Top Down Sociology: Understanding Parsonsian Structure

Talcott Parsons sets out to provide a comprehensive theory of society on which all other sociological work can draw. Though social theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attempted to do the same, Parsons’ theory differs from these others in his absolute belief that human actions are determined rationally and systematically. As such, he is concerned with delineating and defining the complex web of circumstances under which rational actors operate. By understanding these complex webs, he argues, social scientists can understand why different societies progress differently. In doing so, Parsons depicts an extremely conservative social world, whereby social change is determined not by individuals, but by the systems under which they live.

At his most parsimonious, Parsons defines action as composed of an actor and a situation, whereby the actor undertakes a cognitive articulation of process toward a goal or outcome. Situations, in this sense, supply more than merely sensory information to which an actor responds. Indeed, situations are social products that reflect the organizational matrix of physical, social, cultural, and symbolic facets, or pattern variables. Making sense of such situations thus requires a cognitive process that cannot be responded to simply out of reflex or instinct, and is thus uniquely human or social processes. In Parsons’ basic action frame then, an individual acts as the independent variable, working towards normative or ideal goals. From this starting point, the entirety of Parsons’ “general theory of action” falls. The remainder of his work lays out what he sees as the three coequal systems that direct individual choice: personality, culture, and
society. In conceptualizing these three distinct but inter-related systems, Parsons argues that his theory provides a standard by which all societies can be understood and compared.

The first system of action that Parsons describes is the personality system. Key to understanding personality is *motivation*, which Parsons defines as the energy that an individual expends to achieve a goal. When this energy is of a physiological orientation it is a drive, such as a sex drive. When the orientation of this energy is determined by social norms surrounding the goal, with which the actor must interact each time s/he sets out toward this goal, this is a *need-disposition*. Parsons states that need-dispositions are created “when drives and their modes of gratification become organized into and with symbolic systems on the cultural level” (113). This organization of drives on the cultural level is what differentiates a simple human drive from a need-disposition. The transformation from physical to need disposition is essential to Parsons’ discussion of internalization of norms. As Parsons describes the three different types of need-dispositions, he describes them as associated with, or having an orientation to, social objects or cultural norms. Our adherence to social norms becomes so ritualized that our behavior becomes internalized.

In this sense, Parsons requires us to take a bit of a theoretical leap. As he argues, the organization of need-dispositions is entirely structurally-determined. This is especially problematic in Parsons’ discussion of learning, where he defines identification and imitation as the two mechanisms of learning from social objects (129). Both of these mechanisms prevent the individual from having any sense of innovation, as she is acquiring her skills from another social object. This learning leads to the reproduction and repetition of acts in society. In short, all of our actions seem to be intended to fulfill some reciprocal obligation or to maintain the stability of the system. As they are one of the most important elements of our personality system, need-
dispositions prevent us from having any individuality with our own personality. In this sense, it seems our Parsonian actions become so internalized that they become automatic, differing little from his own definition of our physical drives.

Second, Parsons turns his attention to the role of culture in systems. Leaving behind the more micro-level discussions of personalities and pluralities of actors, Parsons moves towards a discussion of actors who share culture and “comprise the values which define the common elements in the situation in which they act” (184). In this, Parsons moves from action, which takes place within an individual frame of reference, to interaction, which necessarily takes place between and among more than one individual and within culture. According to Parsons, culture is a concept that must be “distinguished from the other elements of action by the fact that it is intrinsically transmissible from one action system to another…by diffusion” (159). Culture is transmissible because it, unlike the more micro-level need dispositions and role-expectation, is external to the system it controls. Cultural symbols, or cultural objects, need not have a concrete place in the current system of action or have arisen in the current system, they need only be generalizable in order for them to be transmittable.

Having established the importance of culture in the action frames of individuals, Parsons then sets out the three components of culture that can be found in any society. The first component of culture is a cognitive system of symbols, such as beliefs or ideas. The second component is an expressive symbol system based on cathetic functions in which orientations are inward rather than outward. The third component, where the evaluative (problem solving) function has primacy, is called systems of “normative ideas” or “regulatory symbols” (163). These evaluative functions are the standards for value-orientation; they mediate between cognitive systems (beliefs) and cathetic systems (wants). The evaluative function is distinguished
from the other two functions because it orients the actors towards their own orientations rather than towards outside objects alone. In addition, the evaluative function is singular in that it is characterized by three ways to solve problems: through cognitive standards, appreciative standards, and evaluative standards. Evaluative standards are especially important because they elicit moral action which sets “limits of the permissible costs of an expressive gratification or an instrumental achievement by referring to the consequences of such action for the other parts of the system and for the system as a whole” (166).

While moral standards are the key to the definition and integration of “whole systems of action” (170), they cannot be completely consistent because both social systems and personalities have their own value systems that may not be consistent with the common values. Moving to Parsons’ third and final system of action, his insistence that structural systems instruct individual actions is apparent. In this third section, Parsons parcels out the components of society that organize individuals. Again, Parsons begins with the assumption that rational actors seek to fulfill goals. Society, then, must organize the ways in which goal-achievement is mediated. If society did not take this role, individuals would live in a constant Hobbesian natural state, a war of “each against all,” as every individual competes to attain similar goals (197). Parsons’ society, then organizes individuals by doling out “facilities” and “rewards” to structure and temper goal-attainment. This dual allocation system determines who has access to or control over the means to attain goals, and results in individuals becoming institutionalized according to the types of “roles” they are given. For example, an individual might be given land by nature of his family’s status, a managerial position by nature of his achievements, or a laboratory because he has proved himself to be good at inventing new and improved widgets. This ownership of “facilities” serve dual purposes in society. First, the individual is granted power in return for his
or her achievements, and second, individuals are institutionalized into their roles in society. Society also doles out *rewards* that, conceptualized by Parsons, differ from facilities in that they are desired not for their use, but for their own sake. Income, for example, functions as a reward, and increases the prestige of an individual. An individual is congratulated for his achievements and given means to pursue further achievements. These dual allocation processes again, are necessary for individuals to be organized into a cohesive system.

In some ways, Parsons’ theory is so obtuse and difficult to understand that it lends itself to a self-protection of sorts. There are so many variables and categories to contemplate that rigorous theory testing seems to be a daunting if not nearly impossible task. For example, how would we use Parsons’ theory to account for subcultures? Would Parsons’ consider the existence of subcultures a failure of the reward structure, or a rejection of cultural values? Or, are the two so interconnected that rejecting one means automatically rejecting the other? Even further, if the subculture were not a threat to the overall maintenance of society, would Parsons even care about its existence?

A second question that our group contemplated is how we would compare Parsons theory to that of any other theorist that we have studied this semester. Our first impulse was to contrast him with Mead, and in doing such we recognized that while the two theorists operate from very similar frameworks in that they use similar terms and rhetoric, their conclusions are obviously quite different. Aside from this, however, we were hard pressed to find similarities with other theorists. So, is Parsons an innovator in his time? Does his theory represent a break from previous accounts of society?

Taken as a whole, Parsons’ theory of the general action of society seems somehow less *theoretical* than other social theories we have studied. His work in this book strives to *organize*
the ways in which we understand the social world, rather than analyze the social world itself. Ironically, in his attempt to organize, he is more obtuse than enlightening. Though his categories and systems are meticulous, he fails to provide a single empirical observation to support his organizational ideas. Perhaps more important, his theory is difficult to believe as a whole. How can we accept Parsons’ assertion that social scientists can learn to understand, and perhaps predict individuals’ actions in society depending on what type or sub-type of society they are operating in? What are we to do with variation among individuals that is not accounted for by differing social structures? Do societies never change because of the actions of any one individual or group of individuals? To this end, we might understand Parsons’ general theory of action as useful in a limited capacity. His wide-reaching view of the components of society is remarkable. Working from just one of the sub-systems that he describes might provide us with a solid base for empirical observation; it is fair to say that Parsons provides us with hundreds of assertions to test within this single piece of work.

In sum, this review of Parsons’ general theory of action has highlighted the ways in which this theorist conceptualizes the organization of society. Moving from a micro-level examination of actors and situations to a more macro-level examination of actors and societies, Parsons depicts social systems of rationality and order. However, while these systems are may be interdependent, the focus in this theory is on the dominance of society over the individual. While a lack of individual innovative power and empirical observations may be strong limitations of Parsons theory, it is still important for our understanding of the functionalist perspective in sociology.