Talcott Parsons: Toward a General Theory of Action

Although Parsons and Shils are the book’s named authors, the first part of Toward a General Theory of Action is the collaborative work of nine men. All scholars in the social sciences, these minds set out with the explicit intention of developing a general theory of action. However, unlike Durkheim and Simmel, their goal was not to develop a theory particular to sociology; rather, their aim was to create a more general theory to guide the social sciences collectively. Whereas their predecessors may have been concerned with distinguishing sociology from philosophy or psychology, these authors look at the social sciences together, even as they seek to distinguish them from the biological or physical sciences. They state that a theory, which guides the social sciences, should have three major functions. It should help to codify existing knowledge; it should serve as a guide for research, which it does both through codification and the establishment of “systematically derived theoretical hypotheses;” and finally, it should provide a common point of departure for social science research, thereby limiting the bias created “by the departmentalization of education and research in the social sciences (3).”

While the authors are clear about the role a general theory of action ought to play in systematizing social science research, they likewise insist that what they present in Toward a General Theory of Action is only the beginning of this project. The word “toward” in the title aptly reflects the aims of the authors’ project. If the ultimate goal of scientific inquiry and research is to be able to predict “changes in empirical systems outside special experimental conditions” (48), it is necessary to develop what the authors
call an empirical-theoretical system, the most complex incarnation of the systematization of conceptual schemes. This type of system provides the most sophisticated and accurate way of using theory to understand the real word, where actors and situations are not pure types. The authors lay out a set of criteria for evaluating a systematic theory based on its generality and complexity, its ability to explain one aspect of itself in another part of the system, and the degree to which it advances the ultimate goals of science; in doing so, they humbly place this work at the beginning of a process of developing such a systematic theory. Rather than provide a fully developed theory, the book is meant primarily to provide categories which the authors hope will form the framework of a general theory, while also beginning to take stabs at that theory.

Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties in deciphering the work is distinguishing when the authors mean to adhere to their original promise that their categories are not the theory, and when they are advancing theory through their description of certain categories. Despite this potential confusion throughout the work, the authors are straightforward about certain aspects of their proposed framework for study. The goal of the “general theory” is to generate common ways to analyze “action,” and, in particular, those actions that are of interest to the social sciences; that is, behavior which is goal-oriented, situational, regulated by norms, and required expenditure of energy or motivation.

In Part I, Chapter 2, the authors describe a method of study for the social sciences. In doing so, they begin by defining what they deem to be the object of all social science study: activity. But not all activity is of concern to the social sciences, as the term includes physiological processes that have no relational significance (30). Social sciences
are specifically concerned with activity that is oriented by things outside of the organism, which may include beliefs and images, but which are distinguishable from biochemical and other physiological processes. As the authors describe it, they are concerned with “activity in terms of principles of relationship.” (30).

If we match this description of what might be considered “social” activity with the explanation in “A General Statement” that the theory’s concern is with both the actions of individual actors and a collectivity of actors, we have the first of the work’s codifications from which social science research may proceed. We can see how a codified or systematic understanding of the meaning of “actor” and “action” moves the social scientist toward a study of the ways that interaction among individuals creates society:

The social system is, to be sure, made up of the relationships of individuals, but it is a system which is organized around the problems inherent in or arising from social interaction of a plurality of individual actors rather than around the problems which arise in connection with the integration of the actions of an individual actor, who is also a physiological organism (7).

After establishing the most elemental object of study – “action” – the general theory proceeds to define and describe the three systems they believe orient all action. They argue that interaction between actors is primarily guided by self interest. Individuals will always encounter situations in which they must compromise, and they will always seek to maximize their gain. The shift from talking about actors themselves, egos, to the interaction with alters, other social objects, creates an orientation to a system (15). Three systems orient action: the personality system, the value orientation system, or culture, and the social system. In discussing each of these systems, the authors use a
common framework for analyzing the choices and consequences related to the actions taken.

In “Personality as a System of Action,” the authors identify three different types of need-dispositions; those that mediate person-to-person relationships, those that reflect the observance of internalized cultural standards, and those that reflect role-expectations of others on oneself. (115) The personality system functions in such a way as to obtain the optimum level of gratification, (121) and it deals with problems that impede the attainment of optimum gratification. These problems can be external, in the sense that need-dispositions conflict with perceived or actual external circumstances; or internal, in the sense that they involve the allocation of time and effort or the integration of need-dispositions (or adjudication of conflicts among need-dispositions) within the personality system. (122)

The authors assert that there are certain mechanisms within the personality system that deal with these problems in one way or another. The learning process is one mechanism that deals with problems by adapting the personality system to acquire those need-dispositions that better maintain the system and rejecting those need-dispositions that are detrimental to the system (125). Another mechanism is that of allocation, which allocates the distribution of time and energy among need-dispositions, favoring some over others (131). Still another mechanism is that of integration, which resolves conflicts among need-dispositions within the system. (133) One problem the authors address directly is that of fear of an expected deprivation of a need-disposition. In order to resolve a threatened conflict between need-dispositions it may be necessary to modify one or more of them. This is called the mechanism of adjustment. (138)
The most influential need-dispositions in the scheme are those that seek to achieve gratification vis-à-vis other persons (the alter). The authors assert that in addition to the gratification of material objects, the personality system seeks the affection, approval and esteem of others (140). It is this relationship with others that principally guides the allocation, integration, and adjustment of need-dispositions. A personality system is situated within a number of collectivities that require of it different need-dispositions. It is this juggle that constitutes the personality system. According to the authors, “the social system places every individual in a series of roles where he is expected to conform with certain expectations of behavior.” (148). In their view, at every point in an individual’s life, one is confronted with the actions and attitudes of other persons, both individually and collectively. They go so far as to state, “[r]ole expectations are so fundamental to the social system that all human social motivation involves the problem of conformity with them.” (148). If one fails or refuses to conform to the expectations of others he risks alienation. A system of sanctions also exists as a “secondary line of defense” to keep individuals behavior in line with expectations (158).

After describing personality as a system of action, the authors go on to describe “Systems of Value Orientation.” There are four major types of social value-orientations which result from the interaction of various values and orientations. The Transcendent Achievement Ideal arises at the intersection of Achievement and Universalism; the Immanent Achievement Ideal at Achievement and Particularism; the Trandscendent Quality-Perfection Ideal at Ascription and Universalism; and finally the Immanent Quality-Perfection Ideal at Ascription and Particularism (Fig. 10). These four categories are then each further subdivided in an attempt to highlight variation within these
orientations. Different societies are orientated towards different major value systems, and the author gives various examples of these (185). Furthermore, the authors state that variations in personality are limited by the value orientation of the society and knowing the latter can predict the former.

Finally, the authors lay out their conception of the social system. They reiterate, as they have made clear throughout, that they consider the social system to be discrete and distinguishable from the personality systems of individual actors, despite the fact that it is made up of the same elemental parts. Unlike the personality system, where the individual actor is the “focus of organization,” the “role” is the most important unit in the social system, which they define as a “sector of the individual actor’s total system of action.” (190). An important aspect of the role, the “role expectation,” is determined in part by value-orientation, just as we saw the individual actor’s personality system influenced by value-orientation. However, roles are impacted by their degree of institutionalization as well. And social systems are more than the mere interactions of roles. They contain “collectivities,” as well as shared and collective goals.

The general theory of social action was a valiant effort to devise a theory of action that could be used as a standard for all of the social sciences. However, it does suffer from a number of drawbacks, two of which we will touch upon. One problem with the theory, perhaps its most fatal flaw, is that it is unverifiable. Even supporters of the general theory of social action have been unable to test it in a satisfactory way. It does not readily offer itself for empirical analysis as good theories do. Which raises the question of if it can even really be deemed a theory by definition. Perhaps it is something less concrete, like a hypothesis or framework to be developed upon.
Another problem we see with the theory is that it is too focused on societal
explanations for human behavior and disregards or ignores other possible explanations,
such as psychology. The book places great emphasis on the influence of society on
behavior and does not allow enough room for other explanations. Of course this problem
is due to the sociological focus of the authors. Presumably psychologists would not have
the same focus.

All in all, one must admire this work whether or not it is empirically valid because
it took the bold step of proposing a theory that would explain human behavior from a
sociological perspective. At least a flawed theory provides a framework and basis for
further work in the field, which is what the authors intended to do. In this regard, their
theory has been a resounding success.