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ACTION THEORY AND ACTION RESEARCH*

At first glance the use of the word "action" in sociological discourse to modify both "theory" and "research" might seem confusing. Does the word have the same meaning in both instances? What is common to both the abstract formulations of the so-called "grand" theory of Professor Parsons and his collaborators, and the more mundane and practical research of those who design and evaluate programs of social betterment?

A moment's reflection reminds us that different as action research and action theory might be in some respects, the term "action" does indeed have a common meaning in both cases. When Professor Parsons entitles a work "The Structure of Social Action" and when a reform group christens its organization "Action to Improve our Neighborhoods" the same meaning is intended. In both cases the word "action" is intended to connote such concepts as implementation, establishment and realization. Professor Parsons would be as dissatisfied with the title "The Structure of Social Behavior" as reformers would be unlikely to name their enterprise "Behavior to Improve our Neighborhoods," for in both cases the names must connote purposeful, goal directed, implementive conduct.

The fundamental premise of action theory is that the elements of a situation can be divided into two classes, the normative and the conditional, and that social conduct is to

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be conceptualized as a process whereby ideal norms are realized or implemented in the face of realistic conditions. This is nowhere more clearly stated than in the conclusion to The Structure of Social Action where Parsons states:

"Action must always be thought of as involving a state of tension between two different orders of elements, the normative and the conditional. As process, action is, in fact, the process of alteration of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity with norms."¹

This passage must not be regarded as evidence that Professor Parsons is squarely on the side of pure idealism. Parsons insists that both normative and conditional elements always contribute to action; he rejects any methodological position that attempts to reduce social reality to either realistic conditions on the one hand or to values, norms or intentions on the other. The passage continues:

"Elimination of the normative aspect altogether eliminates the concept of action itself and leads to the radical positivistic position. Elimination of conditions, of the tension from that side, equally eliminates action and results in idealistic emanationism. Thus conditions may be conceived at one pole, end and normative rules at the other, means and effort as the connecting links between them."²

Thus, according to Parsons, the only way to avoid the undesirable alternatives of positivism and idealism is to construct an action theory which, by taking human effort as its subject relates ideal ends to realistic conditions. Such a theory would presumably be a type of sociological theory with critical relevance for action research for it should provide an account of how social reality opposes human

intentions and shapes the consequences of social action.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the potentiality and the limitations of action theory as a guide to action research and in so doing to develop a critique of Parsonian theory that goes beyond the shibboleths of contemporary criticism. We are often told that Parsons can not deal with change or with conflict, or that his theory is only a set of categories, or that it is idealistic or conservative, without being given convincing and articulate accounts of the precise sense in which these charges are supposed to be true. This paper, while accepting the relevance and value of action theory to action research will also attempt to specify one point at which action theory, as presently conceived, proves inadequate.

This inadequacy may be summarized in a few words: Action theory is more successful in delineating the relations between goals and conditions than in relating conditions to each other. Yet, successful social action (and successful action research) requires understanding of the interrelatedness of social conditions. In consequence, the investigator of any given situation is forced to graft on additional propositions which are imported from other sociological traditions in an ad hoc manner.

In order to specify the sense in which these rather cryptic statements are true it is necessary to establish in more substantive detail the relevant aspects of the theory of action. They may be summarized by providing a synopsis of what Professor Parsons terms "the theory of institutionalization".

Institutionalization is the process by which abstract ethical premises such as values and norms become transformed into concrete established and socially organized institutions. True to the initial premises of action theory such institutions must be regarded as joint products of the norms which they embody and of the social conditions which shaped their development. The first task is to establish a useful classification of the conditional elements.

During one phase of his career Parsons emphasized one type of condition above all others. In The Social System and Towards a General Theory of Action the predominant topic was the condition of adequate motivation. Institutionalization was conceived as a process whereby appropriate mechanisms of socialization and social control are instituted in order to insure that actors are adequately motivated to conform to normative obligations.³

In more recent papers, Parsons has developed a fuller, more inclusive description of the elements of institutionalization. They are said to be four in number.

1. Specification. If a social value is to be institutionalized there must be consensus in the population on the implications of the value for conduct. Consensus on an abstract norm such as equality of opportunity is not enough; there must be agreement on the specific courses of action that the value requires. Value traditions are susceptible to alternative versions and the shape of an established institution reflects the particular version that has become dominant in a population.⁴

2. Ideology. If a social value is to be institutionalized it must be supported by appropriate conceptions of the nature of the social world. Action is guided not only by conditions but by perceptions of conditions and thus patterns of belief within a population shape social institutions.⁵

3. Interests. Here we return to the concept of adequate motivation. Social values are institutionalized when patterns of interests are established which motivate actors to conform. However, Parsons' recent statements make it clear that the concept of adequate motivation is not to be confined to the problem of psychological motivation in the single actor. The patterns of the established interests of organized groups are an equally important factor in institutionalization. Furthermore, it must also be understood that institutionalization does not occur solely through socialization, that is, through transforming peoples' inner desires so that they want to do what they must do. Institutionalization may rest in large measure on the establishment of systems of rewards and sanctions, such as legal agencies or markets that create networks of interests upon which institutions may rest.⁶

4. Jurisdiction. The fourth element of institutionalization concerns the access of systems of social control to actors. Jurisdiction presumes sovereignty in the classical sense, that is, institutionalization ultimately requires physical control over a territorial area.⁷ However, jurisdiction must not be confused with sovereignty for it is a more inclusive term referring to access in a general sense. In order to successfully guarantee a normative order the agencies of social control

must have not only physical access to non-conforming actors, they must also have access to information about non-conformity. Furthermore, in any social system in which legal protections are institutionalized, agencies of social control must have jurisdiction in the legal sense and access to sufficient information to provide legal proofs.⁸ Jurisdiction, like the other components of institutionalization, is not only a condition of institutionalization; it is one of the factors shaping the form of established institutions. The structure of an institutional order is affected by the character of the relevant activity, its accessibility to the organs of control, and the channels of and barriers to communication in the population.

These four elements of institutionalization: specification, ideology, interests and jurisdiction are valuable concepts for the student of programs of social action. They sensitize the analyst to the barriers to success and to the dynamic forces that can be utilized to induce change. The categories help us to understand the form that action programs come to assume in practice.

I have provided only bare outline of the theory of institutionalization. It is a theory which is still developing and it is capable of producing more refined propositions about how values relate to social conditions. The following propositions illustrate the types of hypotheses that are suggested by the theory. (1) The versions of a value tradition that are most likely to become institutionalized are those that are subject to a visible test of compliance. (2) Values

are more likely to become established and embodied in institutions if important organized groups have an interest in their implementation. (3) Values are more likely to be established in sectors of the population where prestige may be obtained by seeking to implement them.

On the other hand, the theory as stated does not generate propositions about the characteristics of a social structure that create visibility, about which groups will organize to effectively secure their interests, or about how the capacity to gain prestige is distributed in society.

The significance of this problem can be more clearly demonstrated by reference to a particular piece of action research.

During the early sixties the author was engaged in evaluative research on the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, a state agency charged by law with an action program. Massachusetts' law forbids discrimination by race, color or religious creed in employment, housing, education and public accommodations, and the Commission Against Discrimination has the task of implementing this law. Action theory provided an important initial insight, namely, that the factor of jurisdiction would be of critical importance. Effective access to violators is an essential precondition of regulation. Therefore, it was important that any program of action research be able to evaluate the relative effectiveness of various strategies of access. This may sound extremely obvious; one might suppose that it would not be necessary to invoke the paraphernalia of action theory to arrive at such a

conclusion. However, it was not obvious to the officials of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, who did not view access as problematical. From their point of view jurisdiction would come automatically as persons came to them to complain of discrimination. Their theory was that what may be called the "private law" strategy would be an effective means of obtaining access to violators.

The law provides that any person who feels that he has been a target of discrimination may bring a complaint to the commission. The commission has a responsibility for investigating such allegations and, if they find probable cause for believing them to be true, the commission must conciliate with the respondent and attempt to eliminate any discriminatory practice which the respondent may employ. The private complaint of the aggrieved individual is the key that unlocks the door to the company and legitimates commission investigation of the entire range of its policies and practices. The officials of the commission had no reason to doubt the effectiveness of this technique. What more effective means of discovering discrimination than to allow the targets of discrimination to activate the legal machinery. Those who are the most hurt will have the most reason to complain and this should lead to efficient use of the limited resources available for investigation.

The facts did not bear the commission out. Investigation unearthed the fact that the mean per cent Negro employed at firms that had been targets of complaints was twice the percentage of Negroes in the labor force of the community and

that most of the jobs in question were of a type that were already easily available to Negroes. There was a noticeable lack of pioneering, strategic complaints which would give the commission access to significant targets. On the other hand, certain structural forces helped to produce strategic complaints. Complaints of middle class origin and complaints sponsored by organized groups were more strategic than complaints of lower class origin brought by unaffiliated individuals. For this reason the private law approach achieved more effective jurisdiction in housing than in employment. Middle class Negroes were effectively organized to use legal services in their quest for better housing.

At this point crucial questions must be asked. It is true that action theory led to recognition of the importance of jurisdiction. But did action theory provide any reason to doubt the assumptions of the commissioners? Did action theory provide any clues as to what structural phenomena would impede or facilitate access? In a very general sense these questions could be answered in the affirmative. Parsons has suggested that jurisdiction is closely associated with various "ascriptive bases" of social structure, particularly territorial location.⁹ However, the findings can only be explained by drawing upon sociological ideas of a type which find no place in action theory as it is presently constituted.

The findings are not inexplicable; in fact, they were not unexpected. We would not expect the private law approach to produce strategic complaints, for strategic complaints run counter to an established social structure. Private complaints

reflect everyday life which in turn is shaped by social structure. The Negro citizen, as he looks for a type of work for which he is qualified, at a firm where he thinks employment is available, (because his cousin who works there told him so), is likely to encounter treatment with the appearance of discrimination. He is likely to be wrong, for after all, his cousin does work there.

Recognition of the principle that aggregate behavior is shaped by social structure and some knowledge of how labor markets are structured help to explain the commission's experience. But action theory has no relevant hypotheses about the structure of the labor market.

So far there is a missing link in the argument. It might be alleged that the criticism is a cheap one for it merely says that action theory is incomplete. Many of the propositions and sub-propositions are yet to be worked out, but that can be said of any theory.

This misconstrues the nature of the argument for the argument does not merely claim that there are some propositions that action theory does not contain; there are whole categories of propositions that it cannot contain because its fundamental structure has no place for them as it is presently constituted.

In action theory there are two basic types of conceptual apparatus for linking separate elements of social structure. One is the concept of a hierarchy of control and the other is the concept of an exchange.

When two elements of social structure are related as a hierarchy of control they are conceived to be at different

levels. The element at the higher level is said to control the element at the lower level and the lower level element is said to set conditions for the higher level element. This concept of two types of causation, control and condition is peculiar to action theory and reflects its preoccupation with norms and conditions. Higher levels are generally seen to be more normative and to control the more conditional levels below them. For example, values and norms are related as a hierarchy of control. Norms are specifications of values but they also reflect the exigencies of the particular institutions which they regulate and thus have a more conditional character.¹⁰

Thus the concept of "equal opportunity" is only a value; it does not specify any particular obligations for any particular type of actor. If personnel directors in business firms come to be obligated to hire Negroes in all capacities for which they believe Negroes to be qualified then a norm has developed. It is a specification or interpretation of the value of equal opportunity but it is a weak specification that reflects a conditional element, the structural position and interests of personnel directors.

Two elements of social structure are related through exchange when they produce resources essential to each other's functioning. Often the exchange is facilitated through the institutionalization of a circulating media such as money. The exchange paradigms were first developed in Economy and Society¹¹ but exchanges are not limited to the economic sphere. Professor Parsons has recently been treating power, influence and commitment as circulating media analogous to money and

this enables an expanded use of the exchange paradigm to exchanges between other institutional spheres.¹²

Now let us examine a particular social phenomena that arises from a link between two areas of social life. Consider the problem of de facto school segregation which arises from links between housing as an institution and the institution of education. When school districts are drawn along neighborhood lines then the patterns of segregation that appear in housing will be reproduced in education. How can this be conceptualized within the framework of action theory? Certainly housing cannot be treated as higher in some control hierarchy than education in any simple sense. Nor is the opposite true. Residential patterns cannot be viewed as conditions for the implementation of educational goals if they are unrelated to any of the conscious goals of educators, and if segregation is truly de facto then it is by definition accidental, an unintended by-product of an unrelated decision. De facto segregation is not an institutionalized norm within the lexicon of action theory. It is a non-valued and accidental phenomenon.

It is also impossible to treat de facto segregation as an item of exchange between the two institutional spheres for it is not a resource necessary for the effective functioning of educational institutions.

Neither of the linking paradigms of action theory are appropriate. De facto segregation is due to the facts that behavior is shaped by social structure, that sectors of social structure overlap and that for this reason the structural

patterns of one sector are reproduced in others.

De facto segregation was not chosen as an example at random. It was chosen because of its connection with the example of action research given earlier. The social forces that operated to impede jurisdiction were essentially the forces of de facto segregation. The social segregation and isolation of the Negro community is reproduced in all patterns of Negro activity, even in the pattern of complaints to the anti-discrimination agency. The routes along which these patterns are channeled are not within the province of action theory as it is presently constituted because in a certain sense action theory lacks a theory of social structure. It has a theory of normative structure and a theory of organization but it lacks a theory of pattern. To define social structure as consisting in institutionalized norms, as Parsons does,¹³ is to open the way for a very sophisticated treatment of both the normative dimensions of social structure and the impact of structural conditions on normatively patterned organization. On the other hand, such an approach says little about the non-normative factors that account for structural conditions.

To the student of social action programs this is a serious flaw. Action theory alerts him to the sources and consequences of resistance but it provides him with few clues as to what shape that resistance will take. It tells us, for example, that jurisdiction is important and it tells us (in the abstract) something about the consequences of the fact that jurisdiction is important. For example, it tells us that easily discoverable

versions of value traditions are more likely to be institutionalized. But it does not permit us to predict patterns of jurisdiction effectively because it lacks the conceptual apparatus for dealing with the structural mechanisms that determine patterns of access. Ideas about patterns of communication, spatial patterns, and patterns of allocation of resources can be introduced into the analysis and categorized as conditional elements. But this is an essentially ad hoc procedure for the sources of these ideas must necessarily lie outside the province of action theory as it is presently stated.

To say that current action theory cannot deal with these types of structural problems is not to say that it cannot be reconstituted to allow for more recognition of the factors shaping structural conditions. One of the main purposes of this paper is to suggest one of the lines along which action theory must develop.

The solution to the problem lies in a reformulation of one of the problems to which Parsons has already devoted considerable attention, the problem of ascription, for ascription may be treated as a third concept for linking institutional spheres. Ascription is for Parsons the fusion of intrinsically separate functions in the same structural unit.¹⁴ His theory of differentiation is essentially an attempt to elucidate the forces that break down ascription and permit the stable establishment of structurally separate units for performing differentiated functions. Thus the family household becomes separate from economically productive units and a variety of

norms and processes normatively regulated exchange emerge to link the newly separated units and relate them to the larger society.¹⁵

Differentiation always presupposes that structures are initially fused and Parsons has suggested that in the first instance all structures are embedded in "ascriptive solidarities," that is, kinship, ethnic solidarities, primary groups and the territorial community. The original embedding of social life in these ascriptive solidarities is taken for granted and what becomes problematical is how specialized functions become emancipated and restabilized as autonomous spheres of social life. The two major sources of restabilization are new normative controls and new processes of exchange, the two general mechanisms that link separate institutions in action theory.

The weakness in action theory is that it tends to assume that once functions have become separated only these two factors link them, whereas in fact they never become totally separated. Both are still residually located in ascriptive structures and linked to each other by virtue of this common location, and the mutual influences that flow along these residual ascriptive links may be very important. Thus, even after the firm and the household have been separated the differentiated firm may recruit personnel by asking for recommendations from employees. These employees will tend to recommend friends, relatives and neighbors thus perpetuating ascriptive patterns of employment within the firm.

It cannot be claimed that action theory refuses to admit the possibility of such residual links but to admit the existence of a phenomena is not theoretically equivalent to taking that phenomenon to be problematical. Theories may treat phenomena as problematical, as something whose attributes must be explained, or as something which is given. Thus it is one thing to assume that there is a great potential for conflict in human affairs and that since conflict is such a threatening force, social integration is problematical; it is quite another to take conflict as problematical and to seek to explain its origin and structure. Further, one may doubt the credentials of a theory of conflict resolution or integration that fails to account for the typical forms that conflict tends to take since presumably the forms of resolution are related to the structure of the conflict.

Similarly, sociological theory must not only admit ascriptive links, it must account for the patterns and the significance of those links. To do so is crucial to the theory of institutionalization for as a norm becomes institutionalized in any given institutional sphere it will encounter resistances that are transmitted to it from other institutional spheres along structural channels of an ascriptive type. For example, the author's investigation of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination indicated that enforcement of the law against discrimination suffered from embedding responsibility for initiating enforcement in the ethnic community which the law was designed to protect. The ideal was intended to be enforced in the sphere of employment but the structural links

between employment, race and law enforcement made the patterns of Negro community life a relevant obstacle to enforcement.

Finally, it should be emphasized again that there is no reason to suppose that what has here been called ascriptive links will be normatively defined. The fundamental structural commonalities that link differentiated institutions arise not only from normatively defined familial, communitarian and ethnic solidarities but from the fact that both institutions are involved in a common ecological system, share a common constitutive order, and are staffed by the same population with all of its relevant population characteristics. Thus a viable action theory, if it is to account for the crucial patterns of connection and mutual influences between institutional spheres must confront and systematically incorporate such concepts as ecological dominance,¹⁶ constitutive order¹⁷ and cohort structure.¹⁸

FOOTNOTES

1. Parsons, Talcott, The Structure of Social Action (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press), 1949, p. 732.
2. Ibid.
3. Parsons, Talcott, The Social System (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press), 1951; and Parsons, Talcott, et. al., Towards a General Theory of Action (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 1951.
4. Parsons, Talcott, "An Outline of the Social System," in Parsons, Talcott, et. al., ed., Theories of Society (New York: Free Press of Glencoe), 1961, pp. 30-79. See p. 44.
5. Parsons, Talcott, "An Approach to the Sociology of Knowledge," Transactions of the Fourth World Congress of Sociology, International Sociological Association, Milan, (1959), pp. 25-29.
6. For further elucidation of this point see Mayhew, Leon, Law and Equal Opportunity (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), forthcoming.
7. Parsons, Talcott in Rosenau, James, ed., International Politics and Foreign Policy (New York: Free Press of Glencoe), 1961, pp. 120-129.
8. Parsons' own writings tend to emphasize the problem of physical control over a territorial area. The author has taken the liberty of extending this concept somewhat.
9. Parsons, Talcott, Theories of Society, op. cit., pp. 239-268.
10. Parsons, Talcott, "An Outline of the Social System," loc. cit.
11. Parsons, Talcott and Smelser, Neil, Economy and Society (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press), 1956.
12. See for example Parsons, Talcott, "On the Concept of Influence," Public Opinion Quarterly, (1962), pp. 37-62.
13. Parsons, Talcott, "An Outline of the Social System," op. cit., p. 61.
14. Parsons, Talcott, "A Functional Theory of Change," in Etzioni, Amitai and Etzioni, Eva, Social Change (New York: Basic Books), 1964, pp. 83-97. See p. 90.
15. Ibid. See also Theories of Society, op. cit., pp. 242-246.

16. Hawley, Amos, Human Ecology (New York: Ronald Press), 1950, p. 221.
17. Cohen, Albert, "The Study of Social Disorganization and Deviant Behavior," in Merton, Robert, et. al., Sociology Today (New York: Basic Books), pp. 461-484.
18. Ryder, Norman, "The Cohort in the Study of Social Change," American Sociological Review, 30, (December, 1965), pp. 843-861.