

FUNCTIONALISM

STRUCTARAL FUNCTIONALISM

TALCOTT PARSONS

Structural functionalism

- **Structural functionalism**, or simply **functionalism**, is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability.
- This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation, which is a broad focus on the social structures that shape society as a whole, and believes that society has evolved like organisms.¹
- This approach looks at both social structure and social functions. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements; namely norms, customs, traditions, and institutions.

- For [Talcott Parsons](#), "structural-functionalism" came to describe a particular stage in the methodological development of [social science](#), rather than a specific school of thought.¹
- The structural functionalism approach is a [macrosociological](#) analysis, with a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole

Talcott Parsons

- Harvard Professor of Economics, and then Sociology, 1927-1973
- Founded the Department of Social Relations combining Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology, 1944
- Key works:
 - The Structure of Social Action (1937)*
 - The Social System (1951)*
 - Social Structure and Personality (1964)*
 - The System of Modern Societies (1971)*
 - The Structure and Change of the Social System (1983)*



Talcott Parsons

Born 1902- Died 1979

- **Education**

- Undergraduate work at Amherst University in biology and medicine
- Studied economics in the London School of Economics
 - Strongly influenced by the social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (a functionalist)
- Attended Heidelberg University, in Germany, on an educational exchange
 - Alfred Weber (Max Weber's brother) was his primary teacher
 - Also sat under the instruction of Karl Mannheim

FUNCTIONALISM'S FUNDAMENTAL PREMISES *ala* PARSONS

- EVERY SYSTEM HAS ***REQUISITE NEEDS*** THAT MUST BE MET FOR THAT SYSTEM TO SURVIVE.
- ***SPECIALIZED STRUCTURES FUNCTION*** TO SATISFY THE NEEDS OF THE SYSTEM.
- SOCIAL STRUCTURES, FUNCTIONS, AND THE SYSTEMIC WHOLE ARE THUS ***INTRINSICALLY RELATED*** AND AFFECT ONE ANOTHER.
- ***SPECIALIZATION*** OF STRUCTURES OCCURS THROUGH THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS OF ***DIFFERENTIATION***.
- SYSTEMS TEND TO BECOME ***MORE COMPLEX*** THROUGH STRUCTURAL DIFFERENTIATION.
- STRUCTURAL DIFFERENTIATION MAKES SYSTEMS ***MORE ADAPTIVE***.
- DIFFERENTIATION CREATES ***PROBLEMS OF COORDINATION AND CONTROL***, WHICH CREATES PRESSURES FOR THE SELECTION OF ***INTEGRATING PROCESSES***.
- INTEGRATING PROCESSES TEND TO KEEP THE SYSTEM IN A STATE OF ***EQUILIBRIUM***

Talcott Parsons: The Structure of Social Action

- Voluntaristic Theory of Action
 - Involves these basic elements
 - Actors are individual persons
 - Actors are viewed as goal seeking
 - Actors also possess alternative means to achieve goals

Social Action

- For Parson **Action** is the building block of the system

Social Action Theory

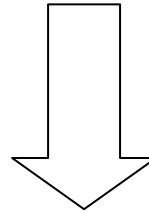
- Social Action Theory begins with a biological-sociological conceptualization of the basic unit of study as the “unit act”.
- An “act” involves the following:
 - An agent or actor
 - Must have an end or goal
 - Must be in a situation which differs from state of affairs the action is oriented
 - There exists alternative meanings to the end

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PARSONS' VOLUNTARISTIC UNIT ACT:

“ENVIRONMENTAL” CONDITIONS



THE NORMATIVE ORDER

THE ACTOR

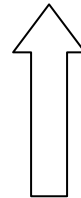


**SELF
EGO**



**NEED
DISPOSITIONS
MOTIVATIONS
(psychodynamic)**

- Cognitive
- Appreciative
- Evaluative



“AVAILABLE” MEANS

GOALS ENDS



VALUE ORIENTATIONS
(cultural frameworks)

- Cognitive Significance
- Expressive Symbolism
- Moral Standards

Talcott Parsons: The Social System

How do social systems survive?

More specifically, why do institutionalized patterns of interactions persist?

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

Social Action Theory

- An act is always a process in time.
- “End” implies a future reference or state that does not exist yet.
- Actions consist of structures and processes by which humans form meaningful intentions and implement them.
- Social action is preformed by an actor either as an individual or a group

Social System

- Parson's described a system as a "complex unit of some kind with boundaries, within which parts are connected, and within which something takes place.
- The social system is an arrangement between parts and elements that exist over time, even while some elements change.

Social System

- Parson's general assumptions:
 - Systems are made of order and the interdependence of parts
 - The system, and all the sub-systems, strive for equilibrium
 - Systems are generally static, or move in a deliberate manner
 - A disruption in the normal flow of one subsystem can cause a disturbance throughout the whole system.
 - Systems have boundaries, which may involve actual physical space, or time and distance.

Talcott Parsons: The Social System

The Four Functional Imperatives

- **Adaptation**
 - Involves securing sufficient resources from the environment and then distributing these throughout the system
- **Goal Attainment**
 - Refers to establishing priorities among system goals and mobilizing system resources for their attainment

Talcott Parsons: The Social System

- **Integration**

- Denotes coordinating and maintaining viable interrelationships among system units

Talcott Parsons: The Social System

- **Latency**

- Embraces two related problems

- **Pattern Maintenance**

- Pertains to how to ensure that actors in the social system display the appropriate characteristics

- » Motives

- » Needs

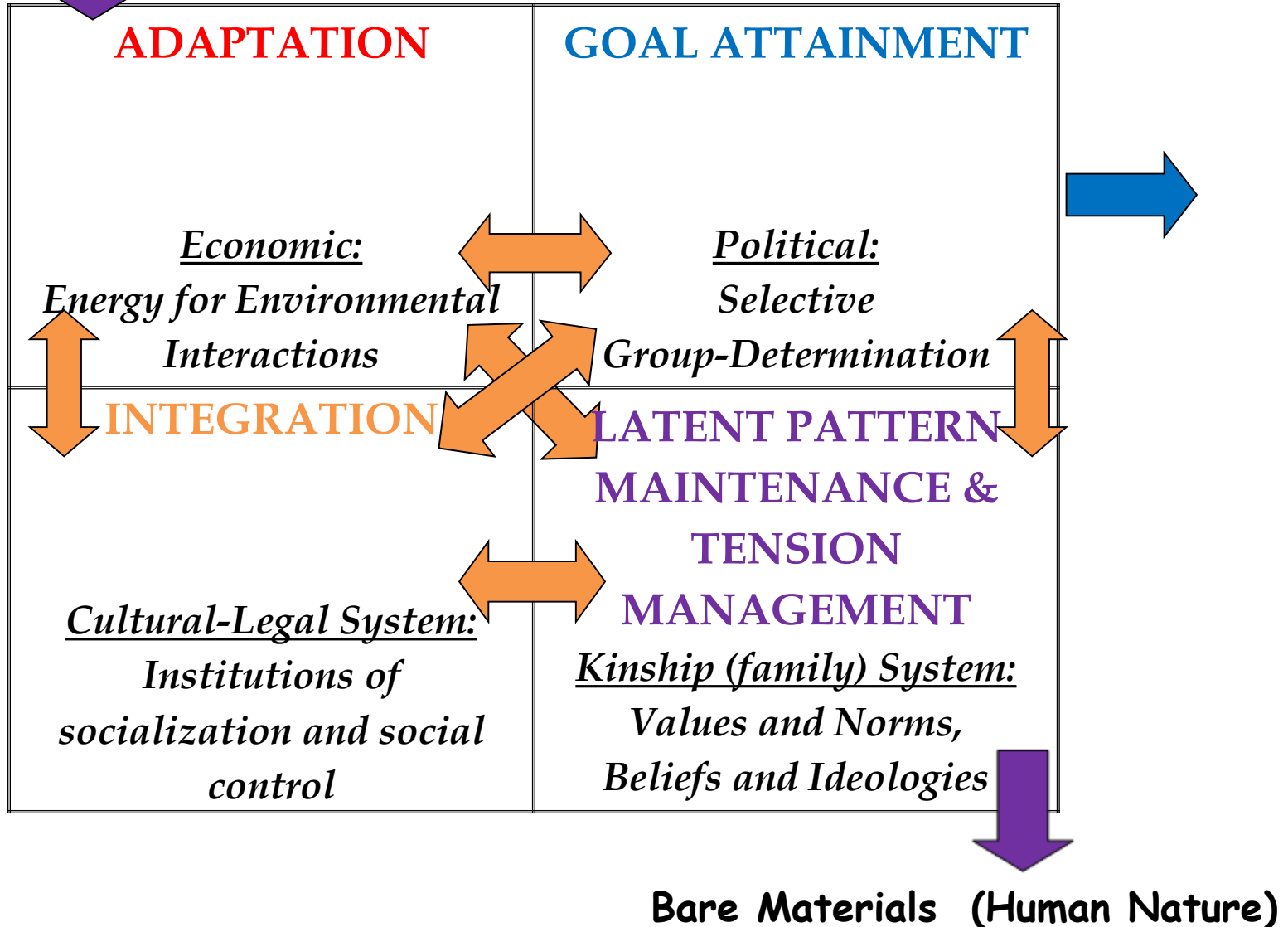
- » Role-playing

- **Tension Management**

- Concerns dealing with the internal tensions and strains of actors in the social system

External Environment
(Natural & Social)

ACTION SYSTEMS *within*
PARSONS' AGIL MODEL



AGIL

- Parsons' hypothesis that process in any social system is subject to four independent functional imperatives or problems which must be met adequately if equilibrium or existence of the system is to be maintained

AGIL

- **Adaptation:**
 - Secure & distribute sufficient resources or adapt to changes
 - **Adaptation**, or the capacity of society to interact with the environment. This includes, among other things, gathering resources and producing commodities to social redistribution.
- **Goal Attainment:**
 - Must establish clear goals. This is primary to political system

AGIL

- **Integration:**
 - Regulation and coordination of actors and systems
- **Latency:**
 - Tension maintenance and pattern maintenance
 - Sufficient motivation for actors
 - Social institutions are key (family, peers, education)

AGIL SCHEMA

Instrumental functions	Consummatory functions	
External problems	<i>Adaptation-</i> natural resources - <u>COMMODITY PRODUCTION</u>	<i>Goal-attainment-</i> political offices - common goals
Internal problems	<i>Latency (or Pattern Maintenance)-</i> family - schools	<i>Integration-</i> religious systems - media

Pattern Variables

- Categorize expectations and the structure of relationships
- Allows for comparison between relationships
- Three primary thoughts when developing these variables:
 - General enough to permit comparison
 - Should show relevance to action
 - Categorizations of decisions

Pattern Variables

- **Affectivity-Affectivity Neutrality**
 - Expectation of emotional component
- **Diffuseness- Specificity**
 - Range of demands expected in a relationship
- **Universalism- Particularism**
 - Fair Treatment or priority status?

Pattern Variables

- **Achievement- Ascription**
 - Interactions based in who they are or inborn quality
- **Collectivity- Self Orientation**
 - Motivation: actions directed at a person or collectivity