
UNIT 27 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SYSTEM — PARSONS

The Concept of Social
System—Parsons

Structure

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27.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to

- explain the early approaches to the study of social systems and Parsons' own point of view regarding them

- understand the action approach of Parsons in the study of the social system
- discuss the basic unit of organisation of the social system
- outline the concept of pattern variables given by Parsons
- describe the functional prerequisites of a social system, and finally
- discuss the types of structures of social systems exemplified empirically by Parsons.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units of Block 6 you learnt about the contributions of B. Malinowski's and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist and structure-functionalist approaches to the study of society. Both these thinkers belonged to the British tradition of social anthropology. They had based their theories on their study of primitive societies.

In this Block, we will explain to you the contribution of American sociologists, Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton to the development of functionalism. For several decades sociology, specially American, was dominated by Parsons and later Merton. The functionalist approach of both Parsons and Merton is a common link between the Blocks 6 and 7 of this course. Unlike the British social anthropologists, the focus of Parsons' and Merton's study was on the modern industrial societies, especially the American society.

To understand the sociological version of functionalism, it is necessary to grasp Talcott Parsons' concept of the social system. Unit 27 is devoted to this task. It describes the concept of **social system** as analysed by Talcott Parsons. His conceptual scheme is provided to analyse the structure and processes of social systems. Parsons' concept of the social system is developed in the nature of a general sociological theory, which can be applied for the study of both the simple primitive societies as well as the complex modern industrial societies.

The unit begins with a discussion of the early approaches to the study of the social systems and Parsons' alternative to these approaches. This is discussed in Section 27.2. The alternative to these approaches is Parsons' 'action approach', which is given in Section 27.3. Parsons has developed his theory from the level of **action** to the social system. The next Section 27.4 describes the basic unit of organisation of a social system given by Parsons. These units are roles and role expectations. The institutionalisation of roles is discussed and social system as a collectivity is described in this section. To explain the dilemma of choice of action available to an individual in a social system Parsons developed the concept of pattern variables. These pattern variables are discussed in Section 27.5.

The survival of any social system depends, according to Parsons on four functional prerequisites. These functional prerequisites have been described in Section 27.6. Finally, Section 27.7 discusses the types of structures of social systems exemplified by Parsons from empirical cases in society.

27.2 TALCOTT PARSONS AND THE EARLY APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SYSTEM

Let us first understand in simple terms what is meant by a social system. A social system has been defined by Mitchell (1979: 203) as ‘consisting of a plurality of al actors interacting directly or indirectly with each other in a bounded situation. There may be physical or territorial boundaries but the main point of reference sociologically is that here individuals are oriented, in a wide sense, to a common focus or interrelated foci’. According to this definition such diverse sets of relationships as families, political parties, kinship groups and even whole societies can be regarded as social systems.

Parsons’ ideas on social systems and his theory of action or action approach are rooted in the thinking of his predecessors. In his monumental book *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) Parsons has reviewed the contributions of many social scientists, but gave special emphasis to Pareto, Durkheim and Max Weber. In this work Parsons attempts to highlight the underlying unity in the contributions of most of these thinkers. By sorting out these unities. Parsons felt that his quest for a general theory of social system would be forwarded. In his opinion a notion of a theory of action was hidden or was present by implication in the works that he reviewed. In the case of Max Weber, however he found action theory more or less clearly formulated. Let us now examine the early approaches to the study of the concept of social system.

27.2.0 The Utilitarian, the Positivist, and the Idealist Points of View

Parsons divides earlier contributions into three broad schools of thought, viz., the utilitarian, the positivist, and the idealist. The utilitarians see social action in a highly individualist fashion. They emphasise utilitarian rational calculation but at the level of the individual. For this reason they are unable to accommodate the fact that social life is collectively cohesive and not a random effect (See Box 27.1).

Box 27.1 Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a school of thought, which believes in the fact that pleasure is better than pain. It is a philosophical outlook and is generally associated with the name of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). According to this outlook utility is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The proper goal of all human beings should be maximisation of utility. Bentham believed that good motives are good as far as they lead to harmony of interests of an individual with those of others.

Thus utilitarianism is a moral theory which has certain social implications. It holds that nothing is desired for its own sake pleasure that it provides. Since pleasure is the guiding force of this philosophy, the moral rules also are believed to be those which encourage behaviour, which can increase pleasure and reduce pain.

Bentham applied this philosophy to the study of economics, administration and law. The classical economists such as Adam Smith, Ricardo and few others subscribed to this view.

Early English Sociology too, was influenced by this philosophy. One of the sociologists most influenced by this philosophy was Herbert Spencer.

The positivists on the other hand believe that social actors have complete knowledge of their social situation. This leaves no room for error on the part of actors or variation among actors (See Box 27.2)

Box 27.2 Positivism

The term 'positivism' was first used by Auguste Comte (1798-1897). You learnt about his 'positive philosophy' in the first block of ESO-13.

This term also has been used for the distinct doctrines of school of philosophers known as 'logical positivists'. They believed in the central idea that the meaning of a statement lay in the method of its verification. Any statement, which could not be verified, therefore, becomes meaningless.

In Parson's view a social theory is positivistic which holds the view that human action can adequately characterised without regard to the agent's own standpoint. He considered utilitarianism as one of the good example of a positivistic theory.

The idealist posit that social action is the realisation of the social spirit and the ideas such as, of a nation or a people, and consequently pay scant attention to real everyday impediments on the ground that obstruct the free realisation of ideas. (see Box 27.3)

Box27.3 Idealism

Idealism is the school of thought, which believes that the mind plays a key role in the constitution of the world as it is experienced. In the history we can discern different forms and applications of idealism. Its most radical form has been rejected because it is equivalent to solipsism. Solipsism is the view that all reality is nothing but the activity of one's own mind and that in reality nothing exists but one's own self

However, idealists usually recognise the existence of the external or natural world fully. They do not claim that it can be reduced to the mere process of thinking. They believe that the mind is active and capable of producing and sustaining modes of being that would not have existed otherwise, such as law, religion, art and mathematics

The eighteenth century Irish philosopher George Berkeley is identified closely with this philosophy. He believed that all aspects of everything of which we are conscious are actually reducible to the ideas present in the mind. For example, the idea of a chair or a cow already exists in

our minds, therefore, we recognise the chair or the cow when we find it. Thus, the observer does not conjure the external objects (chair or cow) into existence. In fact, Berkeley held that the true ideas of the external objects are caused in the human mind directly by God

The eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant further refined idealism through his critical inquiry into the limits of possible knowledge. Kant believed that there is no way of knowing things in themselves, they can be known to us only in the way that they appear to us in experience. He held that the fundamental principles of all science are essentially grounded in the constitution of the mind rather than being derived from the external world.

Finally, the name most closely associated with this philosophical outlook is of the nineteenth century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel believed that the highest achievements of the human spirit (culture, science, religion, and the state) are conceived and sustained by the dialectical activity; such as thesis, antithesis and synthesis of free reflective intellect. It is not the result of naturally determined processes in the mind (Funk and Wagnalls' New Encyclopedia 1971-83, Volume 13: 370-371). In fact, Hegel's philosophy, especially his dialectical thought influenced Karl Marx in developing his ideas of dialectical historical materialism. For Hegel's ideas see Block 2 of ESO-13.

In the *Structure of Social Action* Parsons uses this classification to review the contributions of major thinkers like Durkheim, Pareto and Weber. He goes to great lengths to point out elements of the various schools of thought in their writings. While doing so, however, Parsons is also coaxing out of these authors elements crucial to his understanding of social action and for the development of his action frame of reference.

27.2.1 The Point of View of Talcott Parsons

Parsons emphasised that both the utilitarian and idealist approaches to the study of social systems and social reality were one-sided. The **utilitarian approach** treated social systems as products of rational impulses of human beings (individuals) to integrate their needs and urges as orderly systems. These systems are based on compatibility of interests through contractual mutuality. An example of contractual mutuality is the system of polity (government and state) which represents organised system of power. The market system, which is based on contractual relationships of economic interests, is yet another such example of an orderly system.

But the orderly systems as analysed by utilitarian social scientists, according to Parsons, neglect the role of values. Similarly, in the idealist treatment of social system, democracy is seen simply as the fulfilment of the spirit of a nation. Idealism places too much emphasis on values and ideas and not enough on social practice. Weber too, in a way, belonged to this tradition for he argued that capitalism was aided in its early stages by the Protestant ethic. The difference between Weber and the outright idealists is that Weber never said that the Protestant ethic caused capitalism. But it must be admitted that Weber elaborated at length certain values such as those of

‘rational asceticism’ or ‘inner worldly asceticism’ but neglected the role of needs or search for utilities.

According to Talcott Parsons both the idealist and the utilitarian notions of the social system assume certain characteristics in human impulses in an apriori manner. By apriori we mean that which is already given or assumed. One such characteristic is rationality in the regulation of needs in the utilitarian approach to the social system, and commitment to ultimate values and ideals in the idealist approach.

The utilitarian approach does have the notion of individual actor in the system but only as an abstraction with certain endowed qualities (a prioristic in character).

The idealist approach does the same, only prioristically assumed characteristics are different. The idealists assume that human beings act only to fulfil a grand mental design.

The positivists go to the other extreme and insist that true human action is born out of full information of the situation. There is thus a finality and inflexibility in their scheme for there is only one way to act: the correct way. Consequently there is no room for values, error and variations in social action.

Thus, while each of these schools of thought, the utilitarian, the idealist and the positivist say something important, it is their exclusivism, which Parsons objects to. The utilitarians only emphasise the individual’s rational choice and miss the collective. The idealists talk of values and miss out the pressures exerted on values by empirical reality. Finally, the positivists emphasise complete knowledge of the situation and overlook the role of values, or of error or of variations.

Keeping the above in mind, Parsons offers another approach to the study of social systems termed as “action approach”.

27.3 PARSONS’ ACTION APPROACH

Parsons own approach to the social system is integrative in nature since he not only brought out the significance of motivational factors, such as those present in the utilitarian perspective in the formation of the system, but also that of values. He formulates this approach through his theory of social action, which is an intrinsic element of the social system.

Action, according to Parsons (1973) does not take place in isolation. It is not “empirically discrete but occurs in constellations” which constitute systems. We will discuss these systems later. Let us first understand the concept of action. The concept of action, according to Parsons, is derived from behaviour of human beings as living organism. As living organisms they interact (orientate) with outside reality as well as within their own mind. Behaviour becomes action when four conditions are present.

- i) it is oriented to attainment of ends or goals or other anticipated affairs,
- ii) it occurs in situations,

- iii) it is regulated by norms and values of society,
- iv) it involves an investment of ‘energy’ or motivation or effort.

When all these factors are present, a behaviour becomes action. Take for example a lady driving an automobile to go to a temple. She is probably going to offer prayers. In which case then the offering of the prayer is her end or goal to which she is oriented. Her situation is the road on which she is driving and the car in which she is sitting. Moreover, her behaviour is regulated by social norms or values in which the offering of prayers is recognised as desirable. In addition, she is applying her intelligence in the skill of driving which is learnt from society. Finally, the very act of driving the car implies expenditure of energy, holding the wheel, regulating the accelerator and skilful negotiation through the traffic on the road. When behaviour is seen in this analytical context, it can be defined as action.

Orientation of action can therefore be divided into two components, the **motivational orientation** and the value orientation. Motivational orientation refers to a situation in which action takes place taking into account needs, external appearances and plans. The second form of orientation is value orientation, which is based on considerations of standards of values, aesthetics, morality and of thinking. You will learn more about these two components of action in sub-sections 27.4.1 and 27.4.2 of this unit.

Activity 1

List four kinds of social behaviours you perform in your day-to-day life which qualifies as action according to Parsons, having the four conditions,

- i) it is oriented towards the attainment of ends or goals or other anticipated affairs.
- ii) it occurs in a situation
- iii) it is regulated by norms and values of society
- iv) it involves investment of ‘energy’ or effort or motivation.

Write a note of two pages giving the behaviours and why you consider them ‘action’ as defined by Parsons. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

As mentioned earlier, action according to Parsons does not occur in isolation but occurs in constellations. These constellations of action constitute systems. These systems of action have three modes of organisation, which Parsons describes as the personality system, the cultural system and the social system. The personality system refers to those aspects of the human personality, which affect the individual’s social functioning. The cultural system encompasses instead, the actual beliefs, concrete systems of values and symbolic means of communication. The social system, in this context, refers to the forms and modes of interaction between individuals and its organisation. Mitchell (1979: 204) gives the example of a social system as the authority structure of an organisation or the division of labour in a family.

A social system, according to Parsons, has the following characteristics.

- i) It involves an interaction between two or more actors, and the interaction process is its main focus.
- ii) Interaction takes place in a situation, which implies other actors or alters. These alters are objects of emotion and value judgement and through them goals and means of action are achieved.
- iii) There exists in a social system collective goal orientation or common values and a consensus on expectations in normative and **cognitive** (intellectual) senses.

To understand the concept of social system better, let us now examine the basic unit of organisation of the social system.

27.4 BASIC UNIT OF ORGANISATION OF A SOCIAL SYSTEM

The social system has a mode of organisation of action, which is called role. It is the basic conceptual unit of the social system and it incorporates the individual actor's total system of action. It is also a point of intersection between the system of action of an individual actor and the social system. The primary element of role, according to Parsons is role-expectation. It implies reciprocity between the actor and his/her alter (the other persons), and is governed by a range of motivational and value orientations.

As mentioned earlier, the motivational orientation refers to a situation in which action takes place taking into account needs or motives, external appearances and plans of the individual actors. **Value orientation** refers to the values, aesthetics, morality, etc. aspects of action. The organisation of unit acts into social systems therefore involves the motives and values, which link it to the personality system in the first case and to the cultural system in the second.

27.4.0 The Motivational Orientation

The range of motivational orientations are three. These are the cognitive, the **cathectic** and the **evaluative** orientations.

- i) The cognitive orientation makes actors see their environment or object in relation to their need dispositions as a mental object. They, i.e. the actors, attempt to understand the objectivity of the subject matter of observation.
- ii) The cathectic orientation involves emotional attitude of actors towards their object.
- iii) The evaluative orientation leads the actors to organise their effort in realisation of their object with optimum efficiency. Take for example the behaviour of a housewife going to the market to purchase vegetables. The cognitive orientation enables her to judge the quality of vegetables in relation to her need and need in relation to its prices, the cathectic orientation would determine as to which vegetable she

likes more than the others, and the evaluative orientation would make it possible for her to make a choice of a vegetable which gives her maximum satisfaction.

27.4.2 The Value Orientation

The range of value orientations also comprises three parts. These are the cognitive, the appreciative and the moral.

- i) The cognitive orientation is one, which relates to the issue of validity of judgement.
- ii) The appreciative orientation is that which makes it possible for actors to judge their emotional response to object, its appropriateness or consistency.
- iii) The moral orientation is one, which refers to value commitment of an actor towards his or her objects.

The example of a housewife buying vegetables reveals only the motivational orientation of the housewife. But in value orientation it is the value system and the cultural pattern of the society which is involved. The individual actors act in the context of this cultural-pattern. For example, the role and status of a son in his family is guided by certain norms of the society. As a son in a patriarchal family, he has a different status than as a son in a matriarchal family. His behaviour will be guided by the norms of his society.

Thus, the motivational orientation involves only the motives or psychological aspects of the individual while the value orientation involves the cultural system. Both, the psychological and the cultural aspects of individual behaviour are, however, interlinked and interdependent.

The motivational orientations and value orientations are two levels of orientations, according to Parsons, that define the behavioural and cultural aspects of role and role expectations.

The role expectations in a social system serve as patterns of evaluation. Every actor who performs a role has a dual capacity, because role implies interaction with other person or persons. It divides role into two kinds according to Parsons. The first is the orientation role where actor as ego (self) interacts with alter (the other person) as his or her object. The second is the object role where actor is the object of alter's orientation.

27.4.2 Institutionalisation of Roles in a Social System

In a social system roles are institutionalised. Institutionalisation means that expectations from a specific role, its values and motivational orientations are integrated within the culture of a society. Society sets common standards for role expectations from its members, and when an actor imbibes these standards common to society in the orientations and performance of his/her roles, the roles are said to have been institutionalised.

In order that roles are performed in society in accordance with the standards prescribed by society or in line with the pattern of institutionalisation, each society imposes sanctions. These sanctions are rewards or punishments, as

the case may be, if the role is performed in conformity to the standards or values of society or when it is violative of these values.

27.4.3 Collectivity as a Social System

Related to the concept of role is Parsons' notion of collectivity as a social system. Collectivity can be identified only through the boundary of a social system that determines which members are included and which others are excluded from the membership of the collectivity. All collectivities have membership boundaries (such as, among others, those based on kinship, qualifications or skills or faith). By boundary we mean the limits to which a social system functions as a distinct identity. A kinship system, as an example of a social system has its members and their roles and statuses determined by the cultural pattern found in that society. The boundary of a collectivity varies from situation to situation. The collectivity is not merely a social aggregate of members such as a category. A category is defined through common attributes such as age, sex or education, etc. Collectivity is also not a plurality of individuals who are commonly interdependent with one another ecologically, that is, in a physical situation, such as in a market.

Collectivity differs from the above two types of social aggregates because its plurality is characterised by solidarity of its members; as in a kinship group or in an association. This solidarity emerges from the institutionalisation of shared values such as, the value of cooperation among certain kins or sharing the beliefs and practices of a religion.

Collectivities may have internal subdivisions as sub-collectivities where membership might overlap. Collectivities and sub-collectivities are forms of social system. Society, according to Parsons is a total social system which is self-subsistent or which maintains itself without being dependent on any other social system. The distinction between the social system and society is however relative and analytical.

So far you have learnt about the conceptual unit of the social system called roles, the institutionalisation of roles, and collectivity as a social system. To explain the choices of action available to individuals in the social system as a collectivity, Parsons has developed the concepts of pattern variables. You will learn about these concepts in the next section.

Check Your Progress I

- i) Distinguish between the utilitarian, the positivist and the idealist basis of social action given by Parsons using about nine lines.

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ii) What do you understand by role institutionalisation? Discuss using about five lines.

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iii) Fill in the blanks:

- a) The system is an example of contractual mutuality based on economic interests.
- b) Action according to Parsons does not take place in
- c) The systems of action have three modes of organisation which Parsons describes as the social system, the personality system and the system.
- d) The range of motivational orientation is cognitive and evaluative.
- e) The comprises three parts, the cognitive, the appreciative and the moral orientation.

27.5 PATTERN VARIABLES

In order to develop concepts, which could reflect the properties of all action systems, Parsons was led to a set of concepts, which could bring out the variable properties of these systems. These concepts are termed pattern variables.

Role being the most vital element of the social system, its performance generates forces of strain or tension. The extent of strain depends on the way role-expectations are institutionalised in society and also on the degree to which the values of role-expectations are internalised by social actors. In relation to motivational orientation and value orientation, in the performance of roles, each actor faces dilemmas. These dilemmas emanate from strains in an individual's choice of or preference within a range of orientations both related to needs and to values. Though these dilemmas are often seen dichotomously they in fact are placed along a continua. But for reasons of simplicity let us proceed as if these dilemmas were dichotomous in character. The actor must choose between the options, before she or he can act with respect to the situation. For example, in a situation, which requires an actor to choose between universalistic values or particularistic values, the actor can choose only one of them.

There are in all five pattern variables, each side of it represents one polar extreme. These pattern variables are

- i) affectivity versus affective neutrality
- ii) self-orientation versus collectivity orientation
- iii) universalism versus particularism
- iv) ascription versus achievement
- v) specificity versus diffuseness.

Let us now discuss each of them in detail.

27.5.0 Affectivity versus Affective Neutrality

Affectivity versus affective neutrality concerns the dilemma of role performance where evaluation is involved in relation to a situation. How much should a situation be evaluated in emotional terms or with a degree of emotional neutrality? This poses a difficult choice in most roles that we are expected to perform in society. Take for example the mother-child relationship. It has high degree of affective orientation, but discipline is also required. So on many occasions a mother would have to exercise affective-neutral role in relation to her child's socialisation. But mother-child relationship is essentially dominated by affectivity. In comparison, doctor-patient relationship brings out the aspect of affective neutrality that characterises a doctor's role. Affective-neutrality is essential for proper medical care, especially where surgical treatments are involved. But according to Parsons in all role performance situations the dilemma of choice and its degree of expression or commitment remains.

27.5.1 Self-orientation versus Collectivity Orientation

Similarly, in self-orientation versus collectivity orientation pattern variable the main issue is that of moral standard in the procedure of evaluation. The moral standard arises from the fact that actor has to make a choice between his or her own gratification and its deferment for the good of a larger number of people, a collectivity. Some form of altruism and self-sacrifice is involved. The dilemma of this pattern variable has always been present in human life from primitive mode of economy and society to modern civilisation. The notion of socialist society and socialist consciousness offers us a good example where a whole social system and patterns of its institutions are based on the dominant choice in favour of collectivity orientation. But as Parsons has rightly pointed out, institutionalisation of such values is always fragile. This is because the response to the situation by the actor is always in the form of a dilemma.

27.5.2 Universalism versus Particularism

Universalism versus particularism is a pattern variable which defines the role situation where the actor's dilemma is between the cognitive versus the cathective (or emotional standards) evaluation. A very good example of roles adhering to universalistic standards of human behaviour are role performances which go strictly by legal norms and legal sanctions. It one abides by the rule of law irrespective of personal, kinship or friendship considerations, then that would be an example of the universalistic mode of role performance. If one violates legal norms only because the person

involved is a kin or a friend, then particularistic considerations would be said to be operating. Parsons says that in societies where the role of the bureaucracy of formal organisations and modern institutions have become widespread there the dilemmas of Universalism and particularism have become a matter of choice in everyday life.

27.5.3 Ascription versus Achievement

The actor's dilemma in the ascription versus achievement pattern variable is based on whether or not the actor defines the objects of his or her role either in terms of quality or performance. In India a very good example of this pattern variable is the role performance governed by the caste system. In the caste system, the statuses of persons are determined not on the basis of their personal achievement or personal skills or knowledge but on the basis of their birth. Ascription is based on assigning certain quality to a person either by birth, or age, or sex or kinship or race. Achievement is based on personal acquisition of skills and levels of performance in society.

27.5.4 Specificity versus Diffuseness

The specificity versus diffuseness pattern variable concerns the scope of the object of role performance. Scope, in this case, is to be understood in terms of the nature of social interaction.

Some social interactions, such as between doctors and patients or between buyers and sellers of goods in the market, have a very specific scope. The nature of these interactions is defined in terms of a very precise context of interaction. A doctor does not have to understand the social, financial or political background of his or her patients in order to treat them and to give them a prescription. Doctor's task is very specific. So is the case of sellers of commodities in the market, who do not have to know the general details of the life of their customers. Such roles are specific in terms of the standards of response between actors.

On the contrary, some role relationships are very general and encompassing in nature. Such roles involve several aspects of the object of interaction. Some examples of such role relationships are friendship, conjugal relationship between husband and wife, relationships between kin of various degrees. All these relationships are such where the actor does not interact with another in a relationship in a specific context as such, but in a diffused manner such as in case of two close friends. The scope of interaction is flexible, open and encompassing in nature.

Activity 2

Think carefully about the organisation where you work or study such as, your Study Centre. Now, according to the Pattern Variables described by Parsons give two features of your interaction with this organisation and determine which pattern it falls into. For example, if you work in a private company runs by your friend or relative, your interaction with it can have both the qualities of universalism or particularism.

Write a note of a page and compare, if possible, with the notes of other students at your Study Centre.

The pattern variables, according to Parsons, not only define the nature of role interaction and role expectations in social system but provide in addition, the overall direction in which most members of a social system choose their roles. It also gives us an idea about the nature of the social system. For instance, take the family as a social system: the role expectations within the family amongst its members can be said to be affective, largely collectivity oriented, particularistic, ascriptive and diffuse.

On the contrary, take the example of your membership in a medical association or bar association, or student association, here role expectations and standards of role performance would largely be oriented towards pattern variables of affective neutrality, self-orientation (due to competition), universalism, achievement and specificity. But these are extreme examples. In real life the dilemma of choices in terms of pattern variables are much more precarious and full of strain than we find in the examples we have mentioned.

Till now you learnt about the various characteristics of the social system. In the next section we are going to discuss those aspects of the social system which Parsons considers the prerequisites for its functioning.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Define pattern variables and list them using about six lines.
- ii) Given below are different types of social behaviour. State in the line given below each sentence, the pattern-variable to which it belongs.
 - a) A school teacher giving extra marks to her own child.
 - b) A policeman shooting his brother who is running away after looting a bank.
 - c) The son of a millionaire working as a clerk in his father's company.
- d) The daughter of a clerk getting the job of the Director in an organisation through her merit.
- e) The saleswoman gives the change of money to a client.
- f) The exchange of notes and gossip between two friends.

27.6 FUNCTIONAL PREREQUISITES

As you have already learnt. Parsons thinks all systems such as the family, the economy or the polity have a boundary which they maintain in order to subsist. This self-maintenance of systems is possible because human actors as social beings are socialised in society and their motivational and value orientations accordingly are patterned. In order to maintain itself, social systems have to perform some indispensable adjustment between its internal organisation and outer environment. These adjustments are like the adjustment that the human body has to make with the outside environment through breathing, blood circulation and through the maintenance of a steady temperature within itself. Social systems, Parsons

argues, also have a self-adjustive and self-maintaining quality. These adjustment processes which maintain the social system internally and through its boundary conditions are called functions. Functions are processes of system's self-maintenance.

There are certain functions without which a social system cannot subsist. These are called 'functional prerequisites' by Talcott Parsons. There are four such functional prerequisites.

- i) adaptation
- ii) goal attainment
- iii) integration
- iv) latency

The scope of functioning of these functional prerequisites is further defined in terms of whether they deal with processes external or internal to the system. They are also defined in terms of the nature of interaction as such, whether it is consummatory or whether it is instrumental. Consummatory is where the emphasis is on achieving some desired end and instrumental is where the emphasis is on the acquisition and incorporation of means to achieve ends.

Let us now examine each of these functional prerequisites.

27.6.0 Adaptation

Adaptation as a functional prerequisite implies generation and acquisition of resources from outside the system, its external environment and to effect its distribution in the system. External environment in this case means land, water, etc. As an example we can mention the economic system, which involves resource utilisation, production and distribution in the society. Adaptation is oriented to factors external to the system and it has an instrumental character.

27.6.1 Goal-Attainment

Goal-Attainment is that functional prerequisite which involves, firstly, the determination of goals, secondly, the motivating of members of the system to attain these goals, and thirdly, the mobilising of the members and of their energies for the achievement of these goals. Its processes are consummatory in character although it does involve external interaction.

The organisation of the power and authority structure in a social system is an example of an institution where goal attainment is the primary thrust. The political processes are its examples. It needs to be remembered that goal attainment is related to the ideological and organisational set up of the social system.

27.6.2 Integration

Integration is that functional prerequisite which helps to maintain coherence, solidarity and coordination in the system. In the social system this function is mainly performed by culture and values. Therefore, the cultural system and its associated institutions and practices constitute elements of integration.

Integration ensures continuity, coordination and solidarity within the system; it also helps in safeguarding the system from breakdown or disruption. This functional prerequisite is internal to the system and has a consummatory character.

27.6.3 Latency

Finally, latency is that functional prerequisite of the social system which stores, organises and maintains the motivational energy of elements in the social system. Its main functions are pattern maintenance and tension management within the system.

This function is performed by the socialisation process of the members of the social system. The process of socialisation helps in internalisation of the symbols, values, tastes and habits specific to the social system in the personality of the actors who are members of the system. It needs also to be added that in Parsons' view the function of tension management must take place internally in all institutions. This is how it can be differentiated from the function of "integration" which refers primarily to the integration between different systems in society. The functional prerequisite of latency also bears an instrumental character.

Functional Prerequisites of a Social System

	Adaptation	Goal Attainment
External	Example - Economic System - Resource utilisation, production, Distribution etc.	Example-Political System - State, Political Parties, etc.
	Latency or Pattern Maintenance	Integration
Internal	Example - Family socialisation, Education etc.	Example - Cultural system - Religion, ideology, etc.

In the preceding sections we familiarised you to the concept of social system. Let us now understand the empirical examples of types of structures of social systems given by Parsons.

27.7 TYPES OF STRUCTURES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Parsons has dealt primarily with four types of structures of social systems in his sociological analysis. These are the economic system, the family system, the political system and the personality system.

Ideas about dilemmas of role expectations and role performance enunciated in the form of pattern variables (which you just studied) and formulation of functional prerequisites, taken together would further our knowledge of societies significantly. We find that it helps us to identify different types of structures of social systems, their social characteristics and their place in

society. We can identify social systems not just theoretically, as we saw in the earlier sections on pattern variables and functional prerequisites, but empirically as well.

In his book *The Social System* (1951), Parsons mentions many types of empirical (i.e., that which can be observed in the field [societies] and can be verified) social systems with different clusterings of social structures. Parsons made a distinction between the concept of social system and **social structure**. Social system is manifested through the totality of the principles through which roles and related elements of social interaction are organised. Social structure, on the other hand, reflects the specific manner in which these roles in an interaction situation are configured or composed together. For instance, family is a social system but its social structure can be seen in the empirical clustering of kinship roles.

Similarly, the economic system can be treated as another example of a social system, but its social structure is characterised by roles related to production, marketing, management, etc. Pattern variables illustrate in a precise manner the principal types of clusterings of social structures. Parsons mentions four such types

- i) the universalistic-achievement pattern
- ii) the universalistic-ascription pattern
- iii) the particularistic-achievement pattern
- iv) the particularistic-ascription pattern

27.7.0 The Universalistic-Achievement Pattern

It is a type of structure of social system in whose roles those value-orientations are dominant which encourage achievement based on legal rational methods among members of a society. It exemplifies modern industrial societies where the governing values are those of equality, democracy, freedom of enterprise, rational management and openness in social interactions. Divisions of society based on caste, ethnicity or other particularistic values do not go well with this social system. The nearest example of this type of structure of a social system, in Parsons' opinion, would be the American society.

27.7.1 The Universalistic-Ascription Pattern

It is yet another type of configuration of roles which makes a kind of social system in which values of legal rationality are encouraged in performance of roles but the distribution of authority is not on the basis of equality or democracy. Modern principles of science and technology are employed in work and occupation, in industry and communication but the distribution of these takes place on ascriptive principles, such as membership to a particular ideological association, or party, or cult. Parsons believes that Nazi Germany is an example of one such society.

German social structure during the Nazi regime manifested a peculiar combination of rational methods of organisation of roles in industries, management and productive institutions but discriminated between those

who, according to them symbolised ideal qualities of German people such as white Nordic races, and those that did not, namely the Jews. There could be other examples drawn from other periods of social history as well.

27.7.2 The Particularistic-Achievement Pattern

This type of social structure, according to Parsons, is best seen in the classical Chinese society. This society was dominated by values of ‘familism’. By ‘familism’ we mean the notion of continuity with ancestors (ancestor worship), strong ties of kinship, but where the female line of descent was undermined in favour of the male. This led to an overall female subordination in that society. It was based on a configuration of roles in which occupation, authority, management, etc. were organised not on universalistic principles but on particularistic ones.

Of all the particularistic principles in operation in traditional or classical Chinese society birth and kinship were emphasised the most. But at the same time, the society also emphasised achievement and a “code of propriety” in the conduct of roles which was equivalent to legal rationality (universalistic principle). All these features were contained in Confucianism which was the official ethic in classical China. The dominance of universalism along with the ascription principle can be seen in the recruitment of civil servants in China. Entrance into these services was based on competitive examinations, which only those candidates who conformed to the official ethic could take.

27.7.3 The Particularistic-Ascription Pattern

It refers to such types of social structures in which the roles are organised in terms of values, which are associated with kinship, birth and other ascriptive features. In social structures of this kind, achievement through individual effort is not encouraged. Work, in this type “is considered as a necessary evil just as morality is a necessary condition of minimum stability”, says Talcott Parsons.

Overwhelming emphasis, in this kind of society, is placed on expressive or artistic orientations. Society is traditionalistic as there is no incentive to disturb tradition and a strong vested interest exists in favour of stability. In Parsons’ view the “Spanish Americans” in the USA exemplify this type of social structure. But you could also debate whether traditional Indian caste society had features, which were particularistic-ascriptive, or not.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Fill in the blanks:
 - a) According to Parsons, all social systems have a which they maintain in order to subsist.
 - b) In order to maintain itself social systems have to perform some adjustments in its internal organisation and outer
 - c) Adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency are the without which a social system cannot subsist.

- d) Pattern variables illustrate in a precise manner the principal types of clustering of
- ii) Describe one of the functional prerequisites, with examples, in about six lines.

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- iii) Discuss any one of the types of structure of social system described by Parsons in eight lines.

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27.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you learnt about the early approaches to the study of social systems, such as the utilitarian, the positivist and the idealist approaches. You learnt that Parsons did not accept these approaches because the utilitarians stressed too much on external, motivational factors, the positivist left no room for error on the part of social actors or values and the idealists stressed too much on values. Thus, as an alternative, Parsons developed his own ‘action approach’ theory, which is integrative in nature. In this theory he has included the motivational orientation as well as the value orientations.

Parsons has described role as the most vital element of social systems. In performance of roles individuals are confronted with dilemmas which in turn emanates from choices offered by society within a range of orientations, both motivational and value. The dichotomy in the nature of orientations described by Parsons in his pattern variables determines the course of action followed by individuals in society. We have described in this unit the functional prerequisites, such as, adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency without which a social system cannot exist. Finally, we have

described in this unit the types of structures of social systems analysed by Parsons based on the criteria of universalism, particularism, ascription and achievement. Parsons has given the examples of these types of social systems from real societies.

27.9 KEYWORDS

Action	A human behaviour, according to Parsons, in which four conditions are fulfilled is an action. These conditions are <ul style="list-style-type: none">i) it is oriented towards attainment of ends or goals or other anticipated affairsii) it occur in situationsiii) it involves investment of 'energy' or effort andiv) it is regulated by norms and values of society.
Cathectic	That which pertains to the emotions such as, affection, love, like, dislike, etc.
Cognitive	That which pertains to comprehension or understanding. For example when you see a chair you know that it is a chair because it has a certain shape, it is made of wood or metal and so on.
Evaluative	That which pertains to comparative judgement
Motivational Orientation	It refers to the mechanical aspects of action. Reasons or purposes of social action which are not related to the values and norms of society such as, choosing the best sari or most appropriate birthday card.
Social Structure	It reflects the specific manner in which the roles in interaction situation are configurated or composed together.
Social System	It is manifested through the totality of principles through which roles and related elements of social interaction are organised.
Utilitarian Approach	It refers to the belief that individual in society is guided by rational motives of satisfying needs and avoiding pain. Hedonism, i.e. the doctrine that pleasure is the chief good in life is part of the belief in utilitarianism.
Value Orientation	It refers to that orientation of social action which is governed by social norms and values,

such as marrying someone within one's own caste or class or wearing a formal dress for a formal party.

27.10 FURTHER READING

Black, Max (ed.) 1961. The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons: A Critical Examination. Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Hamilton, Peter, 1983. Talcott Parsons. Key Sociologists series; Routledge: London and New York

Parsons, Talcott, 1951. The Social System. The Free Press, Glencoe: Illinois

27.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) According to Parsons, the utilitarian point of view of social action is highly individualistic in nature. It gave importance to rational calculation at the individual level. The positivists believed that social actors know everything about the situation in which they act i.e. in which they perform their social roles. Therefore, for them, the actor has only one way to act, the correct way. This point of view left no room for variations of action or for values. Finally, the idealists believed that social action is the realisation of the social spirit and the ideas, such as of a democracy or socialism. They gave overemphasis to values and ideals.
- ii) Social roles are said to be institutionalised when the expectations from that role, its values and motivational orientations are integrated within the culture of the society. The society sets the common standards for role expectations from its members and when the actors (performing their social role) imbibe these standards common to society their roles are said to be institutionalised.
- iii)
 - a) market
 - b) isolation
 - c) cultural
 - d) cathectic
 - e) value-orientation

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Pattern variable refers to the dichotomy within the range of orientation, both motivational and value orientations in which the social actor has to choose one side before the actor can act. In the performance of roles, individuals face dilemmas which occur due to improper internalisation of values related to role expectation. These strains in

the role performance are reflected in the dichotomy of the pattern variables. These pattern variables are

- i) affectivity versus affective neutrality
 - ii) self-orientation versus, collective orientation
 - iii) universalism versus particularism
 - iv) ascription versus achievement, and
 - v) specificity versus diffuseness.
- ii) a) affectivity
 - b) collectivity orientation
 - c) universalism
 - d) achievement
 - e) specificity
 - f) diffuseness

Check Your Progress 3

- i) a) boundary
 - b) indispensable, environment
 - c) functional prerequisites
 - d) social structure
- ii) Adaptation is a functional prerequisite. It implies the generation and acquisition of resources, such as food, water, materials for construction, etc. from outside the system i.e. the external environment. It also takes care of the distribution of the resources in society. Best example of this functional prerequisite is the economy. It is oriented to the external factors for the system and is instrumental in character.
 - iii) The particularistic-achievement pattern of configuration of a social system, according to Parsons was dominated by values of “familism”. In this type the values of kinship ties, continuity with the ancestors and ancestor worship were prominent. The organisation of occupations, authority, management, etc. were based on particularistic principles of birth and kinship. However, in this society achievement and “code of propriety” in performance of roles similar to legal rational action was followed. Traditional or classical Chinese society represents this type of social system.