Toward a General Theory of Action

Talcott Parsons’ *Toward a General Theory of Action* represents an attempt to codify existing knowledge in the social and behavioral sciences and thereby identify their limitations and future research needs. Unlike Durkheim’s efforts to differentiate and establish sociology as a discipline, however, Parsons’ text comprises the efforts of an interdisciplinary collaboration of psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. In this work, Parsons is interested in the orientation of individual and collective actors to situations, and the mechanisms by which they choose one action over other possible actions. Further, and perhaps most centrally, *Toward a General Theory of Action* is concerned with social stability, or the equilibrium of social systems. This underlying interest colors Parson’s analysis of both personality and cultural systems, and it is apparent through the recurrence of key concepts such as consistency and integration.

According to Parsons’ own definition, the “General Theory” is not a fully-developed theory, but rather a system of categories with which to classify components of action. There are three systems of human action upon which the theory rests: personality, the social system, and the system of culture. From the fundamental structure of these categories, Parsons develops a system of classification that accounts for every aspect of the process by which a social actor understands and evaluates choices of possible actions. The pattern-variables, five distinct axes along which sit all possible modes of relating to a situation, are central to the discussion of how social actors choose from possible pathways of action.

In his discussion of the personality as a system of action, Parsons further discusses the forces which impel individuals to these pathways of action. He sets forth a
variety of “motivational concepts,” distinguishing primarily between “drives” and “need-dispositions.” The former term refers to “‘automatic,’ regulatory devices” in which “no selection or choice is involved” (112) while the latter refers to motivations to action which have taken on “temporal dimensions;” as individuals take the time to contemplate “future possibilities” related to specific actions. (113) Need-dispositions, further, consistently act both in tandem with and in opposition to various other need-dispositions. (114) Also in this section, Parsons examines the mechanisms for learning and performance, and he essentially expands them to fashion a view of the ways in which individuals (personalities) interact with, make meaning of, and derive identity from a larger society. Parsons defines learning as “the acquisition and extinction of orientation and action tendencies.” (125) What this seems to mean, in short, is that there are three basic forms of learning: cognitive learning, which involves a process of discrimination and generalization; cathectic learning, a process of substitution; and evaluative learning, a measuring of impulse against social convention. (123-24)

Parsons further discusses the ways in which personalities make meaning of the outside world. He theorizes that a two-part process of identification and imitation of social patterns functions as the basis for social understanding and eventual performance of social identities. (129, 131) Parsons’ analysis of the “empirical interdependence” of personality and social systems examines the “points of contact” between the two. (146) Using a basic social constructivist argument (somewhat perplexing in the ways it assumes as fact various biological distinctions, like sex, sexual identity -- and pathological variations thereof – and race), he argues that even these biologically based social roles are learned. (147) He further assumes the salience of such traits by contrasting them with
other learned types of personality traits, like intelligence (gleaned from comparison with other members of society). (148)

In his sections on value-orientation and the social system, Parsons continues to expand upon his system of categories. He defines equilibrium as the maintenance of the essential structure of the social system itself (205), while order is defined as peaceful coexistence under conditions of scarcity and is considered to be one of the first functional imperatives of social systems. (180) The fundamental need for order in a system is the root of the strain which appears when an inconsistent value system is translated into action. (175) Two opposite tendencies battle within any stable system. One is to build up and maintain levels of consistency as high as possible; the other is the inherent tendency in any system toward inconsistent subsystems. These two tendencies function within a dynamic equilibrium that includes various accommodating mechanisms. (175)

The organization of action through personality and cultural systems is important insofar as it maintains or disturbs the equilibrium of the social system. The social system depends on the extent to which it can keep the equilibrium of the personality systems of its members from varying beyond certain limits. Because social systems work through their impact on the motivational systems of individuals, it is motivation that needs to be controlled. (226) This happens through socialization and social control. (227)

The functional need for order that underlies any system of action also includes the need for integration of cultural components. (175) The essence of culture is the capacity for interpersonal-generalization. (162) Of the three types of symbol (cultural) systems that form the elements of culture—cognitive, expressive, and evaluative—, it is the last, also defined as standards of value-orientation, that has special importance. These
standards can in turn be sub-classified into cognitive, appreciative, and moral (163), and they are important because they are overwhelmingly involved in the processes of social interaction. (165) Although cognitive symbols are important for the integration and consistency of a cultural system, as well as for adaptation (167), it is the moral value standards that are the “organizers which define and integrate whole systems of action.” (170)

Social systems need to solve two problems in order to maintain their equilibrium: integration and allocation. The first arises out of the fact that a social system is a system of differentiated actions, organized into a system of differentiated roles. This internal differentiation, which is a fundamental property of all systems, requires integration to avoid conflict. (197) Integration is achieved through systems of value-orientation, which are institutionalized and define solidarity, and adaptive structures, through which the system achieves sufficient integration to continue. (219)

The problem of allocation arises out of the scarcity of social and non-social objects of need-dispositions. As a fundamental problem of interaction, allocation is one of the main functions that comprises social systems. (197) The allocative functions of social systems include the allocation of personnel, facilities/resources (power), and rewards (prestige). Strains arising from the working of the allocative mechanisms may constitute some of the most important sources of change. (207)

As a point of critique, the geometrical perfection of Parsons’ theory is troubled at several points; notably, the cultural system, although identified as such, is not actually a system of action in itself. The anthropologists working on the project objected to the demotion of the cultural to the realm of symbolic action – perhaps this is a moment in
which the disciplinary primacy of sociology rears its head over the stated objective of a
unified social scientific effort. The structural momentum by which cultural systems were
originally designated as one of the three system-levels of action, and which pulls together
the entire list of wide-ranging and minute classifications, is both a strength and a
weakness of Parson’s effort.

Finally, the members of our group were left with a myriad of far-ranging
questions after reading and discussing this text. First, Parsons seems to fundamentally
systematize the formation of personality from the learning processes he discusses,
theorizing issues of individuality and deviance as the ultimate cumulative effects of sets
of need-dispositions and social expectations (particularly familial relationships). (155-
56) If this is, in fact, true, what is the precise line between sociology and psychology?
Is, within this theory, anything truly intrinsic to the individual, or is s/he merely just an
amalgam of processes of discrimination, generalization and internalization of outside
patterns of social behavior? Furthermore, and more broadly, does this text technically set
forth a theory, or merely a description, with an accompanying set of classifications? (E.g.
Where is the causality here?) In addition, despite the explanations at the end of Chapter
4 regarding the inherent possibilities for social change, and the attention paid to
allocation of power, the focus on equilibrium and the language itself seem to point to a
basic understanding of order/equilibrium as “normal,” while change is “deviant,” and
even “wrong” (see pages 230-231). Or is this an a-moral, de-politicized, value-neutral
theoretical framework? And, finally, there are echoes of Weber (e.g. allocation of
prestige) and Durkheim (e.g. the importance attached to solidarity) throughout this text;
how are we to read these theorists together?