

Talcott Parsons Theoretical Contributions to Sociology

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Sociology 401: Sociological Theory

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April 20, 2024

Introduction

In this paper sociologist Talcott Parsons and his theoretical contributions to sociology will be examined. Parsons background, education, and accomplishments will be discussed as well as how those factors shaped his sociological theories. Talcott Parsons was well known among the sociological profession as an American Sociologist. Parsons was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado December 13, 1902. He was born the youngest of five children to Edward Parsons and Mary Augusta Ingersoll. His father was a Congregationalist minister as well as an English professor and then Dean of faculty at Colorado College. Because Parsons father was a minister religion was a large part of his childhood and upbringing. Talcott Parsons was married to Helen Walker who he had met in London, and they had one son, Charles Parsons (New World Encyclopedia, 2020).

Talcott Parsons began his university studies at Amherst in Massachusetts where he had originally planned to study to become a physician. However, he later changed his major to economics and received his Bachelor of Arts (BA) in 1924. Parsons then began studying sociology and economics in Europe where he received his PhD from the University of Heidelberg, Germany. After completing his education, he worked at Amherst before he obtained a full-time position at Harvard University in 1931 (Allan & Daynes, 2017). Parsons spent most of his career at Harvard University and in 1945 created the Department of Social Relations which combined sociology, psychology, and anthropology into one department. Parsons did this in order to break down barriers between the disciplines (Harvard Archives, 2023). Parsons also published numerous works, one of which was called *The Structure of Social Action* which was published in 1937. In this work he began to form his general theory of action. Then in 1951 Parsons published *The Social System* and *Toward a General Theory of Action* and in these works

he edited his general theory of action. But that was just the beginning as Parsons spent most of his career editing and changing his theory (Harvard Archives, 2023).

Major Concerns

A major concern of Talcott Parsons was social order. Parsons wanted to know exactly how social order is achieved in societies. He believed that social order is achieved through norms that society has and uses. In his work, he synthesized three other theorists Marx, Weber, and Freud to better understand social order. Parsons, unlike other theorists wanted to incorporate the whole which was essential for his work as he combined many different perspectives (Merton, Bellah, Pitts, Williams, & Riley, 1980). The overall goal for Talcott Parsons was that “he wanted to comprehend the totality of the human context and to offer a full and complete explanation of social action (Allan & Daynes, 2017).”

Theoretical Contributions

The first theory perspective Parsons uses to explain social action is structural functionalism. From this perspective he says that every group in a society tends to fulfill the following: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. This is part of the general theoretical system that provides a better understanding of society through structural functionalism. Adaptation is changing to the social and physical environment while goal attainment is having goals and engaging others to achieve those goals. Integration is bringing society and groups together creating a whole and latency is maintaining motivation with management resources to ensure everyone in society is doing what they are expected to do (New World Encyclopedia, 2020).

In relation to his four society functions discussed above he also created four subsystems of society. These subsystems consisted of the economy which serves as a function by creating

and dispersing resources for the individual and society. The polity which is a subgroup that works to attain collective goals such as government agencies. The third subsystem is the societal community where groups share types of lifestyles to endure ties of solidarity. The last system he created was the fiduciary system, which is focused on sharing, maintaining, and building upon societies shared values. By developing these subsystems Parsons reinforced his theory that norms were a way of maintaining social order (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2011).

Parsons also created a theory based on behavior and action which has a component known as the unit act. The unit act is when there are conditions to an act, means to the act, and an end of the action. To formulate the unit act however, there needs to be an actor, a goal, means which is how the act is done, situational conditions, and norms (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2011). This also ties into his theory about voluntaristic action which he drew from Max Weber. Typically, a person's actions are done so for a meaningful reason and therefore, it is never done because a person wants to. People act voluntarily for their own benefit and to attain their own goals. This is often driven by norms, values, and determination. However, Parsons did not stop there he then came up with patterning voluntaristic action. Parsons made the argument that patterning voluntaristic action has two levels. The first level is structuring the behaviors, and the second level is individual socialization. In other words, people are motivated for their own internal reasons and the social world requires conformity. Therefore, people can change their motivation to conform to society and its expectations (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

Parsons Legacy

One of Talcott Parsons biggest contributions to sociology the way he conducted he research. He focused on the essential ideas in relation to his topic. He wanted to follow logic and evidence rather than following theoretical formulas. His primary focus on fundamental

theoretical issues paved the way for future sociologists especially those in the United States. This is important to Americans specially because empiricist styles, the belief that knowledge could be gained through intuition, where popular and in turn pushed back against the predominant type of theories (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2011).

Parsons left a legacy with his work in another way as well. The major concepts to his theories are ideas that sociologists can continue to use. Social scientists can adopt the concepts and add or change their ideas to be incorporated into their own work (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2011). One way Parsons can help to explain a social problem such as elections is by using the unit act. The actor would be the person running to be president. Their goal is to become president and the means they use to achieve that goal is the large amounts of money they have, nice clothes to look presentable, and the education to write influential speeches. Situational conditions would be the typical election process that happens every four years. Lastly, the norms and values of running for president would be the candidate going all over the country on their campaign trails because people expect them to.

Conclusion

Talcott Parsons was an influential American sociologist who helped develop Harvard University's Sociology Department. He published numerous books, works, and built upon and expanded other theories. Though Parsons encountered some critiques he never stopped working to further academia in sociology and the social sciences. Parsons was hard working and devoted to his work as he was highly educated in numerous subjects. He wanted to figure out why and how social order occurred, so he took theories, expanded, and came up with his own ideas too. In the end he answered his question and gave numerous explanations as to how and why social order occurs.

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