Talcott Parsons was born in 1902 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He came from a religious and intellectual background; his father was a Congregational minister, a professor, and ultimately the president of a small college. Parsons got an undergraduate degree from Amherst College in 1924 and set out to do graduate work at the London School of Economics. In the next year, he moved on to Heidelberg, Germany. Max Weber had spent a large portion of his career at Heidelberg, and although he had died five years before Parsons arrived, Weber’s influence survived and his widow continued to hold meetings in her home, meetings that Parsons attended.

Parsons was greatly affected by Weber’s work and ultimately wrote his doctoral thesis at Heidelberg, dealing, in part, with Weber’s work. Parsons became an instructor at Harvard in 1927, and although he switched departments several times, Parsons remained at Harvard until his death in 1979. His career progress was not rapid; he did not obtain a tenured position until 1939. Two years previously, he had published *The Structure of Social Action*, a book that not only introduced major sociological theorists such as Weber to large numbers of sociologists but also laid the groundwork for Parsons’s own developing theory.

After that, Parsons made rapid academic progress. He was made chairman of the Harvard sociology department in 1944 and two years later set up and chaired the innovative department of social relations, which included not only sociologists but a variety of other social scientists. By 1949 he had been elected president of the American Sociological Association. In the 1950s and into the 1960s, with the publication of such books as *The Social System* (1951), Parsons became the dominant figure in American sociology.

However, in the late 1960s, Parsons came under attack from the emerging radical wing of American sociology. Parsons was seen as a political conservative, and his theory was considered highly conservative and little more than an elaborate categorization scheme. But in the 1980s, there was resurgence in interest in Parsonsian theory not only in the United States but around the world.

**Major Sociological Works:**
2.1 CONCEPT OF SOCIAL ACTION

Parson’s theory is conceptual framework which means it is a series of concepts which can be used to understand different levels of the social reality. It is a general and abstract theory which is universally applicable to both modern complex societies as well as simple primitive societies. The conceptual framework is built by Parsons in such a way that it is useful in analyzing the micro level of the social reality i.e. the level of individual action and patterns of interaction between individual, and the macro level of the social reality consisting of the social system, social structure and social organization. An important characteristic of this conceptual framework is that lower order concepts i.e. concepts used for analyzing the micro level are also used to derive higher order concepts (concepts used for studying the macro level). In other words, higher order concepts emerge from lower order concepts so that Parson’s started with individual action and patterns of interaction in his first book from which he derive higher order concepts used for analyzing the social system in his later book.

Social Action

Talcott Parsons began with the study of the micro level of the social reality that is from the level of individual action and interaction. In his first book “The Structure of Social Action” published in 1937, Parson defined individual action by distinguishing it from behavior. Behaviour is an automatic response to a stimulus and in natural sciences like Physics and Biology, the behaviour of objects and the behaviour of an organism is studied respectively. Both these natural science study the response of objects or organisms to stimuli. However, individual action in social science is different from such behaviour in the natural science because individual
are active and creative in these actions as they possess mind and consciousness which is not there in organism. Individual action is not an automatic response to stimuli but it is always taking place according to the mind and consciousness. Individuals actively create their actions according to goals and situations because of mind and consciousness.

Therefore, individual action which Parsons called the “Unit act” is the basic unit of society from which emerge, patterns of interaction, social system and social structure. The individual action or the unit act consists of the following four parts:

i. A social actor (e.g., a person, a family, an occupational group).

ii. An end (a goal or objective), a concrete future state of affairs toward which the action is directed.

iii. A concrete situation in which the act must be initiated and in which certain social and physical conditions will apply. It includes:
   Conditions: No control of actor. Road, environment
   Means: An Actor has a choice of alternative means

iv. A normative (value) orientation which regulates the relationship between these elements (Parsons 1937: 43–45).
   (This involves the investment of energy, motivation or effort)

It has been said that Parsons’ concept of individual action or the unit act is voluntary i.e., individual are free in their choice of alternative courses of action. However, the parts of individual action or unit act make it clear that Parsons did not consider the individual action to be free and voluntary. The individual actor is considered by Parsons to be determined by goals, situations, means, norms and values. All of which are given by the social structure. This means that individual action or the unit act is never voluntary but rather it is always structured by society. This is the reason why the name of Parsons book is “The Structure of Social Action” (1937). This emphasis upon the structure of action becomes clearer in Parsons later book “The Social System” (1951) in which he moves away from the analysis of micro level of social reality to the analysis of the macro level. Before analyzing the social system, Parsons defines social action and social system as
Parsons gave three new concepts for the analysis of social action i.e.

a) Need dispositions:- Need dispositions consist of biological needs which are shaped by social forces like utilization of energy, art etc.

b) Motivations orientations:- Motivational orientations are those which express the concern of individual actors about the degree of satisfaction of their need dispositions. Individual interest is deemed high.

c) Values orientation:- Value orientations are cultural standards for the choice of various courses of action by actors. Social aspect is deemed high.

Motivational orientation (Types)

- **Cognitive** motivational orientation used by the actor to analyse social phenomena in terms of their properties i.e. seeing object/environment in terms of their needs.

- **Cathectic** motivational orientation used by the actors to attach emotions to social phenomena i.e. emotional attitude of actors

- **Evaluative** motivational orientation used by the actor to determine the degree to which social phenomena satisfy their need dispositions i.e. optimum efficiency.

For example, a cognitive orientation allows us to have a range of vegetables as our choice for meals; whereas the cathactic orientation attaches us emotionally with few of the vegetables list which one likes the most and the evaluative part focusses on the parameters that which among
the favorite vegetables can be easily available considering the limitations of time, availability and price.

**Value orientations: types**

- **Cognitive** value orientations are cultural standard used by actors to decide which social phenomena are useful and important. (Evaluation in terms of objective standards).
- **Appreciative** value orientations are used by actors to decide the amount of emotions to be attached to social phenomena. (Evaluation in terms of aesthetic sense)
- **Moral** value orientations are used to decide the degree to which social phenomena are likely to satisfy or deprive them of need dispositions. (Evaluation in terms of rightness or wrongness).

Parsons gave three types of social action based on the three types of motivational orientation and the three types of value orientation as follows:

a. **Instrumental social action**: Cognitive motivational orientation and cognitive value orientation are dominant.

b. **Expressive social action**: Cathetic motivational orientation and appreciative value orientation are dominant.

c. **Moral social action**: Evaluative motivational action and moral value orientation are dominant.

When there is conflict between Motivational and Value orientations, the developing patterns are termed as *Pattern Variables* by Parsons.
2.2

PARSON’S SOCIAL SYSTEM

From the analysis of social action in his first book, Parsons moved to the analysis of social system and social structure. In his 2nd book “The Social System”, published in 1951, he defined the social system as the system of a series of social actions towards others which become pattern of interaction between many actors. The series of social action is the basic unit of the social system just as successive individual actions or unit acts are the basic unit of the social action.

He says that as variously oriented actors (in terms of their configuration of motivational and value orientation) interact; they come to develop agreements and sustain patterns of interaction, which becomes institutionalized. Such institutionalized patterns are conceptualized as social system in Parsonian viewpoint.

In this way we move away from the analysis of micro phenomena of individual actions to social structure, social system and social organization. Parsons points to the unique character of the social system which is that the patterns of interaction between many actors are ordinary and stable. He made new concepts for the analysis of the social system which give it stability. The concept of the status goals leads to organization of the social system and the concept of institutionalization gives stability to the social system. The concept of status goal organizes the social system in such a way that interaction takes place not between actors but between status goals. Status differs in the pattern of occupation and goal differs to what an actor does in that position. This means that actors may change but the pattern of interaction is always organized in the same way because it takes place between status goals and not between actors. Parsons further says that the stability of a social system is ensured by a process he called institutionalism. This means that the status goals are acquired by norms. As variously oriented actors interact (in terms of their configuration of motivational and value orientations), they come to develop agreements and sustain patterns of interaction, which becomes institutionalized. Such institutionalized patterns can be, in Parsons view, conceptualized as social system. Hence, it is a system of actions, made up of interactions, actor and object, goal and situations, conditions, motivational and value orientations.
Patterns of interaction between many actors constitute the social system in which actors are oriented in their actions by different combination of motivational orientation and value orientation. The motivational orientation and value orientation which determine action in the social system are conceptualized by Parsons as the ‘personality system’ and ‘cultural system’ respectively. The institutionalization of action in the social system, involves a relationship between it, personality system and cultural system.

Parsons concludes by saying that, these systems have impact on each other’s domain and an individual’s action is characteristic of the interaction between these systems.

Like social action, there are some **conditions also for a social system**:

1. Two or more individuals in a social interaction
2. Goals {Individual (Motives) and Collective (Values)}
3. Consensus (People agreeing to the common jobs) common values

**Structural Prerequisites:**

In the analysis of the patterns of interaction between many actors, Parsons concentrates upon the social system. These patterns of interaction are organized and stable because of the status, roles and institutionalization. Then Parsons analyses the social system in terms of its structures and functions. If the social system is to survive, four needs must be fulfilled which Parsons
called the “four pre-requisites” for the survival of the social system. These are the polar dichotomies or dilemmas which an actor has to combat while facing a situation. The four structural prerequisites are:

I. The first need is **Adaptation**: This refers to the way in which the social system adapts to the environment and also the way in which the environment is adapted to by the social system. In order to require the resources needed for survival, it is the *economic* structure which fulfills this need by making arrangement for the production, consumption and distribution of resources.

II. The second need is “**Goal Attainment**”: This refers to the way in which the social system establishes the priorities of goals to be attained by it is the *political* structure of the social system which fulfills this need by organizing the people to attain these goals by:
   a) Setting goals,
   b) Organizing people and
   c) Motivating their energy towards the goal(s).

III. The third need is **Integration**: which refers to the coherence, coordination and management of the relationship between various parts of the social system i.e. the system must regulate the interrelationships of its component parts. It must also manage the relationship among the other three functional imperatives i.e. Adaptation, Goal Attainment and Latency. This need is fulfilled by law.

IV. The fourth pre-requisite is **Latency**: It has been divided into two aspects called pattern maintenance and tension management. Pattern maintenance means the motivation of actors and the cultural patterns which sustain these motivations must be maintained in each generation and passed on from one generation to another. Tension management means that internal tensions, strains and stress of the actors must be dealt with in order to sustain the motivation of actors. This ensures that the actors display appropriate characteristics. This need is fulfilled by structures of the school.
These four needs are known as the functional *pre-requisites* or *AGIL* as discussed by Talcott Parsons. This way he proposes the functional aspects of the different social setups preceeded by the structure of social system.

The AGIL scheme of Parsons can be applied to the university in the following manner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Polity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance, UGC, Fees, Research Grants</td>
<td>VC, Registrars, DSW, Deans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture</strong></td>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Teacher Interaction, Officials closeness, Traditions, Festivals</td>
<td>Psychologists, Counsellors, Peer group</td>
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### 1.3 PATTERN VARIABLES

The performance of roles generates forces of *strain* or *tension*. The extent of strain depends on the way role expectations are internalized by social actors i.e. in the motivational and value orientations each actor faces dilemma in the performance of these roles which involves a choice between two patterns of actions as follows:

- A. Affectivity and Affective Neutrality
- B. Diffuseness and Specificity
- C. Particularism and Universalism
- D. Ascription and Achievement
- E. Collective Orientation and Self orientation

**A. Affectivity and Affective Neutrality**

This pattern variable is concerned with the amount of emotions or effect.
**Affectivity:** The actor lays emphasis on one’s gratification, avoiding pain and maximizing pleasure. Here, the emotions play their role quite effectively even if it disturbs the discipline. The role performance of a mother with her children is a different situation which must be affective or emotional in order to ensure proper case and efficient socialization of children.

**Affective Neutrality:** Here the actor lays more emphasis on the discipline, deferring gratification even at the cost of one’s pain or even death. A doctor while treating a patient has to be without emotion in order to ensure proper case and efficient treatment of patient. Similarly a soldier has to be affective neutral in combating any enemy plans.

**B. Diffusion and Specificity:**
This is concerned with the scope of obligation in role performance in two different situations in one of which the obligations are narrow and other broad.

**Diffusion:** The role performance in this situation is wide in scope and infinitely broad and concerned with many aspects of the relationship (diffuse). For example, the relationship between husband and wife, and the role of mother in a situation involving children as well as the role performance of friends is always broad because it is concerned with many aspects of the relationship.

**Specificity:** This concern only with one aspect of relationship (specific) which is limited in scope. For example, the role of doctors in a situation evaluating the health of patients has narrow scope of obligations or the doctor is concerned only with one aspect of the patients which involves the health status or diseases.

**C. Particularism and Universalism:**
This is concerned with the evaluation of the role performance of others in two situations with respect to personal or impersonal standards.

**Particularism:** When a person only concerns the personal i.e. kinship considerations, friendship considerations, caste considerations, religious considerations, etc. Here the violation of norms, rules, law takes place to favour a particular person.

**Universalism:** Here, universal standards are applicable to all in every kind of situation/circumstance. The legal norms and sanctions are abided by as the rules prescribe.
D. **Ascription and Achievement**

This is concerned with the evaluation of inborn qualities against merit.

**Ascription**: Here the evaluation of role performance is considered according to the inborn qualities (ascription) such as kinship, caste or religion etc. For example, in a strong political organization, only those candidates are favored for some posts or jobs which have any kin, caste, region or any such connection with the party heads even against the qualified candidates.

**Achievement**: The evaluation is based on the performance or merit of an individual in any kind of competition, examination or trial. For example, the evaluation of the role of or a student cannot be on the basis of their qualities of birth such as kinship, caste or religion but it will always be on merit.

E. **Self-orientation & Collective Orientation**:

This is concerned with whether the role performance is based on self-interest and personal goals (self-orientation) or it is based on collective interests and collective goals.

**Self-orientation**: When self-interest and personal gratifications are involved and held higher than that of collectivity. A doctor can never act on the basis of self-interest. A true leader of any specific movement has to focus on the collective goals rather than any self-interest.

**Collective-orientation**: No self-interest or personal goals are considered in collective orientation. One defers his/her gratification for the good of a large number of people collectively. Had the freedom fighters of our country run after the self-interest, the country would then still have been reeling under the clutches of imperialism.

2.4 **EQUILIBRIUM AND CHANGE**

The study of equilibrium and change was done by Parsons at different times. The equilibrium dominated in his book “*The Social System* (1937)” while the study of change came latter in his
last two books “Societies, Evolutions and Comprehensive Perspective (1966)” and “Evolution of Society Published (1977). Thus, Parsons initially believe that the social system was orderly or in equilibrium as he discussed the concept on change only in his latter books.

The concept of order was taken by Parson from the British political scientist Thomas Hobbs who wanted to prevent conflict in societies by the use of power and force so that what Hobbs called “was of all against all” should be prevented and this could be done only by the use of force by a dictator (leviathan) who could establish order in society.

Parsons criticized Hobbs for saying that conflict could be prevented only by that use of force because this can work only for a short period in society. If so order is to be established in society for a long period of time then norms and values must be established in society rather than the use of force for preventing conflict. Parsons calls the establishment of norms and values in society as the formulation of a “Cultural System” which is necessary for preventing conflict for a long period of time. The integration of this cultural system into the social system is necessary for the required order in society which must take place in such a way that norms and values are inculcated by actors so that they are able to play roles. There are two processes in all societies which ensure that actors always play roles according to norms and values of a particular society. These two processes are:

(i) Socialization: It is the process by which the norms and values of the cultural system are inculcated by actors so that they are motivated to play roles in the social system. These norms and values of the cultural system also provide the stable and secured social relationship of the family in order to manage the strain and tensions which is there in motivating actors to play roles.

(ii) Social control: The process of social control reduces the possibility of the deviance of actors in playing roles. Social sanctions are always there for those actors who do not play roles according to the norms and values.

Parson’s say that in spite of the operation of these two processes in all societies, there is no guarantee that order will always be there in the social systems. He says that order in the social system is a self-maintaining equilibrium. This is because socialization and social control are
processes which do not occur equally for all the actors in the social system and so there are always some individuals who are able to deviate in performing these roles. This deviance of some individuals disturbs the equilibrium of the social system. However, the self-maintaining equilibrium always restores the social system. In this way the equilibrium is maintained in the social system even though there are changes in it because of some deviance.

Thus, the social system is self-maintain equilibrium and so any disturbance in one part of the social system leads to restoration of the system back to equilibrium. Any change in one part of the social system brings about such changes in other parts after the disturbance of the equilibrium. All parts of social system are interdependent and interrelated so that any change in equilibrium of the system results in shifting the position of the equilibrium. This is called moving or dynamic equilibrium, a consequence of the equilibrium being self-maintained.

**Parsons Study of Change**

(Social change can be seen as a moving equilibrium.)

Parsons moved away from the study of order or self-maintaining equilibrium of the social system to the study of change in order to reply to his critics who used to say that the Parsonian theory was static and his conservation did not explain the social change. He, thus, studied social change by using the concept of evolution in a way similar to Spencer to meet change from simple to complex, homogeneous to heterogeneous, undifferentiated to differentiated; with the emergence of new parts in which there is more and more functional specialization in the society. Since, new parts are created by differentiation; the social system thus has the feature of making the social system more adaptive than it was earlier. Specialized institutions now carry out different functions that were previously carried out by one single institution, to what he called functional specialization. Earlier people used to have the formal education and the religious educations in their homes, but now we have schools and religious seminaries specialized for the job.

Parsons says that the evolution the social system means that the social system undergoes the process of adaptive upgradation. That is a system is more adaptive, absorbing all the changes with time and reshaping itself that it used to be earlier. This shows that the process of a social
Change by differentiation is progressive change because the system gets more and more adapted as it evolves.

**Evolutionary Universals:** Parson also says that the process of evolution of the social system in the history of all societies consists of the same three stages i.e. primitive, intermediate and modern stages. These three stages of evolution are not similar to all societies as these are applicable to all societies by taking into account the considerable variations found in particular societies because of its specific cultural and material conditions. These three stages are called **evolutionary universals** by Parsons and he distinguished between them on the basis of cultural conditions. For example, the growth rates of different countries has made them to figure accordingly in developed, developing and under developed categories.

Thus the change from primitive to intermediate stage took place because of the development of a **written language** and the change from intermediate to modern stage took place because of the development of an **institutionalized code of normative order which means a legal code or laws.**

**Criticism of Parsons**

His theory was at its peak between 1930’s to 1960’s but from thereon it was flooded with intense criticism. Mitchell says that “when a sociologist wishes to debate, question, criticize and rebel, it is usually Parsons who becomes the target”.

- His was universal and general approach to theory in Sociology.
- Doesn’t deal adequately with history.
- He did not allow much room for dissensus and conflict. As Alvin Gouldner criticized Parsons saying that he ‘tended to over-emphasize harmonious relationship’.
- Focus on the brighter side only, as Gouldner says “Parsons persistently sees the partly filled glass of water as half-full rather than half empty”.
- Parsons lacks a creative and dynamic sense of actor, because people appear to be seen as constrained by cultural and social forces.
• Deals more likely with the static structures than with the change processes. The approach has incapacity to deal with contemporary processes of social change. As Parsons discussed it, it was again discussed in developmental terms rather than the revolutionary terms.

• It is teleological: Defined as the view that society or other social structures has purpose or goals. In order to achieve those goals, society creates specific social structures and institutions as for procreation and socialization of individuals, family as an institution is created.

• It adheres to tautology: a tautological argument is one in which the conclusion is merely the restatement of the premise i.e. defining whole in terms of parts and parts in terms of the whole. For example, social system is defined by the relationship among its component parts and that the components parts are defined by their place in the larger social system.

• Parsons has not produced any great empirical work as Durkheim (Suicide) or Marx, which somewhat diminishes his reputation.