Parsons: Grand Theory Essay, Research Paper

Talcott Parsons’ Grand Theory is based in the perspective which is commonly referred to as

“structural functionalism.” Parsons himself, however, preferred the term “functional analysis”

after it was suggested by his student, Robert Merton(Coser 1975). For the most part, “structural

functionalism” is the preferred label. Its focus is on the functional requirements, or needs, of a

social system that must be met for the system to survive and the corresponding structures that

meet those needs. The social systems we are referring to tend to perform the tasks that are

necessary for their survival. Sociological analysis comes into play as a search for the social

structures that perform those tasks or meet the needs of the social system(Wallace and Wolf

1999). A basic definition of functionalism would be the study of the social and cultural

phenomena in terms of the functions they perform. The society conceived in functionalism is a

system of interrelated parts that are interdependent of one another. If a change in one part takes

place, then their is a change in the system and reorganization occurs in an effort to once again

achieve equilibrium(Wallace and Wolf 1999). It is this strive toward equilibrium that Parsons is

most concerned with in his Grand Theory. While Parsons’ contributions are great, there were

many who paved the way before him.

Intellectuals such as Auguste Comte, Herber Spencer, Vilfredo Pareto, and Emile

Durkheim laid much of the ground work. Comte, Spencer, and Pareto contributed the concept of

the interdependence of parts of the social system, while Durkheim emphasized integration or

solidarity. Both ideas Parsons incorporated into his paradigm. It was Comte who introduced the

concept of equilibrium to functionalism, which he borrowed from biology’s treatment of

homeostasis. Spencer’s differentiation, as in the mutual dependence of unlike parts of the system

brought about inevitably by an increase in a society’s size, is thought of today as an important

aspect of a social system’s interrelatedness and integration. By integration we mean the

incorporation of individuals into the social order, which is essential to the maintenance of social

equilibrium. It was Durkheim, the most important forerunner of modern functionalism, who

championed integration and conceptionalized the function of the division of labor(Wallace and

Wolf 1999). Parsons was greatly influenced by these two concepts.

Durkheim viewed social evolution as a movement from the mechanical solidarity of tribal

societies to the organic solidarity characteristic of industrial societies. At the heart of both

societies is the collective conscience, which he defined as “the totality of beliefs and sentiments

common to average citizens of the same society.” Primitive societies with mechanical solidarity

had a strong collective conscience but little individualism. As the division of labor increased, so

did individualism. This, in turn, led to a corresponding decrease in the collective conscience and a

shift to organic solidarity. With this foundation of great ideas, and his own experience in the

biological studies, Parsons was ready to form his own functionalism perspective. His

contributions include: his system of action, his action schema, the pattern variables, and the

system problems.

For Parsons, the system was the center of his thinking from a very early age(Wallace and

Ruth 1999). His general theory of action includes four systems: the cultural system, the social

system, the personality system, and the behavioral organism system. Each system in turn has a

basic unit of analysis, or variable by which it is measured. For the cultural system it is “meaning”

or “symbolic systems” like national values, religious beliefs, or languages. In Parsons view,

cultural traditions are made up of shared symbolic systems, with the focus on shared values. An

important concept for the cultural system in socialization, or the process where societal values are

internalized by a society’s members. For Parsons, socialization is an important force in

maintaining social control and holding a society together(Wallace and Wolf 1999). The next level

in Parsons’s scheme is the social system.

The social system’s basic unit is “role interaction”, which refers to how individual actors

interact in relation to their roles in society. Parsons defined the social system as two of more

individuals, or collectivities, interacting in a situation which has at least a physical of

environmental aspect, whose actors are motivated toward personal gratification, and whose

relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and influenced by the cultural system.

The basic unit of the personality system is the individual actor, or human. The main focus

at this level is on the individual’s “motivation toward gratification,” which Parsons emphasizes in

his definition of the social system. More specifically, the focus is on the needs, motives, and

attitudes involved in this “motivation.” This assumption, that people are self-interested or profit

maximizers, is also found in both conflict theory and exchange theory(Wallace and Wolf 1999).

For the behavioral organism, the fourth system, the basic unit is the human being in its

biological sense. By this Parson is referring to the physical aspect of the human person, including

the physical and organic environment in which the human lives. Parsons is particularly interested

in the organism’s central nervous system and motor activity. His view of socialization is what

makes the before mentioned systems interrelated.

We, according to Parsons, are merely behavioral organisms at birth. It is when a person

comes into contact with society and its members does that person internalize the values of the

prevailing cultural system. In other words, the person learns role expectations, as mentioned in

the social system, and so become full participants in that society. The socialization disseminates

from the first system to the last. Values first come from the cultural system. Then the

corresponding normative, or role expectations, are learned in the social system. The individuals

identity comes from the personality system and the necessary biological equipment comes from

the behavioral system. Parsons does not consider these four systems to be mutually exclusive.

Instead they exhibit the interdependence that functionalism consistently stresses. It is the context

of the four systems that Parsons attempts to describe actual behavior in his theory of action.

He begins with an actor, which could be either a single person or a collectivity. Parsons

sees the actor as being motivated, as in “motivated toward gratification,” to spend energy and

resources to reach a desirable goal or end. This goal or end is defined in the actor by the cultural

system through socialization. The action takes place in situation defined by the social system and

includes means(facilities, tools, or resources) and conditions(obstacles that arise in the pursuit of

the goal). Being that means are scarce in society and conditions are unforeseeable, the situation

could be so restricting the goal may be unattainable. These elements are regulated by the

normative standards of the social system and an actor who is motivated to pursue a goal must

fulfill those normative expectations. It is because of this standard for goal attainment it could be

said that norms are central to Parsons’ theory of action and the cultural system that legitimates

them is primary(Wallace and Wolf 1999). The theory of action describes the relationship between

a motivated actor, a goal, and the conditions that are defined by the cultural system but says little

about the different contingencies and expectations actors are likely to face in the situation. In an

attempt to show the actor’s situation in not entirely unstructured and uncertain he formulated the

pattern variables.

This segment of Parsons’s work is based on Ferdinand Toennie’s

gemeinschaft-gesellschaft typology. Toennies focuses on contrasting primitive communities,

characterized by close personal bonds or kinship relations, with modern industrial societies, which

are characterized by more impersonal or business-type relationships. As mentioned earlier,

Durkheim analyzed the types of solidarity in primitive and modern societies. Like both before

him, Parsons considers the difference between primitive and modern societies to be fundamental.

He labels relationships in traditional societies expressive, and relationships in modern society

instrumental. Each pattern variable, to Parsons, represents a problem or delimma that must be

solved by the actor before the action can take place(Wallace and Wolf 1999).

The first choice an actor must make is between ascription(expressive) and

achievement(instrumental). The problem is whether the actor chooses to orient themselves

toward others on the basis of ascribed qualities, like sex, age, race, or ethnicity, or on the basis of

what they can do or have done, as in performance. To Parsons, the choice is not an arbitrary one

because at the core of this decision are normative expectations.

The second pattern variable is diffuseness(expressive) or specificity(instrumental). The

issue at hand here is the range of demands in the relationship. If the number and types of demands

or responsibilities are wide-ranging then it is a diffuse relationship, much like a close friendship. If

the scope of the relationship is narrow or very limited then it is specific, much like the relationship

between a patient and a doctor. Parson argues that in modern societies with a high division of

labor, the choice generally involves specifically defined behavior. In traditional societies, more of

the relationships are diffuse.

The third pattern variable is affectivity(expressive) or affective neutrality(instrumental).

The issue here is simply whether the actor can expect emotional gratification in the relationship.

Parson used the school system as an example of this choice. When a child first enters school they

have already become accustomed to their affective relationship with their parents. The child soon

realizes, through socialization, that the relationship with the teacher is affectively neutral. In this

way the school institution teaches the child to tread a predominantly instrument path which is the

type of worker needed in a modern society.

The fourth pattern variable is particularism(expressive) or universalism(instrumental).

The choice here is between reacting on the basis of some generality or reacting on the basis of

some particular relationship to a person or one’s membership in a group. Discrimination is a good

example of choices being made on the basis of particularistic criteria rather than universalistic

criteria expounded by modern societies(Wallace and Wolf 1999).

The final variable is collectivity(expressive) or self(instrumental). This is the choice

between gratifying private interests or whether to fulfill some collective obligation or duty. Those

in the business world are preoccupied with self-interest when striving for profit. On the other

hand, a civil servant is expected to carry out their duties in the best interest of the public.

Once Parsons had the pattern variable defined he then set out to further define those

variables and reduce the lack of certainty in his theory of action about what goals actors would

pursue. The AGIL model was his attempt to incorporate his theory propositions about the nature

of goals. With the collaboration of Robert F. Bales, Parsons conducted experiments on leadership

in small groups. They found in a typical meeting it began with a request for and the providing of

information that would solve the problem of a common orientation to the task. The group would

then try to solve the problem of evaluation and make decisions about the task at hand. An

attempt at consensus through social control was next. If the cycle was successful then it would

end with activity expressing solidarity and tension reduction, which such things like humor, to

repair any damage done to social integration and to bring the group back to the equilibrium that

existed before hand. Parsons decided that Bale’s categories for analyzing small group interaction

and the activities all small groups engage in could be expanded beyond small groups to include all

systems of action, if reconceptualized. This led Parsons to the four-function paradigm in which he

identifies the major problems action oriented systems must solve if the are to maintain equilibrium,

develop, and survive. Parsons argues that all action systems face four major problems, or have

four needs: adaption, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance-tension

management. Parsons usually pictures society or the system in question as a large square that he

divides into four equal parts and label with the letters AGIL.

By A, adaption, Parsons is referring to the need of a system to secure sufficient resources

form the environment and distribute them throughout. This is commonly accomplished through

social institutions which are interrelated systems of social norms and roles that satisfy those needs.

If a social system is to survive it needs certain structures or institutions to perform the function of

adaption to the environment. Our economic institution meets this need.

The G stands for goal attainment. It is the system’s need to mobilize its resources and

energies to establish priorities among and attain system goals. In democratic societies this system

problem would be the concern of political institutions.

By I Parsons is referring to Integration. This is the need to coordinate, adjust, and

regulate relationships among various actors or collectivities within the system thereby preventing

mutual interference and keeping the system functioning. Integration has been the priority of

functionalists, since Durkheim, and because of this, it is the central variable of the paradigm. Legal

institutions meet the need for social control(Wallace and Wolf 1999).

The last system need is the L, or latent pattern maintenance-tension management. This

need has two parts. The first is to make certain actors are sufficiently motivated to play their

parts of the system or maintain the current values. The second is to provide mechanisms for

internal tension management. In America institutions like the family, religion, the media, and

education cater to this need. Parsons the same problems face every system, from large social

systems to each of their subsystems. He considers these four system needs as the prerequisites for

social equilibrium. However, Parsons’s theory of action, pattern variables, and AGIL model have

not gone on without criticism.

One of the objectives is Parsons’s failure to deal adequately with role conflict. The pattern

variables do not necessarily apply to every specific act within the role as he states according to

Robert Merton(Sztompka 1996). Merton gives the example that the role of an elected official is

collectivity-oriented but still allows the officials to be self-oriented in choosing among jobs. Yet,

the public still expects the official to be collectivity-oriented when making public policy.

Parsons system variables trouble some sociologists as well. In his later years Parsons

moved from interaction to instead focus on wholes as systems devided up into subsystems

according to Nicos Mouzelis(1995). His problem with the shift in focus is these subsystems do

not refer to groups or actors. They instead focus on institutionalized norms that are grouped

together in regards to one of the social system’s four functional needs. The subsystems

themselves refer to institutions rather than actors so that subsystems are devided into

sub-subsystems with no place for groups or actors

Another of the main objectives refers to the inability of Parsons’s grand theory to describe

social change. This may very well be true. However, Alvin Boskoff(1995:207) states that their

are two fundamental problems of general theory. The first one: “What factors account for

changes within a system?” The second: “What is the relation between these processes and the

factors or conditions that produce changes of a system?” Boskoff then argues that Parsons was

merely concentrating on the first question since it logically precedes the second and thereby

provides a basis for then dealing with the second. So perhaps the real argument, a semantically

one albeit, is against the “grand” before “theory.”

Parsons knew there were weakness or inadequacies in his theory of action. So he

developed the pattern variables. He saw inadequacies in them so he developed the functional

system problems. In his book “Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory,”(1977) he

states that what he has concerned himself with in the social field relates to concerns found in the

biological sciences, linguistics, psychology, political science, and social anthropology. With this

relation he saw “a very fruitful interaction.” It is, perhaps, with this interaction that a theory will

warrant the word “grand” in front of it.

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