

Structural-Functional Perspective¹

On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address described the United States Civil War as a test of whether a "new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" would "long endure." There is no guarantee that any society or nation will "long endure." But for people living in a well-established society, its survival and stability are likely to be taken for granted and not seen as problematic unless threatened by a more powerful enemy. We should recognize, however, that the relative position of any society is dependent on several factors, both internal and external, that determine its relative strength or weakness as well as its long-term survival prospects. Historian Paul Kennedy's (1987) analysis of the rise and fall of the great powers has shown that no power can take its continued dominance for granted.

Understanding the requirements for the survival of a society and other social systems is a major feature of functional theory. Fundamental questions regarding how individuals are socialized to become contributing members of society, and how its different "parts" (or social institutions) fit together to insure its survival and maintain social order, are crucial in functional analysis. This societal focus is implicit in many public policy discussions concerning the long-range consequences of alternative policy decisions. Political leaders often engage in passionate debate regarding their contrasting visions of what is good for society and the welfare of its members. Individuals may be asked to sacrifice their own welfare for the good of society, as members of the armed forces do routinely when in combat. As expressed in the challenging words of President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." The implication is that the well-being and even the survival of society are dependent on its members' willingness to make their contributions.

For modern sociology, functional theory was developed most systematically by Talcott Parsons, along with numerous colleagues. Although Parsons' earliest contribution was an attempt to integrate previous perspectives into a comprehensive theory of social action, he is best remembered for his structural/functional analysis of the overall society. In this perspective, the focus is on how individuals' actions are organized through their roles in social institutions in ways that contribute to

¹ A large portion of the material in this chapter is adapted from D. P. Johnson ([1981] 1986:328–428).

society's basic functional requirements. Although functional theory is usually seen as most relevant for a macro-level analysis of society itself, the strategy of functional analysis can be applied to any social system, including those at the micro and meso levels. Following a brief introductory section, the major themes from Parsons' structural-functional framework to be discussed in this chapter are as follows:

- **Voluntaristic theory of social action**—Parsons argued that human behavior involves choices people make, but these choices are regulated by shared values and norms.
- **The pattern variables**—This refers to a series of specific choices individuals make within the normative guidelines of their society with regard to their orientations toward others as well as the priority they are expected to give to their own interests versus their normative obligations.
- **The strategy of structural-functional analysis**—This section, sometimes considered the heart of Parsons' theory, will deal with how the major institutional structures of society fit together in fulfilling its functional requirements. Parsons' AGIL model, which is perhaps his most enduring legacy to contemporary theory, will be seen as applicable to other social system as well as the overall society.
- **Hierarchy of cultural control**—Social systems are shown in this section to be linked to the culture, personality patterns, and the behavioral organism as analytically distinct systems. Cultural values and norms are seen as controlling the dynamics of social systems and personality formation, but this control operates within the constraints and conditions established by the lower level systems in the hierarchy.
- **Structural differentiation and evolutionary change**—Despite his strong emphasis on stability and social order, Parsons also used his perspective to analyze the evolutionary changes leading to modern society.
- **The ultimate meaning of human life**—This section reflects Parsons' efforts to provide a comprehensive analysis of the "human condition" that incorporates the level of ultimate or transcendent meanings (as expressed in religious beliefs and symbols, for example) as well as the material environment and biological characteristics of human beings.

The Voluntaristic Theory of Social Action

Parsons' (1937) early theory of social action was based on an intensive critical analysis of the works of Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber—all early theorists from across the Atlantic. His major argument was that these theorists converged, despite different starting points, in pointing to the essential elements of a voluntaristic theory of social action. Parsons regarded his contribution as identifying these crucial elements and integrating them in a more general and systematic perspective. In pursuing this goal, he made extensive use of the means-ends framework. His analysis was complex, but the basic ideas are consistent with our common sense and everyday experience. In its barest essentials, his argument is that all social action has the following characteristics:

1. it is goal directed (or has an **end**);
2. it takes place in a situation that provides **means** individuals can use to achieve their goal, plus **conditions** the actor cannot change, and
3. it is **normatively regulated** with respect to the choice of both ends and means.

In effect, Parsons' analysis was intended as a comprehensive synthesis of the opposing viewpoints of positivism and idealism.⁵ Although positivism itself is not a unified theoretical or philosophical position, the point to note is that it involves a deterministic model of human behavior. In Parsons' terms, this implied that behavior could be adequately explained as being determined by either the situation or the underlying characteristics of human nature. This emphasis ignored the role of individual choice, as well as the normative orientation that governed and regulated individuals' choices with regard to the means employed and the ends or goals that are sought.

⁵For a concise overview of the schools of thought that Parsons attempted to integrate in his voluntaristic theory, see Devereux (pp. 1–63, especially pp. 7–20 in Black, ed., 1961). The discussion that follows differs from Devereux's, however. Devereux distinguished (1) utilitarianism and economic theory, (2) positivism, and (3) idealism. The discussion that follows is based on Parsons' treatment of utilitarianism as one branch of positivism which he contrasted with an "anti-intellectual" branch. Of the four theorists analyzed, Marshall, Pareto, and Durkheim start from a positivist position, while Weber starts from the general context of German historicism and idealism. In each case, however, Parsons contends that these theorists each moved toward a recognition of the validity of the opposing position.

Parsons distinguished between a utilitarian branch of positivism and an “antiintellectual” branch. In the utilitarian branch, represented by British economist Alfred Marshall, individuals consciously adapt to the environment in their efforts to meet their individual needs. In the antiintellectual branch, individuals are influenced by conditions of which they may not be consciously aware. These include underlying sentiments that motivate their actions as suggested in Pareto’s early theory (see Chap. 2). Durkheim also started from a positivist foundation in Parsons’ view. This was manifested in his emphasis on the external reality of social facts which he developed in opposition to the individualistic approach of utilitarianism. Later, however, Durkheim moved toward a position of sociological idealism in showing how individuals internalize collective representations (ideas, beliefs, values, and normative patterns) in their subjective consciousness.⁶

In contrast to positivism, idealism emphasized the normative orientation that governs individuals’ choices. Its major shortcoming in Parsons’ view was that it did not deal adequately with the constraining effects of the environment or with the limitations and predispositions of human beings’ biological characteristics. Cultural values do not implement themselves automatically; instead, human energy must be expended in confronting and overcoming obstacles and in making use of material resources in an effort to achieve them or have them manifested in their individual and collective lives.

Of the four theorists Parsons analyzed, it was Weber, in Parsons’ view, who demonstrated most systematically that cultural values and norms can be incorporated in a comprehensive model of social action that also recognizes the importance of material conditions and the social environment. Both emphases—the subjective normative orientation and the objective situational context—are crucial for a general theory of action. The normative orientation gives direction to individuals’ choices of means and ends, while the situational context provides opportunities and sets constraints for individuals’ actions. The basic argument in Parsons’ voluntaristic theory of social action is that individuals make choices, but their choices are normatively regulated with regard to the goals individuals pursue and the means they employ to reach these goals.

The Strategy of Structural-Functional Analysis

All social relationships involve mutual orientations of two or more persons toward one another, and these orientations can be classified in terms of the pattern variables. Although their actions are goal-oriented, reflecting their concerns with their overall gratification/deprivation balance, Parsons' goal is to emphasize that the specific manner in which goals are pursued and gratification is sought will be governed by the normative standards and value orientations of the overall culture. Also, in addition to satisfying individual needs and interests, additional requirements must be fulfilled for social relationships and systems to endure—and this is the specific emphasis of functional theory. Such requirements include, for example, maintaining compatible mutual orientations (not only in terms of general cultural values and norms but also in terms of specific role expectations) and developing ways to resolve conflicts. This applies to all social systems, from the simplest dyadic relationship to a complex society.

By the early 1950s, Parsons gave higher priority to the functional requirements of society (and other social systems) than to the categorization of individuals' orientations in terms of his pattern variables. Since social systems are made up of individuals, one underlying requirement is to insure that the basic needs of their members are met and that their motivations are linked to their roles in the system. However, the functional requirements of social systems are not the same as the needs and goals of individuals. Parsons' social system focus gave rise to an in-depth analysis of the social structures (or subsystems) through which the functional requirements of social systems (including the overall society in particular) are met. Although the pattern variables were no longer the primary focus of attention, they can be used to categorize and analyze the basic structures of the social relations through which these functional requirements are met. An early formulation of this structural-functional approach was provided in Parsons' (1951) book, *The Social System* (see also Parsons, 1949:212–237).

The transition from individuals' actions to social structures requires clarification of some additional concepts. A "role" refers to patterns of action that are expected by virtue of a being in a particular relationship or occupying a particular position or status. Actions that an individual is expected to perform are the responsibilities of a role; the actions or responses expected of others constitute its rights. The concept of role is linked with the concept of status, which in this usage refers to a person's position in a relationship or social system, not to prestige. Roles (or status-roles) are the most elementary units of social structure and, in Parsons' terms, are "the primary mechanisms through which the essential functional prerequisites of the system are met." (Parsons, 1951:115)

Roles are organized into larger units referred to as "institutions." The concept of **institution** in this context does not refer to a particular organization, but to a set of roles and normative patterns that are relevant to a particular functional problem. Parsons used "collectivity" to refer to a specific social organization. Thus, for example, in contrast to a particular business firm, the economy as an institution

consists of a whole set of institutionalized patterns such as private property, occupational choice, the monetary and credit system, contractual relationships, bureaucratic forms of organization, and the like. As Parsons explains the distinction, "A collectivity is a system of concretely interactive specific roles. An institution on the other hand is a complex of patterned elements in role-expectations which may apply to an indefinite number of collectivities." (Parsons, 1951:115)

Functional Requirements and Institutional Structures of Societies

A major goal of Parsons' functional analysis was to explain the mechanisms that produce congruence between individuals' motives and needs, specific role expectations, and shared cultural values. The concepts of **internalization** and **institutionalization** are used to describe the processes involved. Internalization is the process whereby cultural value orientations and role expectations are incorporated into the personality system through socialization. As Parsons explained, "It is only by virtue of internalization of institutionalized values that a genuine motivational integration of behavior in the social structure takes place, that the 'deeper' layers of motivation become harnessed to the fulfillment of role-expectations." (Parsons, 1951:42)

While internalization refers to the personality system, institutionalization refers to the social system. When internalized normative commitments lead to actions that fulfill the expectations of others and elicit their approval, they can be said to be institutionalized. As Parsons noted, "In so far as... conformity with a value-orientation standard meets both these criteria, that is, from the point of view of any given actor in the system, it is both a mode of the fulfillment of his own need-dispositions and a condition of 'optimizing' the reactions of other significant actors, that standard will be said to be 'institutionalized.'" (Parsons, 1951:38)

In addition to the need for congruence between the personality system, social system, and cultural system, additional functional requirements can be identified within each of these systems. At the level of the individual personality, there is a need to maintain at least minimal equilibrium between competing needs and motives. Similarly, the pattern of role expectations in the social system must be compatible with minimal needs for order and integration. In addition, mechanisms are needed to solve the recurrent problems of allocation of material resources, rewards, authority, and power, and for integrating and coordinating the actions of various individuals into a system. At the level of the cultural system there is the need to insure a minimal degree of consistency or symbolic congruence in values and cognitive orientations.¹²

Parsons' emphasis on congruence and consistency has been subjected to much criticism. Gideon Sjoberg (pp. 339-345 in Demerath and Peterson, eds., 1967), for

¹²Dealing with inconsistencies at the cultural level is a major focus of Margaret Archer's (1988) more recent perspective on cultural elaboration and change. Archer's perspective on culture will be reviewed in more detail in Chap. 19.

example, suggested that social systems may have contradictory functional requirements involving inconsistent values. To illustrate, a social system may place a high value on equality at the same time that it also places a high value on providing rewards consistent with individuals' accomplishment when levels of achievement clearly differ among different people. Both of these values may be important but for different functional requirements. Sjoberg suggests that a dialectical type of analysis can help direct attention to such internal strains and conflicts.

Since functional analysis can be applied to different groups and organizations within society, strains and conflicts may be expected as these groups and organizations seek to fulfill their own functional requirements, sometimes in competition with one another and with the overall society's functional requirements. This means that mechanisms for resolving conflicts must be considered. Moreover, socialization is never so complete that individuals' needs and motives always correspond 100% with the role requirements and value orientations of the society. Because of the strains and tensions that exist between social expectations and individuals' needs and impulses, mechanisms of social control are needed to deal with deviant or rebellious behavior when it occurs (Parsons, 1951:249-325). Parsons' functional analysis grows out of his analysis of the "human condition" and the need for people to cooperate in adapting to their environment in order to survive. To meet the basic needs of society the following specific types of structures should be expected to be found in some form in any society. (The following discussion of these structures is drawn from Parsons, 1951:153-167.)

Kinship Structures—concerned with the regulation of sexual expression plus the care and training of the young. Since infants and young children are unable to survive on their own for several years after birth, their ability to function as members of society requires extensive socialization. In modern societies socialization also occurs within the specialized educational establishment.

Instrumental Achievement Structures and Stratification—needed to channel individuals' motivational energy to accomplish tasks necessary for maintaining the overall welfare of society in accordance with its shared values. To motivate the actions needed, rewards are provided in proportion to members' contributions. In this way the stratification system is linked with instrumental achievement. In America (and other modern societies), it is through the occupational structure that instrumental achievement activities are organized. The distribution of money, prestige, and power are coupled closely with the occupational structure within the economic system and other institutions as well. This explanation of stratification has been criticized as justifying inequality and reflecting an unrealistic view of which contributions to society are most valuable or essential. For example, are the contributions of top athletic stars more valuable than the contributions of school teachers? The dynamics of market systems and socioeconomic class structures, as discussed in the last chapter, may be more crucial than the functional importance of a particular role in explaining social and economic inequalities.

Territoriality, Force, and the Integration of the Power System—the need for some form of territorial organization for controlling internal conflict, developing

policies for relating to other societies, and territorial defense. This means that all societies must have some form of political organization and systems for internal and external defense (law enforcement and military organizations).

Religion and Value Integration—the requirement to define cultural values and reinforce commitment to them. Religion has traditionally provided the overarching cultural worldview that gives ultimate significance to the society's shared value system. Even when traditional religions undergo change or deterioration, it is important for societies to develop some type of shared values and ultimate meaning system and to reinforce people's commitments to these shared orientations. This applies particularly to those involving basic moral codes that govern individuals' transactions and relations with one another.

In line with the differences in the contributions that various structures make in fulfilling these requirements, there will be corresponding variations in the pattern variables manifested in them. For example, kinship systems will be characterized by affectivity, particularism, ascription, diffuseness, and a collectivity orientation. Instrumental achievement structures in modern societies, in contrast, are more likely to reflect affective neutrality, universalism, achievement, specificity, and a self-orientation. However, the extent to which these variables are involved in instrumental achievement will be heavily influenced by the degree to which instrumental achievement is structurally segregated from the kinship system. If instrumental achievement is carried out within the context of the kinship system (as in many primitive societies or in a family business enterprise in contemporary society), these patterns are likely to be undermined by the conflicting dynamics of kinship ties.