

Talcott Parson's Action System

Structural functionalism is a broad perspective in sociology which looks at society as a structure with interrelated parts. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the functions of its constituent element, namely; norms, customs, tradition and institutions. Talcott Parson's is widely known for this work with structural functionalism and his action system theory and the AGIL scheme.

Function is a complex of activities directed toward meeting a need, or need of a system. Four parts to the AGIL scheme are:

- A. Adaptation- a system must adapt to its environment,
- G. Goal attainment- a system must define and achieve its primary goals,
- I. Integration – a system must maintain a relationship with its other parts and
- L. Latency – a system must maintain and renew both the motivation of individual and cultural patterns that create and sustain that motivation.

Heart of Parson's work is based on his four action systems, Social system, Cultural system, Personality system and Behavioral organism. Parson designed his AGIL scheme to be used at all levels in his theoretical system. The behavioral organism is the action system that handles the adaptation function by adjusting to and transforming the external world. The personality system performs the goal-attainment functions by defining system goals and mobilizing resources to attain them. The social system copes with the integration function by controlling its parts. Finally, the cultural system performs the latency function by providing actors with the norms and values that motivate them for action.

Work on the social system began in micro level with ego and alter ego. He used the status-role complex as the basic unit of the system. It is the system that consists of the plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the optimization of

gratification. Actor is viewed, not in terms of thought and actions but instead as a bundle of statuses and role. Some functional prerequisite for the social system to survive, social system must have support of other systems, must be able to meet the need, and support many actors, must have control over disruptions in the system. The actors are a vital part of the social system. He was also interested in how the values and norms of the system get transferred to the actor. He deduced that in a successful system, the values and norms get internalized and become part of the actor's consciousness. This gets put into the actor at an early age, and over the years the actor develops that ego and alter ego to work in the conformity of the system. Socialization process and social control allow the social system to maintain its equilibrium even with deviance from the actors.

Culture is the principal force binding the various elements of the social world. Cultural system mediates the interaction among actors and personality and the social systems. Culture can become a part of the other systems. As cultural values and norms are put into an actor and it shapes them. It can dictate both the ego and alter ego of person and also affect the role of actor in the system.

Personality system is not only controlled by cultural system but also by the social system. Personality is defined as the organized system of orientation and motivation of actions of the individual actor. The motivation comes from need; however, the need is also influenced by the social and cultural system.

Behavioral organism is the source of energy for the rest of the system. Behavioral organism itself is the actor and is made of complex structure in itself and able to develop ego and alter ego.

Argument against Parsons Action Theory was that he did not account for social change. To deal with this, he developed evolutionary theory. This theory showed that through different evolutionary process changes may occur. Also, adaptive upgrading shows that social change are adapted into a person's being to be passed on to the next generation. No other sociological theory in history has been the focus of as much interest and criticism as structural functionalism. It is said to be ahistorical, not able to deal with issue of social change and unable to deal with conflict. All criticism point to two things, first it seems clear that structural

functionalism has unusually narrow focus that prevents it from addressing a number of pertinent issues and aspect of the social world. Second, it focus tends to give it a decidedly conservative flavor; structural functionalism has operated in support of the status quo and dominant elites.

Parson's theory of social action is based on his concept of the society. Parsons is known in the field of sociology mostly for his theory of social action.

Action is a process in the actor-situation system which has motivational significance to the individual actor or in the case of collectively, its component individuals.

On the basis of this definition it may be said that the processes of action are related to and influenced by the attainment of the gratification or the avoidance of deprivations of the correlative actor, whatever they concretely be in the light of the relative personal structures that there may be. All social actions proceed from mechanism which is their ultimate source. It does not mean that these actions are solely connected with organism. They are also connected with actor's relations with other persons' social situations and culture.

Systems of social action

Social actions are guided by the following three systems which may also be called as three aspects of the systems of social action Personality system: This aspect of the system of social action is responsible for the needs for fulfilment of which the man makes effort and performs certain actions. But once man makes efforts he has to meet certain conditions. These situations have definite meaning and they are distinguished by various symbols and symptoms. Various elements of the situation come to have several meanings for ego as signs or symbols which become relevant to the organization of his expectation system.

Cultural system: Once the process of the social action develops the symbols and the signs acquire general meaning. They also develop as a result of systematised system and ultimately when different actors under a particular cultural system perform various social interactions, special situation develops.

Social System: A social system consists in a plurality of individual actor's interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect actors are motivated in terms of tendency to the optimization of gratification and whose relations to the situation including each other is defined and motivated in terms of system of culturally structured and shaped symbols.

In Parson's view each of the three main type of social action systems-culture, personality and social systems has a distinctive coordinative role in the action process and therefore has some degree of causal autonomy. Thus personalities organize the total set of learned needs, demands and action choices of individual actors, no two of whom are alike.

Every social system is confronted with 4 functional problems. These problems are those of pattern maintenance, integration, goal attainment and adaptation. Pattern maintenance refers to the need to maintain and reinforce the basic values of the social system and to resolve tensions that emerge from continuous commitment to these values. Integration refers to the allocation of rights and obligations, rewards and facilities to ensure the harmony of relations between members of the social system. Goal attainment involves the necessity of mobilizing actors and resources in organized ways for the attainment of specific goals. Adaptation refers to the need for the production or acquisition of generalized facilities or resources that can be employed in the attainment of various specific goals. Social systems tend to differentiate these problems so as to increase the functional capabilities of the system. Such differentiation whether through the temporal specialization of a structurally undifferentiated unit or through the emergence of two or more structurally distinct units from one undifferentiated unit is held to constitute a major verification of the fourfold functionalist schema. It also provides the framework within which are examined the plural interchanges that occur between structurally differentiated units to provide them with the inputs they require in the performance of their functions and to enable them to dispose of the outputs they produce.