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Q1(d)

Critically analyse Talcott Parsons conception of pattern variable'

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- Critically analyse Talcott Parsons' conception of pattern variables
- Keep the analysis within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Parsons' five dichotomies describe role choices in action systems.

They specify Weber's traditional versus rational-legal contrast.

Indian exams and caste obligations illustrate both poles at once.

Conflict, dependency, and gender critiques limit the modernisation reading.

Use them as types, not as destiny.

Introduction

Talcott Parsons' pattern variables are five dichotomies that describe choices in social action and in the roles of a social system. They map a shift from traditional particularism toward modern achievement. The scheme is powerful as a type, weak as a history of every society.

Body**The five pairs**

- **Affectivity versus affective neutrality:** whether feeling is immediately expressed or disciplined, as in friendship versus a clinic.
- **Self-orientation versus collectivity-orientation:** private interest versus a group mandate.
- **Universalism versus particularism:** a rule for all versus a rule for kin or caste.
- **Achievement versus ascription:** performance versus birth.
- **Specificity versus diffuseness:** a limited contract versus a whole-person tie, as in bureaucracy versus joint family.

Use

- The pairs operationalise Max Weber's traditional versus rational-legal contrast inside everyday roles.
- Indian illustrations include the exam (universalism-achievement) beside caste obligation (particularism-ascription).

Critique

- Ralf Dahrendorf and later conflict theory said the scheme underplays power and contradiction.
- Dependency and caste studies show "modern" offices still run on particularistic networks.
- Gender analysis, after Ann Oakley, shows the "neutral professional" often rests on unpaid female care, which the pairs bury as private.

Flow diagram

Pattern variables -> Universalism achievement

Pattern variables -> Particularism ascription

Universalism achievement -> Modern role type

Particularism ascription -> Traditional role type

Power gender caste -> Not a one-way script

Conclusion

Pattern variables are a lucid typology of role choices. They help contrast clinic and kin, exam and caste. They fail if treated as a one-way modernisation script that erases class, gender, and living particularism.

Facts & figures

Five pairs

Affectivity/neutrality, self/collectivity, universalism/particularism, achievement/ascription, specificity/diffuseness.

The Social System

Parsons' 1951 statement of roles, pattern variables, and AGIL.

Weber

The historical contrast that Parsons tried to make into a systematic role grammar.

Oakley

Makes unpaid care visible; a limit of treating the occupational role as gender-neutral.