

# Talcott Parsons

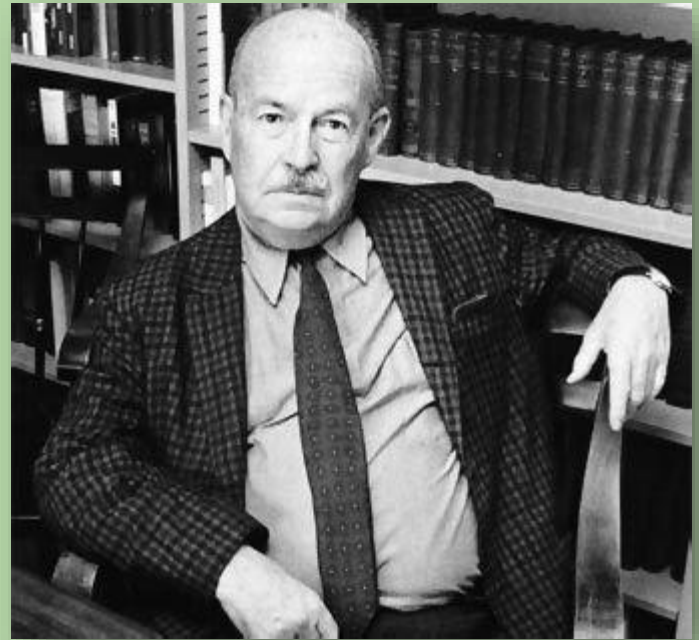
## Social Action

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Semester III Hons, Paper – CC 7

*Modern Sociological Theory*



# Introduction

- ❑ His theory of social action is in intrinsic element of the social system
- ❑ He developed *The Structure of Social Action* in contrast to Weber's four ideal type of social action
- ❑ He proposed *voluntaristic theory of social action* or *simply social action* which sought to bridge the difference between **positivists and the idealists or interpretivists** bt incorporating both the **objective and subjective elements** and it emphasized on an *action frame of reference*
- ❑ He tried to combined both the **micro and macro elements** of social reality

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- ❑ According to Persons, **Action does not take place in isolation**
- ❑ Action is not “**empirically discrete but occurs in constellations**” which constitute system
- ❑ Social action is defined by Persons in his seminal work **The Structure of Social Action (1973)**
- ❑ According to Persons, action is derived from behaviour of human beings as living organism
- ❑ As living organism they interact with outside reality as well as within their own mind
- ❑ *Any act, consciously performed is a social action.*

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- ❑ Behaviour becomes action when four conditions are present
- 1. It occurs in a **social situation**, i.e., actor is a member of society while performing a Social Action
- 2. It is oriented towards attainment of a particular **goal**, i.e., actor is motivated
- 3. Action is regulated by **norms and values**.
- 4. It involves investment of **energy**.

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# Explanation

- ❖ Voluntaristic or a matter of making choices. This is known as Parsons choice based theory. Social action involved actor, with goals, choosing between alternatives.
- ❖ Subjective action which is based on internal orientations and responses
- ❖ At least partially governed or limited by norms and values of one's culture

According to Parsons, an actor is a goal seeking individuals with alternative means to attain those goals it influenced by two factors ...

- 1. Motivational Orientation:** it refers to a situation in which action takes place taking into account needs, external appearances and plans. It is supplying the energy, i.e., 'an urge to get something',  
It is characteristically three fold

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# Explanation

- 1. Cognitive:** corresponding to belief; cognitive meanings imply what is or what the actors perceive
- 2. Cathetic:** this corresponds to sentiments and involves the process through which an actor invests an object with effective significance or perceives what is pleasurable or painful. But the object that an actor perceives to provide gratification are many and varied. Hunger may be satisfied with a variety of objects including the most exotic foods. Similarly, enjoyment of pleasures may take many forms.
- 3. Evaluative:** that is, judgement and interpretation of alternatives and selection of appropriate ones.

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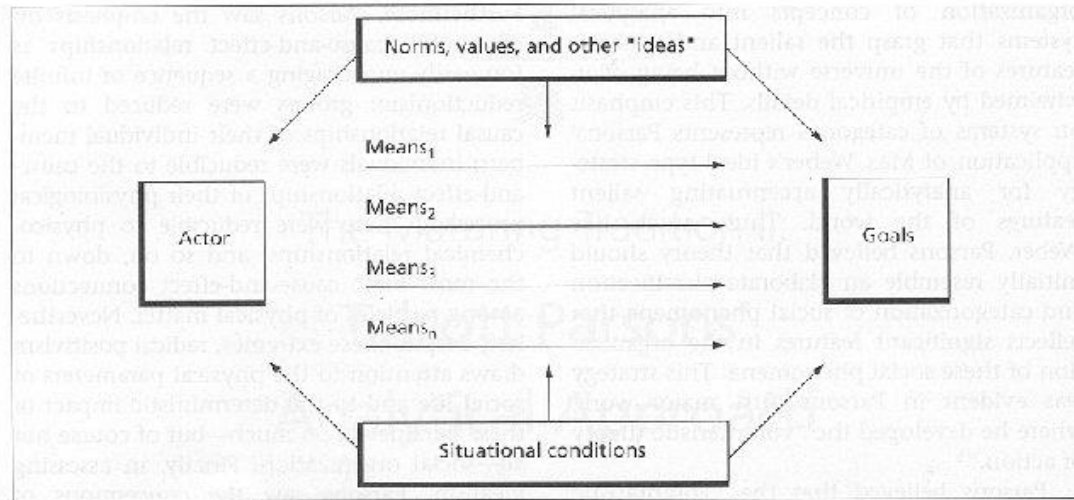
**2.Value Orientation:** it is based on consideration of standards of values. Focus on observance of social norms or standards.

Value orientation are three fold

- 1. Cognition:** those by which the validity of judgements is assessed
- 2. Appreciation:** those by which selections among the possibilities of cathectic significance can be made.
- 3. Moral:** which are neither cognitive nor appreciative but involve a synthesis of both aspects and constitute the standards in terms of which more particular evaluations are themselves evaluated.

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# Talcott Parsons: *The Structure of Social Action*



The Units of Voluntaristic Action

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## Motivational and Value Orientation

- ❖ 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.
- ❖ Both orientation define the behavioural and cultural aspects of role and role expectations
- ❖ The role expectation 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

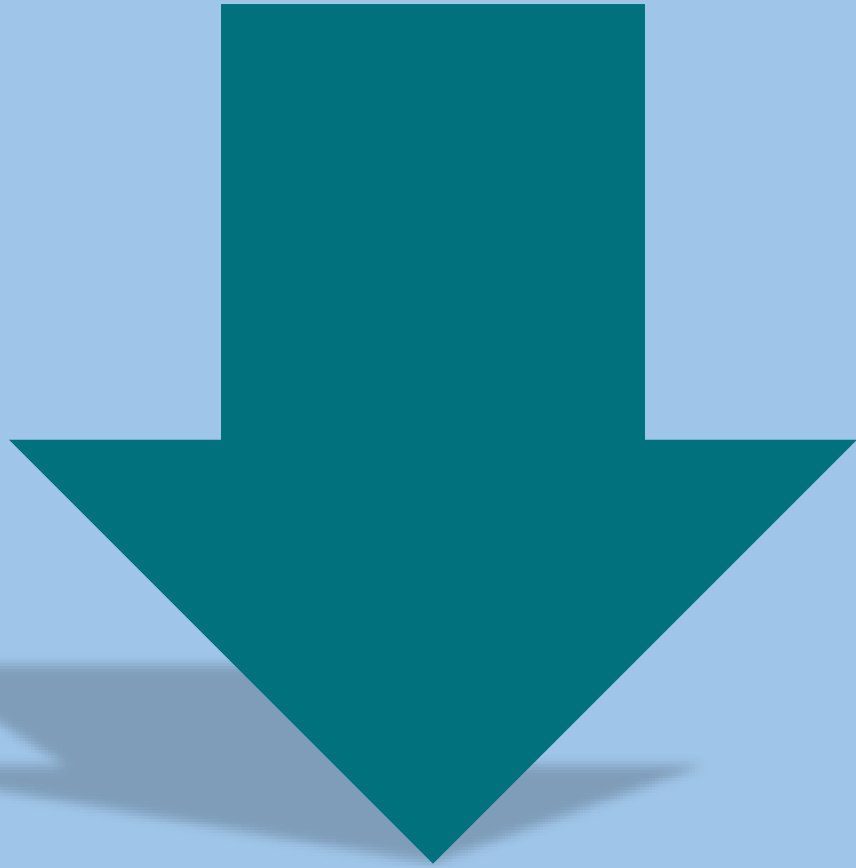
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# Types of Social Action

Persons identifies three types of action:

- 1. Instrumental Action (similar to Zweckrational action of Weber):** this is oriented to the achievement of a goal, which is anticipated future state of affairs, and gives primacy to the cognitive mode of orientation. Both means and ends are logically decided.
- 2. Expressive Action (similar to Affective action of Weber):** action itself is a goal, and gives primacy to the cathectic mode of orientation.
- 3. Moral Action (similar to Traditional or Wertrational Action):** here the focus is on the system of order itself, neither on the goals transcendent to it nor on the gratification interests of the actor.

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## **Action System**

# Overview

- ❑ 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.

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# Overview

- ❑ 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.
- ❑ The actor must choose between the options, before she or he can act with respect to the situation.
- ❑ 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**

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# 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
- 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.

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# 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.

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# 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.
- If 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.

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# 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.

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## 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. 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.
- 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 diffuse manner.

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- 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.

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Thank  
you