms must be met by reequilibrating mechanisms.

Parsons's theory of Social Change

According to functionalism, social structures in society have self-regulatory mechanisms that keep them stable and save them from external threats, highlighting the process of homeostasis

Talcott Parsons did not deny the element of value consensus and stability in a social system, but he also visualised the possibilities of social change

Factors causing social change

Parsons mentioned several factors, which contribute towards the building up of strain in social systems, which bring about the need to establish a new equilibrium.

- **Social Configuration**- Changes in the demographic character of population through migration, racial intermixture, intermarriages, as well as changes in the mortality and fertility rates of the population.
- **Environment-** Changes in the physical environment, such as exhaustion of physical resources like soil, water, weather conditions etc. may also contribute to strain and change in the social system.
- **Increased production**- Changes in population resulting from increased productivity of food and availability of resources for members within a social system.
- **Technological advancements-** Changes in technology and application of scientific knowledge for the advancement of society
- **Cultural configuration-** Development of new cultural configuration such as new religious ideas, or the integration of religious values with science and technology might also trigger changes in the social system.

Parsons held the view that these factors are not exhaustive but merely illustrative in order to indicate that they do not act individually but in a state of interdependent plurality.

Parsons identifies two processes which leads to changes in cultural configuration. They are-

Rationalisation

Rationalisation is a process of progressive growth of rational, individualistic and innovative attitudes towards work, personal commitments and social institutions in general. It also includes an increase in legal and formal methods of allocation of responsibilities in place of custom or tradition or personal whims of people in authority such as the king or the priest

Traditionalisation

It refers to the tendency in social systems to render its values stable, and thus institutionalise them over a period of time. This gives birth to the rise of vested interests. These vested interests emphasize preservation of these values irrespective of changing situations. When this happens the rational values tend to become traditionalised.

Cultural values in society or in social systems continually undergo these processes of rationalisation and traditionalisation, resulting in a cyclic process

Cultural factors which bring about change within social syst
Traditionalisation
Innovation & Change
Cultural Values in Society
Institutionalisation of new values & ideas and rise of vested interests.
Rationalisation

Moving Equilibrium

Parsons explained the process of social change through the concept of moving equilibrium. In practice, no social system is in a perfect state of equilibrium, although a certain degree of equilibrium is essential for the survival of societies.

For instance, the AGIL are closely interrelated. A change in one will produce disturbances in the social system as a whole. The other part of the system will operate to return it in equilibrium

In Parsons words, once the disturbance is introduced into an equilibrated system, there will tend to be a reaction to this disturbance, which will tend to restore the system of equilibrium. This reaction will lead to some degree of change however small in the system as a whole. Thus, social change can be seen as moving equilibrium.

Example- The internet led to cyber crimes in society, which introduced cyber laws, hence reaching a new equilibrium

Parsons as a structural-functionalist

- His work *The Social System* tended to concentrate on the structures of society and their relationship to each other. Those structures were seen as mutually supportive and tending toward a dynamic equilibrium.

- His emphasis was on how order was maintained among the various elements of society. According to him, 'Value Consensus' is the integrating force in society. Value consensus is a result of role performance which are institutionalized in society. By the process of socialization, role expectations, values and goals of society are inculcated in individual actors.

- He believed that various social structures performed a variety of positive functions for each other.

- Parsons was concerned not only with the social system per se but also with its relationship to the other action systems, especially the cultural and personality systems

Criticism of Parsons grand theory of social system

- **Dahrendorf** called his conception as utopian . Grand functional theory has little practical utility and is low on empirical testability. His ideas are too abstract with little empirical verifiability.

- He takes an over-socialized view of man in which man is influenced by the values and norms alone, painting a passive picture

- **Merton** takes much realistic view and he included latent functions, dysfunctions as well in his analysis. Merton termed such a grand conception as both futile and sterile and proposed Middle range theories

- According to **Jonathan Turner**, structure functionalism of Parsons suffers from illegitimate teleologies and tautologies which are the two most important logical problems confronting structural functionalism. They often take cause and effect and vice-versa.

- Parsons is said to ignore the class conflict and class antagonism. He over-relied on value consensus

Cybernatic Hierarchy of control-

Social System is linked with other systems through 'Energy flow' and 'Information control', which Parsons termed as 'Cybernetic Hierarchy of Control'.
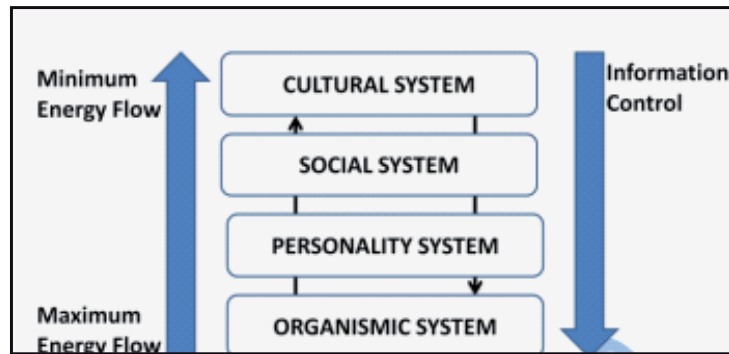
Pattern Variables

Pattern variable is a framework through which Parsons tries to understand how an actor negotiates with the action situation and manifest a particular kind of behavior

In the evolutionary theory of social change in his work **The Structure of Social Action** , Parsons highlights the possibility of conflict in relation to motivational orientation and value orientation of social action

Parsons gave 5 set of pattern variables which can be categorized in Pattern variable A and in Pattern variable B

Ascription vs Achievement

Ascription is based on birth which achievement relies on merit

This classification was first done by Ralph Linton. He states that ascription is the most important value of traditional society as it gives rise to persistence without the element of change. Achievement is a modern trait

Parsons says that ascription and achievement helps in analyzing the identity of an actor. Ascription gives who the actor is, while achievement reflects what the actor is capable of.

For instance, the role performance governed by the caste system is ascriptive while based on skills and education is achievement

Affectivity vs Affective-Neutrality

This relates to the degree of emotion appropriate to social relationship in a given situation. The dilemma here is in deciding whether one expresses their orientation in terms of immediate gratification (affectivity) or whether they renounce immediate gratification in favor of moral interests (affective-neutrality).

For instance, lashing out at someone in public is affective action, while moderating your response and communicating the concern through proper channels is affective-neutrality achieved through emotional intelligence

Particularism vs Universalism

Particularism refers to value system determined by an actor's particular relations with a particular object. This means he act differently towards different people. For example, he is loyal to his family but not to strangers

Universalism refers to the value system of a society, based on higher level of generality in order to legitimize the wider variety of goals and functions of its subunits.

For example, rule of law is applicable to everyone irrespective of personal, kinship or friendship considerations, making it universalistic mode of role performance. A policewoman would arrest her husband if he violates the law.

Diffuseness vs Specificity

This set defines the range of obligation towards the counter actors. This can be understood in terms of interactions in the society. In diffusion, the relations borne by object to the actor are broader in involvement and scope. In specificity, these involvements are limited in scope

Some social interaction such as between doctors and patients, or between buyers and sellers of goods in the market, has a very specific scope. While the interaction between buyer and seller are generally diffused

Self Orientation vs Collective Orientation

It refers to the form of goal orientation. The actor has to make a choice between his or her own gratification and its determent for the good of a larger number of people, a collectivity.

Collective orientation leads to altruism and self-sacrifice while, self-orientation involves egoism and utilitarianism

Difference between Pattern variable A and B

Pattern Variable A	Pattern Variable B
It is a product of expressive orientation	It is a product of instrumental mode of orientation
It emphasizes on aesthetic and emotive criteria	It emphasizes on rational, objective and goal orientation
It is the essence of traditional society	It is the reflection of modern society
Ascription, Affectivity, Particularism, Diffusion and collective-orientation belongs to this group	Achievement, Affective-neutrality, Universalism, Specificity and self-orientation belongs to this group

Significance of Pattern Variables

They talks about the successful negotiations between actor, cultural system and social structure

- They include the micro- perspective ie the role of actor in social change. Man is a bundle of impulses but is bound by compulsions. This means he wants to do something but culture and norms bind him to do something else
- They provide an explanation for modernity and recognizes the dilemma involved and make an attempt to neutralize it
- Pattern Variables are the connecting link between the Parsonian idea of social action and social system
- The concept of pattern variable is found in the work of Ferdinand Tonnies- Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, Emile Durkheim- Mechanical and Organic Solidarity, Karl Marx- Historical materialism.

Parsons was important for legitimizing grand theory and for introducing European theorists to an American audience. He is also known for his role in the development of action theory and structural functionalism

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