

## Talcott Parson Theory on Social Stratification: 1<sup>st</sup> Years:

Parsons' Functional Theory of Social Stratification Compared with the Davis and Moore theory, Talcott Parsons' work is much more general and abstract. One of the central figures in modern American sociology, Parsons developed a theory that is often considered the most important functional statement on all aspects of society ever made.

Parsons argued that two sets of concepts are most important in helping us understand social stratification. He viewed that the purpose of social stratification is the differential evaluation in the moral sense of individuals as units. Parsons means, as in the Warner school, the status or honor is the most important dimension of social stratification. People are evaluated and ranked by others in terms of how well they live up to the dominant values in the society, whatever these values may be. This means that there will always be a hierarchy of status honor in every society.

Parsons recognized wealth and power differences, but primary significance is a symbol of achievement. Parsons the common value system helps ensure that the functionally most important roles are filled by competent people through their status striving. In order to specify the placement of people in the stratification system, Parsons had to rank which roles or tasks are the most respected (to the least respected) in the society, which involved getting more specific about the dominant value system.

Parsons first offered his description of the four major functional subsystems within a society that are related to the four major functional prerequisites that all societies must meet if they are to survive

All societies must solve problems of

- (1) adaptation of the environment
- (2) goal attainment
- (3) integration and
- (4) latent pattern maintenance (or, for short, AGIL).

The primary "concrete" institutions that usually perform these functional prerequisites for a society are, in order, the economy, the state, the legal system or sometimes religion, and the family, schools, and cultural institutions.

The importance of the preceding in understanding social stratification, Parsons claimed, is twofold:

- (1) The differing tasks of these various institutions lead them to stress differing values (or pattern variables).

2) Societies differ with respect to which of the four sets of institutions (adaptive, goal attainment, integration, or latent pattern maintenance) is primary. In a society where one set of institutions is primary (say, goal attainment or the polity), the common value system will be more heavily weighed toward the values most consistent with this institutional stress. Thus, the individuals who best live up to the values shaped by the primary institution or institutions will receive more status, as well as the secondary rewards that are tied to high status, like wealth. Let us summarize these very abstract ideas: 1. A person's place in the status hierarchy (stratification system) is determined by the moral evaluation of others. 2. This moral evaluation is made in terms of a common value system. 3. The common value system is shaped by the institution that is given primary stress in the society (the institutional stress coming from the particular historical and environmental circumstances of the society). 4. Thus, people who best live up to these values or ideas will receive, in addition to high status, other rewards, such as a high income and wealth. It is also important to note that authority (or power) is attained through an individual's functional position in the occupational structure, which, of course, is gained through status attainment.

The people who meet the performance and achievement ideals in the economic occupational structure will be rewarded with greater status, advancement in the occupational structure, and the secondary rewards of wealth and high income.

Parsons' Theory of Social Stratification. In the society will be most highly rewarded, with status first, and wealth as a secondary reward. What Parsons has done, however, is specify more clearly what the most important positions will be, given a particular institutional stress in the society.

### Critiques of Parsons

One can certainly disagree with Parsons over why these people are on top of the stratification system in these countries. In other words, what Parsons leaves out of his analysis, or reduces to secondary importance, is a key to the critics' responses.

One of the most prominent criticisms of Parsons' work involves his assumption of a society with needs of its own. From this perspective, people in top institutional positions are doing what they do for the interests and needs of the total society. For Parsons, the interests of individuals and groups within the society are second\*.

Like Durkheim, Parsons recognized class divisions, but again, these were seen as less important (Burger 1977). Take the example of power. Parsons preferred the term authority because he viewed power and influence over others as something given to occupants of top institutional positions so that the interests and needs of the total society would be furthered. Parsons rejected the notion that power is often used for the interests of individuals and groups. Parsons' assumptions that there is a social system with needs of its own and that actors in this system are working to fulfill society's needs rather than their own

Parsons could do this because he believed that people primarily seek status, therefore striving to live up to dominant values. By striving to live up to the dominant values-remembering that Parsons saw the values as shaped by the needs of society-people are serving the needs of society. Parsons did not see people as striving primarily for power and material wealth for personal interests.

Conflict theorists like Turnin (1953:393) point out that "social stratification systems function to provide the elite with the political power necessary to procure acceptance and dominance of an ideology which rationalizes the status quo, whatever this may be, as 'logical,' 'natural,' and 'morally right.' " An elite may legitimize its own high status through its influence over people's perspectives of what is to be valued. To the extent that this is the case, people may be given status and other rewards not because they meet the needs of the overall society but because they serve the interests of elites in the society. A Conflict View of Economic Dominance, Power, and Status. Conflict theorists, of course, may disagree whether political power or economic dominance, or neither, is most important

But, as we have noted many times, an accumulation of empirical, historical, and other types of data and information can lead us to suggest that one abstract theory or paradigm is more useful or less useful in providing understanding of a particular subject matter such as social stratification. The ideas of Davis and Moore and Talcott Parsons reviewed here are not without value. Societies do, to some extent, operate in the manner described by these functional theorists. And much of the empirical research on social stratification uses the concept of occupational status, which comes from the functionalist perspective, though as we will see it can be used in altered form by conflict theories as well. But with this in mind we must consider the concept of occupational status before turning more generally to modern conflict theories of social stratification.