

SEM-II- CC-3- SOCACOR03T- Introduction to Sociology II
Topic- 2.3: Talcott Parsons: Pattern Variables

One way that Parsons organized his analysis of social action and activities within social systems is through pattern variables. Remember that social action is voluntary, oriented, and subject to guidance or influence of social norms. These pattern variables provide a way of categorizing the types of choices and forms of orientation for individual social actors, both in contemporary society and historically. The variables include “categorization of modes of orientation in personality systems, the value patterns of culture, and the normative requirements in social systems”. Adams and Sydie state that these are means of guiding “individuals toward one or other of a set of dichotomous choices”.

Pattern variables also provide a means of describing and classifying institutions, social relationships, and different societies, and the values and norms of these. All of the norms, values, roles, institutions, subsystems and even the society as a whole can be classified and examined on the basis of these pattern variables. For Parsons, these were necessary to make the theory of action more explicit and “to develop clearer specifications of what different contingencies and expectations actors were likely to face” (Wallace and Wolf, p. 30).

The pattern variables are constructed as polar opposites that give the range of possible decisions and modes of orientation for a social actor. They are ideal types of social action that, for Parsons, provided a conceptual scheme for analyzing action within systems. In practice, individual choice is unlikely to be so starkly divided between the polar opposites and the social action of an individual may be a combination of the two, between the opposites. That is, there may be a continuity of possible forms of action bridging the extremes, so that much social action occurs between the poles. The pattern variables are as follows:

A. Affectivity and Affective Neutrality. This set of concepts refers to the amount of emotion or affect that is appropriate or expected in a given form of interaction. Particular individuals and diffuse obligations (see c and d) are associated with affectivity, whereas contacts with many individuals (universalistic) in a bureaucracy may be devoid of emotion and characterized by affective neutrality. Affective neutrality may refer to self discipline and the deferment of gratification (Weber’s spirit of capitalism). In contrast, affectivity

may be associated with expressing emotions. Adams and Sydie also refer to affective neutrality being associated with ego control.

B. Collectivity and Self. This pair emphasizes the extent of collective or shared interest as opposed to self interest that is associated with social action. Each social action is carried out in a social context and in various types of collectivities. Where individuals pursue a collective form of action, then the interests of the collectivity may take precedence over that of the individual, for example, in Durkheim's traditional society, mechanical solidarity, or even in contemporary family activities. Various forms of action such as altruism, charity, self-sacrifice (in war time) also fit this variable. In modern societies, individual success and instrumental activity often become dominant in social action, especially in economic action. Models of the latter assume there is egoism or self-interest in individual economic action, and this forms the basis on which much social and economic analysis is constructed.

C. Particularism and Universalism. This pair refers to the range of people that an individual must consider when involved in social action. The issue here is whether to react "on the basis of a general norm or on the basis of someone's particular relationship to you". A particular relation is a relationship of a social actor with a specific individual. Parent-child or friendship relationships tend to be of this sort, where the relationship is very particular. In contrast, a bureaucracy is characterized by universal forms of relationships, where everyone is to be treated impartially and according to the same procedures or rules. In such parts of modern society, the ideal is that there is to be no particularism or favoritism is to be extended to anyone, even to a close friend or family member.

D. Diffuseness and Specificity. In contrast to the range of people involved in variable c, diffuseness and specificity deal with the range of obligations involved. These refer to the nature of social contacts and how extensive or how narrow are the obligations in any interaction. For example, in a bureaucracy, social relationships are very specific, where we meet with or contact someone for some very particular reason associated with their status and position, e.g. visiting a physician. In contrast, traditional society, friendships, and parent-child relationships are examples of more diffuse forms of contact – involving few people but having a broad or diffuse range of obligations. We rely on friends for a broad range of types of support, including conversation, support, accommodation, and intimate relationships. While there may be limits on such contacts, the diffuse relationships associated with

traditional society or friendships have the potential of dealing with almost any set of interests and problems.

E. Ascription and Achievement. Ascription refers to qualities of individuals, often inborn qualities such as sex, ethnicity, race, age, family status, or characteristics of the household of origin. In traditional society, these often governed an individual's life course or life chances. Achievement refers to performance of an individual and emphasizes what that individual achieves in life. For example, we might say that someone has achieved a prestigious position even though their ascribed status was that of poverty and disadvantage. While modern society does not always provide for opportunity to achieve or reward merit, the ideal goal is generally one that each individual should be provided an opportunity to achieve what they are capable of achieving. Where this is not permitted, this may mean there is discrimination, inequity, or violation of rights. For Fraser and Honneth this could be a result of misrecognition.

F. Expressive and Instrumental. Parsons regards the first half of each pair as the expressive types of characteristics and the second half of the pattern as the instrumental types of characteristics. Expressive aspects refer to "the integrative and tension aspects". These are people, roles, and actions concerned with taking care of the common task culture, how to integrate the group, and how to manage and resolve internal tensions and conflicts. This may take many different forms but often is associated with the family, and more specifically with the female role in the family.

The instrumental characteristics refer to "the goal attainment and adaptation aspects". These are the characteristics, people, roles, and actions associated with ideas, problem solving, getting the task done. These tasks are often associated with male roles, public activities, the economy, or politics.

The pattern variables can be used to refer to either the type of social action or the type of society. Social action and interaction in early forms of society were more likely to be characterized by expressive characteristics. In contrast, in modern societies, with a more complex division of labour and differentiation of statuses and roles, much of social action and interaction is characterized by instrumental characteristics.