

Structural Functional Approach

Talcott Parsons

Talcott Parsons began writing in the 1930s and contributed to sociology, political science, anthropology, and psychology. Structural functionalism and Parsons have received a lot of criticism. Numerous critics have pointed out Parsons' underemphasis of political and monetary struggle, the basics of social change, and the by and large "manipulative" conduct unregulated by qualities and standards. Structural functionalism, and a large portion of Parsons' works, appear to be insufficient in their definitions concerning the connections amongst institutionalized and non-institutionalized conduct, and the procedures by which institutionalization happens.

Parsons was heavily influenced by Durkheim and Max Weber, synthesizing 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 behavior, and that these expectations would (if successful) be "derived" from the accepted norms and values of the society they inhabit. As Parsons himself emphasized, in a general context there would never exist any perfect "fit" between behaviors 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 behaviors are repeated in more interactions, and these expectations are entrenched or institutionalized, 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 fulfill any role, the individual is expected to conform to the norms governing the nature of the role they fulfill.

Furthermore, one person can and does fulfill 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 fulfilling its functional needs so that society runs smoothly.

Contrary to prevailing myth, Parsons never spoke about a society where there was no conflict or some kind of "perfect" equilibrium. A society's cultural value-system was in the typical case never completely integrated, never static and most of the time, like in the case of the American society, in a complex state of transformation relative to its historical point of departure. To reach a "perfect" equilibrium was not any serious theoretical question in Parsons analysis of social systems, indeed, the most dynamic societies had generally cultural systems with important inner tensions like the US and India. These tensions were a source of their strength according to Parsons rather than the opposite. Parsons never thought about system-institutionalization and the level of strains (tensions, conflict) in the system as opposite forces per se.

The key processes for Parsons for system reproduction are socialization and social control. Socialization is important because it is the mechanism for transferring the accepted norms and values of society to the individuals within the system. Parsons never spoke about "perfect socialization"—in any society socialization was only partial and "incomplete" from an integral point of view.

Parsons 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.

Socialization 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 formalized, through institutions such as prisons and mental homes. If these two processes were perfect, society would become static and unchanging, but in reality this is unlikely to occur for long.

Parsons recognizes 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 institutionalized, 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 (or therefore a new system) are formed, or society dies. This model of social change has been described as a "moving equilibrium", and emphasizes a desire for social order.

Almond & Powell

In the 1970s, political scientists Gabriel Almond and Bingham Powell introduced a structural-functionalist approach to comparing political systems. They argued that, in order to understand a political system, it is necessary to understand not only its institutions (or structures) but also their respective functions. They also insisted that these institutions, to be properly understood, must be placed in a meaningful and dynamic historical context.

This idea stood in marked contrast to prevalent approaches in the field of comparative politics—the state-society theory and the dependency theory. These were the descendants of David Easton's system theory in international relations, a mechanistic view that saw all political systems as essentially the same, subject to the same laws of "stimulus and response"—or inputs and outputs—while paying little attention to unique characteristics. The structural-functional approach is based on the view that a political system is made up of several key components, including interest groups, political parties and branches of government.

In addition to structures, Almond and Powell showed that a political system consists of various functions, chief among them political socialization, recruitment and communication: socialization refers to the way in which societies pass along their values and beliefs to succeeding generations, and in political terms describe the process by which a society inculcates civic virtues, or the habits of effective citizenship; recruitment denotes the process by which a political system generates interest, engagement and participation from citizens; and communication refers to the way that a system promulgates its values and information.