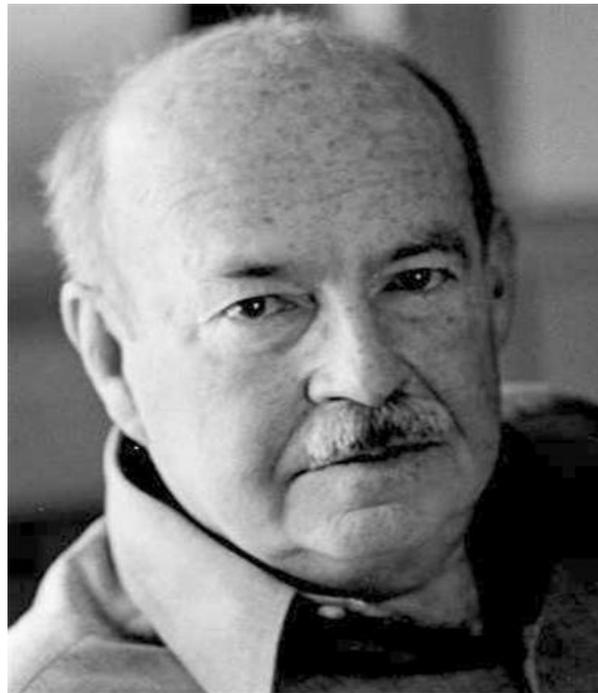


## **Module-23**

### **TALCOTT PARSONS**

**(1902-1979)**



**Developed by:**

**Dr. Subrata Chatterjee**  
**Associate Professor of Sociology**  
**Khejuri College**  
**P.O- Baratala, Purba Medinipur**  
**West Bengal, India**

# TALCOTT PARSONS

(1902-1979)

## INTRODUCTION

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was an American sociologist who served on the faculty of Harvard University from 1927 to 1973. Parsons was one of the most influential structural functionalists of the 1950s. As a functionalist, he was concerned with how elements of society were functional for a society. He was also concerned with social order, but argued that order and stability in a society are the result of the influence of certain values in society, rather than in structure such as the economic system. He was for many years the best-known sociologist in the United States, and indeed one of the best-known in the world. He produced a general theoretical system for the analysis of society that came to be called structural functionalism. Parsons' analysis was largely developed within his major published works:

- The Structure of Social Action (1937),
- The Social System (1951),
- Structure and Process in Modern Societies (1960),
- Sociological Theory and Modern Society (1968),
- Politics and Social Structure (1969).

Parsons was an advocate of "grand theory," an attempt to integrate all the social sciences into an overarching theoretical framework.

## STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

Talcott Parsons was heavily influenced by Durkheim and Max Weber, synthesising much of their work into his action theory, which he based on the system-theoretical concept and the methodological principle of voluntary action. He held that "the social system is made up of the actions of individuals." His starting point, accordingly, is the interaction between two individuals faced with a variety of choices about how they might act, choices that are influenced and constrained by a number of physical and social factors.

Parsons determined that each individual has expectations of the other's action and reaction to his own behaviour, and that these expectations would (if successful) be "derived" from the accepted norms and values of the society they inhabit. As Parsons himself emphasised, however, in a general context there would never exist any perfect "fit" between behaviours and norms, so such a relation is never complete or "perfect." Social norms were always problematic for Parsons, who never claimed (as has often been alleged) that social norms were generally accepted and agreed

upon, should this prevent some kind of universal law. Whether social norms were accepted or not was for Parsons simply a historical question.

As behaviours are repeated in more interactions, and these expectations are entrenched or institutionalised, a role is created. Parsons defines a "role" as the normatively-regulated participation "of a person in a concrete process of social interaction with specific, concrete role-partners." Although any individual, theoretically, can fulfil any role, the individual is expected to conform to the norms governing the nature of the role they fulfil. Furthermore, one person can and does fulfil many different roles at the same time. In one sense, an individual can be seen to be a "composition" of the roles he inhabits. Certainly, today, when asked to describe themselves, most people would answer with reference to their societal roles.

Parsons later developed the idea of roles into collectivities of roles that complement each other in fulfilling functions for society. Some roles are bound up in institutions and social structures (economic, educational, legal and even gender-based). These are functional in the sense that they assist society in operating and fulfil its functional needs so that society runs smoothly. A society where there is no conflict, where everyone knows what is expected of him, and where these expectations are consistently met, is in a perfect state of equilibrium. The key processes for Parsons in attaining this equilibrium are socialisation and social control. Socialisation is important because it is the mechanism for transferring the accepted norms and values of society to the individuals within the system. Perfect socialisation occurs when these norms and values are completely internalised, when they become part of the individual's personality.

Parson states that "this point is independent of the sense in which [the] individual is concretely autonomous or creative rather than 'passive' or 'conforming', for individuality and creativity, are to a considerable extent, phenomena of the institutionalization of expectations"; they are culturally constructed. Structural functionalism 5 Socialisation is supported by the positive and negative sanctioning of role behaviours that do or do not meet these expectations. A punishment could be informal, like a snigger or gossip, or more formalised, through institutions such as prisons and mental homes. If these two processes were perfect, society would become static and unchanging, and in reality this is unlikely to occur for long.

Parsons recognises this, stating that he treats "the structure of the system as problematic and subject to change," and that his concept of the tendency towards equilibrium "does not imply the empirical dominance of stability over change." He does, however, believe that these changes occur in a relatively smooth way. Individuals in interaction with changing situations adapt through a process of "role bargaining." Once the roles are established, they create norms that guide further action and are thus institutionalised, creating stability across social interactions. Where the adaptation process cannot adjust, due to sharp shocks or immediate radical change, structural dissolution occurs and either new structures (and therefore a new system) are formed, or society dies. This model of social change has been described as a "moving equilibrium," and emphasises a desire for social order.

## **SYSTEM OF SOCIAL ACTION**

Social actions are guided by the following three systems which may also be called as three aspects of the systems of social action

**Personality system:** This aspect of the system of social action is responsible for the needs for fulfilment of which the man makes effort and performs certain actions. But once man makes efforts he has to meet certain conditions. These situations have definite meaning and they are distinguished by various symbols and symptoms. Various elements of the situation come to have several meanings for ego as signs or symbols which become relevant to the organization of his expectation system.

**Cultural system:** Once the process of the social action develops the symbols and the signs acquire general meaning. They also develop as a result of systematised system and ultimately when different actors under a particular cultural system perform various social interactions, special situation develops.

**Social System:** A social system consists in a plurality of individual actor's interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect actors are motivated in terms of tendency to the optimization of gratification and whose relations to the situation including each other is defined and motivated in terms of system of culturally structured and shaped symbols.

In Parson's view each of the three main type of social action systems-culture, personality and social systems has a distinctive coordinative role in the action process and therefore has some degree of causal autonomy. Thus personalities organize the total set of learned needs, demands and action choices of individual actors, no two of whom are alike.

Every social system is confronted with 4 functional problems. These problems are those of pattern maintenance, integration, goal attainment and adaptation. Pattern maintenance refers to the need to maintain and reinforce the basic values of the social system and to resolve tensions that emerge from continuous commitment to these values. Integration refers to the allocation of rights and obligations, rewards and facilities to ensure the harmony of relations between members of the social system. Goal attainment involves the necessity of mobilizing actors and resources in organized ways for the attainment of specific goals. Adaptation refers to the need for the production or acquisition of generalized facilities or resources that can be employed in the attainment of various specific goals. Social systems tend to differentiate these problems so as to increase the functional capabilities of the system. Such differentiation whether through the temporal specialization of a structurally undifferentiated unit or through the emergence of two or more structurally distinct units from one undifferentiated unit is held to constitute a major verification of the fourfold functionalist schema. It also provides the framework within which are examined the plural interchanges that occur between structurally differentiated units to provide them with the inputs they require in the performance of their functions and to enable them to dispose of the outputs they produce.

## **PATTERN VARIABLES**

Parsons constructed a set of variables that can be used to analyze the various systems. These are the "categorization of modes of orientation in personality systems, the value patterns of culture, and the normative requirements in social systems" (Turner, p. 58) These became a way of describing and classifying different societies, and the values and norms of that society. All of the norms, values, roles, institutions, subsystems and even the society as a whole can be classified and examined on the basis of these patterned variables. For Parsons, these were necessary to make the theory of action more explicit and "to develop clearer specifications of what different contingencies and expectations actors were likely to face" (Wallace and Wolf, p. 30). The patterned variables are set up as polar opposites that give the range of possible decisions and modes of orientation. Any actual role or decision may be a combination of the two, between the opposites. For Parsons though, these provided an ideal type conceptual scheme that allowed analysis of various systems of parts of systems. The five pattern variables are as follows.

a. Ascription and Achievement. Ascription refers to qualities of individuals, and often inborn qualities such as sex, ethnicity, race, age, family status, or characteristics of the household of origin. Achievement refers to performance, and emphasizes individual achievement. For example, we might say that someone has achieved a prestigious position even though their ascribed status was that of poverty and disadvantage.

b. Diffuseness and Specificity. These refer to the nature of social contacts and how extensive or how narrow are the obligations in any interaction. For example, in a bureaucracy, social relationships are very specific, where we meet with or contact someone for some very particular reason associated with their status and position, e.g. visiting a physician. Friendships and parent-child relationships are examples of more diffuse forms of contact. We rely on friends for a broad range of types of support, conversation, activities, and so on. While there may be limits on such contacts, these have the potential of dealing with almost any set of interests and problems.

c. Affectivity and Affective Neutrality. Neutrality refer to the amount of emotion or affect that is appropriate or expected in an given form of interaction. Again, particularism and diffuseness might often be associated with affectivity, whereas contacts with other individuals in a bureaucracy may be devoid of emotion and characterized by affective neutrality. Affective neutrality may refer to self discipline and the deferment of gratification. In contrast, affectivity can mean the expression of gratification of emotions.

d. Particularism and Universalism. These refer to the range of people that are to be considered, whereas diffuseness and specificity deal with the range of obligations involved. The issue here is whether to react "on the basis of a general norm or reacting on the basis of someone's particular relationship to you" (Wallace and Wolf, p. 34). A particular relation is one that is with a specific individual. Parent-child or friendship relationships tend to be of this sort, where the relationship

is likely to be very particular, but at the same time very diffuse. In contrast, a bureaucracy is characterized by universal forms of relationships, where everyone is to be treated impartially and much the same. No particularism or favoritism is to be extended to anyone, even to a close friend or family member.

e. Collectivity or Self. These emphasize the extent of self interest as opposed to collective or shared interest associated with any action. Each of our social actions are made within a social context, with others, and in various types of collectivities. Where individuals pursue a collective form of action, then the interests of the collectivity may take precedence over that of the individual. Various forms of action such as altruism, charity, self-sacrifice (in wartime) can be included here. In contrast, much economics and utilitarianism assumes egoism or the self seeking individual as the primary basis on which social analysis is to be built.

The pattern variables provide a means of looking at various forms that norms and social actions can take, and what their orientation is. These can describe the nature of societal norms, or the basic values that guide, and form the basis for decisions in, the personality system. The range of possible types of motivation and action is considerably broader in Parson's scheme than in much of the classical sociological writers, at least the utilitarians, Durkheim and Marx. Weber viewed motivation and meaning as key, but did not provide a guide concerning how to apply these in general. Perhaps these pattern variables can be thought of as a way that people do relate to situations they face, the type of orientation they have, and how they are likely to interpret meaning in each social action.

f. Expressive and Instrumental. Parsons regards the first half of each pair as the expressive types of characteristics and the second half of the pattern as the instrumental types of characteristics. Expressive aspects refer to "the integrative and tension aspects" (Morgan, p. 29). These are people, roles, and actions concerned with taking care of the common task culture, how to integrate the group, and how to manage and resolve internal tensions and conflicts. This may take many different forms but often is associated with the family, and more specifically with the female role in the family.

## A.G.I.L. FUNCTIONAL IMPERATIVES FOR SOCIAL SYSTEMS

<b>P</b> Adaptation	<b>A</b> Goal Attainment
<b>E</b> Integration	<b>I</b> Latency

The structural-functional sociological theories of Talcott Parsons almost entirely dominated the field during his own lifetime. Parsons viewed society as a system of interacting social units, institutions and organizations. He was interested in the force of social norms, and how we come to feel that force and act accordingly (Parsons, 1971; Parsons, 1968; Parsons, 1951). One of the ways he conceptualized these social systems was as problem-solving devices. In his mind, social systems arose to solve four particular problems, listed in PAEI order below, for modern developed nation-state systems:

*P – Adaptation:* Social systems must cope with their external boundary conditions, such as their resource base, physical environment, territory and so on. Economic activity serves to solve problems of adaptation.

*A – Goal Attainment:* The goals of societies and social institutions have to be defined, resolving goal conflicts, prioritizing some over others, determining resource allocations and directing social energies. Political activity organizes and directs the goal attainment of modern social systems.

*E – Integration:* All of the adaptive efforts of social institutions within a society need to be integrated into a cohesive system. The institutions need to be regulated so that a harmonious society can emerge from their interaction. Legal systems solve this problem, seeking overarching principles for aligning social activities.

*I – Latency:* The encultured patterns of behaviour required by the social system must be maintained. Peoples' motivation must be established and renewed, and the tensions they experience as they negotiate the social order must be managed. Furthermore, the cultural patterns

that accomplish this renewal must themselves be maintained and renewed. Fiduciary systems such as families, schools and churches solve these problems of pattern/tension management.

These four functional imperatives (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, Latency: A.G.I.L.) provided what Parsons felt was a more complex and systemic account of social phenomena which previous theorists had tried to explain in terms of unitary causes.