
UNIT 6 PARSONS AND DAVIS

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the theory of social stratification put forward by two well-known American sociologists, Parsons and Davis. This theory is also known as the Functionalist Theory of Social Stratification. Though this theory has been widely accepted by sociologists for analysing social stratification, there have been some strong criticisms of this theory. We shall examine all these aspects of the theory. Hence, after reading this unit you will understand:

- the Background of this theory;
- what this theory states;
- the problems in explaining this theory;
- the criticism put forth by some well-known sociologists; and
- the importance of the theory in understanding society.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The functionalist theory tries to explain the reasons why a society is able to survive. The underlying belief of this theory is that all societies want stability and peace. The people in society do not want chaos and confusion because this will disrupt their day-to-day activities. Hence all societies want order and some form of discipline. These are the means of achieving stability in society.

The functionalists view society as some form of organism consisting of different parts. These parts are integrated to the whole and they work in co-operation with each other. The human body is a complex organism that comprises different parts of the body. Each of these parts is separate but they form an integrated whole. Similarly, in society there are different parts that perform different roles. If we look at the total picture of society we will see that all these parts perform roles which contribute to the stability of the entire society. In other words they contribute to the integration of society. For example, we find that people have different types of occupations and people perform different types of activities. There are doctors, lawyers, teachers, students workers, industrialists, farmers, weavers etc. Though all these activities are different they are all needed for the functioning of the society. Therefore they can be viewed as separate parts which work together in order to

- integrate the society.

Hence we can see that the functionalist approach maintains that every component of the social structure performs specific functions which are necessary for maintaining stability in that society. These functions are necessary for the survival of that society. Hence the system of stratification in a society is also necessary for its integration and its stability.

6.2 FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF STRATIFICATION

The functionalists accept the fact that all societies are stratified. In other words, all the functions carried out by the various members of society are functional for its survival but they are not equal in status. Some of the functions are superior to the others. They are ranked higher. The people who perform these functions are also regarded as superior to others, i.e. those below them. The functionalist theories of stratification attempt to explain how social inequalities occur and why they are necessary for society.

The functionalists presume that there are certain basic needs of the every society. These needs have to be met or else there will be instability in society. These needs are known as functional prerequisites. Secondly, though these functional prerequisites are important, they are ranked according to the importance that is granted to them in that society. For example, workers and managers are needed to run a factory. No factory can exist with only workers and no managers or only managers and no workers. Hence managers and workers are integral for running a factory. At the same time it will be wrong to assume that because both groups are necessary, both have equal status. This is not so. The managers enjoy higher status than the workers do. Hence integration does not mean equality. It means that all the different groups together contribute towards stability but they do so because they are stratified in a hierarchy. What is the basis of this hierarchy and, why do people accept it? These are the questions that the theorists try to explain. In the next section we shall examine the views of Talcott Parsons, the most eminent of the functionalists theorists.

6.3 TALCOTT PARSONS' APPROACH

The central point of the Parsons's analysis of social systems is the problem of order. He believed that all social systems came into existence because people within this system wanted order and stability. A social system, according to Parsons, existed when two or more people interacted with each other in a bounded situation and their actions influenced others. This means that a social system must first of all have a group of people. This group could comprise two individuals or even a country. Secondly these people exist within a common boundary. Thirdly, they interact with each other, either directly or indirectly. And lastly, their actions influence each other's behaviour.

One can notice this form of action in our every day life. In your daily life you interact with number of people. While doing so your behaviour is influenced by the person you interact with. For example, when you are speaking to your father or to an elder you behave in a particular manner. When you are interacting with your friends and peers you behave in a different manner. Why do you do this? Why is your behaviour not the same with all people you interact with? According to Parsons, this is because in the course of your interaction, your action (behaviour) is influenced by the actions of the other person. This makes you change or adapt your behaviour in different situations.

Activity 1

Discuss with other students at the study centre concerning the problem of order in society. Note down your findings in a notebook.

The regulation of your behaviour in different situations is mainly because you, as an individual, behave in a given manner because every body else behaves in a similar manner in the given situation. Moreover, you also know that if you do not behave in the prescribed manner a situation may be created which will give rise to disorder. For example, if you have behave in a rude manner with your friends as if the person in your enemy, a hostile situation will be created and you may lose the friendship. Hence you will behave with him or her in the manner which is expected.

Therefore we can assume that the action of any person is determined by whom he or she is interacting with. This in turn is determined by the rules of behaviour in a particular society or social system. The rules of behaviour are further based on the common consensus of the people and that is why it is taken as correct. This common consensus is what Parsons calls Values. Social values are therefore the shared beliefs of a society. The way in which these values are practised (the actions which result in these values) are known as Norms. Social norms are thus the rules of behaviour.

Parsons further states that social values and norms arise out of the need for every society to maintain order and stability. Values and norms will differ in each society because the needs of each society are different. But the common factor in the value system of each society is the need for stability. Hence each society devises its own values which are best suited for this purpose.

6.3.1 Value Consensus and Stratification

How does the value system of a society emerge? Parsons attempts to answer this question by stressing that values do not arise out of the mind of an individual (king or priest in the earlier times). Values are shared beliefs. This means that all members of a society agree that the given values are the best means through which stability can be maintained in their society. In this way values are not only shared beliefs but they emerge out of consensus of the members of that society. This consensus emerges because all members of a society want order and stability in their daily life. Therefore, order stability and co-operation are based on the values consensus. There is an agreement by members on what is good for all.

Box 6.01

Parsons argues that it follows from the existence of values that individuals will be evaluated and therefore placed in some form of rank order. Therefore the different strata in a society is based on a hierarchy which in reality forms its stratification system. Parsons stated that "Stratification is the ranking of units in a social system in accordance with the common values system." Hence it is the value system which creates stratification in a society. Moreover, differences in the strata are justified by the values system.

In any society, those performing according to the social values are better rewarded. The type of rewards, according to Parsons, depends on what the values of that society define as superior. For example traditionally among the Rajputs high value was placed on bravery and valour. Hence any person displaying these qualities was better rewarded and given a higher rank. Among other communities higher value may be placed on business acumen and the ability to trade profitably. Hence those who prove themselves in these fields will be ranked high. Similarly in all societal systems the value system places higher rewards on some qualities and lesser rewards for other qualities. In case a person violates the social values he or she is punished. Hence in a society which places greater values on bravery a person who shows traces of cowardice will lose rank.

Modern industrial societies, according to Parsons, place higher value on individual achievement. Moreover the emphasis of such societies is on producing goods and services. Hence Parsons noted that in these societies (especially the USA) the value system places "primary emphasis on productive activity within the economy." Thus those who excel in these will be better rewarded. In such societies it is possible for a worker to become a successful industrialist if he has the necessary qualities. After he proves his merit, his status will rise in the social system and he will not only be wealthy but also well respected. In companies the executives who are dynamic and successful get higher rewards in terms of salaries and other benefits. This in turn elevates their position in the stratification system.

1) Outline the functionalist theory. Use about five lines for your answer.

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2) Describe what is value consensus. What role does it play in social stratification? Use about five lines for your answer.

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Therefore we can see that in explaining social stratification, Parsons placed emphasis on the differences that existed among people. These differences, he explained, was in consonance with the value system of that society and hence was necessary for the stability of the that society. In fact since the value system justified the inequalities, they were accepted by all, including those who were in the lower ranks. For example, industrial organizations have elaborate stratification systems. There are differences among the workers on the basis of their skills and experiences. Those who are skilled and show leadership qualities are rewarded through promotions, higher wages etc. Similarly though both labour and management are needed to run an industrial organisation, the position of the management is superior to that of workers. These differences may cause conflicts but since they are backed by the value system, there are few instances of intensive conflict over these issues. Even a militant trade union accepts the fact that management is superior. This is because the value system allows for these differences. Hence, Parsons argued, the people by and large accept these differences and major conflict is prevented. All people, whether they be workers or in management, believe that this system is the best. If these values are challenged this would lead to instability in that society.

Therefore we can summarise Parsons main points thus:

- Value consensus is an essential part of all societies.
- Social stratification is inevitable in all societies.
- The stratification system is seen as being just, right and proper for maintaining order and stability. This enables different people to get different rewards.
- Conflicts may occur between those who are rewarded and those who are not rewarded, but this does not threaten the existing system because it is kept in check by the value system.

6.4 DAVIS – MOORE THEORY

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore have further developed the functionalist theory of stratification. Both are eminent American sociologists and they were students of Talcott Parsons. They elaborated their view in an article titled, "Some Principles of Stratification". This article became very popular and controversial. Their views have been supported by functionalists and have been severely criticised by others. Their views are also referred as the functionalist theory of inequality. Let us first discuss their proposition and then we can discuss some of the critiques.

Parsons stressed on the need for stratification in society. He showed that it was inevitable in every society. Davis and Moore elaborated on this and try to examine how stratification becomes effective in any society. In this way the attempt to extend Parsons argument. The main problem they pose is why do certain positions carry different degrees of prestige? And, how do individuals get into these positions?

The authors support Parson's view that the basis of the existence of societies in order and stability. All societies have their own functional prerequisites which help them survive and operate effectively. Let us elaborate on this point. Societies are not mere collection of individuals. These individuals have to perform specific tasks so that the requirements of society are fulfilled. There are thus a number of activities that exist in society. A society needs workers, industrialists, managers, policemen, teachers, students artisans and so on. Different individuals who have specialised skills do these different types of work.. Therefore the first functional prerequisite of any society is of allocating these different roles effectively. This will ensure that the right people are placed in proper positions.

There are four aspects of the above-mentioned functional prerequisite. Firstly, all roles in society must be filled. All societies have different types of occupations. These occupations are necessary for their existence. Hence it is necessary to ensure that these occupations are filled. At the same time, mere filled up occupations in not enough. If the wrong people (i.e. people who do not have the requisite skills) are selected for the tasks there will be instability in society. This in especially true if these positions are important. For example if a power generation company employs a well known novelist, who has no idea of power generation, the work of the company will suffer and there will be instability not only in the company but in the supply of electricity. Therefore the second factor is that the most competent people must fill in the positions. Thirdly, in order the best people are selected for the job it is necessary to train them for it. Training therefore is an effective means of ensuring that the best people are selected. In the case of that novelist who is made the head of a power generation company, had he undergone training for fulfilling the needs of that position he could be regarded as the best person. Lastly, the roles must be performed conscientiously. This is very important for ensuring effective performance in the roles. As person may be trained and is the best in the field, but if he does not do his work with dedication the system will suffer. Hence all these four factors are necessary in order to meet the functional prerequisites of a society.



A cobbler mends the footwear of passers by
Courtesy: T. Kapur

- 2) Say True and False for the statements that are given below:
 - i) All positions in society are of the same functional important.
 - ii) Limited people can perform functionally important roles.
 - iii) No training is required to perform functionally important roles.

6.4.2 Basic Propositions of Davis and Moore

In the above sections we have tried to explain the role of social stratification as a functional necessity of societies. In modern societies the basis of status is through achievement and not ascription. In other words the status of a person is determined by his or her merits and not by birth. Such societies are more dynamic and can fulfil their functional prerequisites. In order to achieve this Davis and Moore note that there are some propositions that are common for all these societies. These are:

- 1) In every society certain positions are functionally more important than the others. These positions carry greater rewards and higher prestige. For example, a position in the Indian administrative service is considered to have more prestige than other jobs.
- 2) Only limited people have the necessary merit or talents to perform these roles. We can see that in the case of the IAS examinations several thousands appear for the examinations but only a handful are successful.
- 3) In most case these positions require a lengthy and intensive training period. This involves sacrifices on the part of the people who acquire these posts. In our own society we can see that certain professions such as medicine, engineering, chartered accountancy etc. involve intensive and expensive training involving a number of years. According to Davis and Moore, this involves sacrifice on the part of the candidate. Hence they must be rewarded for their sacrifice through higher financial rewards and greater prestige in society.

The above propositions are based on the fact that in modern societies achievement values have replaced ascriptive criteria. In these societies a person's merit is more important than his or her birth. The occupations are arranged hierarchically and those at the top have greater rewards and prestige than those below. This system of higher rewards, along with the fact that all can compete for these rewards and only those who are competent will get them, provides motivation to people to strive to perform better. However the most important condition for such a system to survive is that there is social consensus on the importance of the different occupations. This means that the ranking of occupations in terms of their superiority is based on the value consensus of that society.

Box 6.02

Davis and Moore noted that there could be a problem in deciding which positions are functionally more important than others. It is possible that a position that is highly rewarded may not necessarily be functionally important. This in fact is one of the weaknesses of the theory that has been pointed out by its critics (we shall deal with this in more detail in the next section). Davis and Moore suggest that there are ways of measuring whether a superior position is functionally important or not.

It may be argued that an engineer in a factory is no different than a skilled worker, hence the higher reward for the engineer is not justified. Davis and Moore would argue that the engineer is functionally more important because he has the skills of a skilled worker in addition to his other skills which the skilled worker does not possess. Hence though an engineer can be a skilled worker, a skilled worker cannot become an engineer. The second measure is the "degree to which other positions are dependent on the one in question". Thus an engineer in a factory is more important than the workers are because they are dependent on his for direction in their work.

In brief, Davis and Moore have carried forward Parsons views on stratification by clarifying the reasons for social inequality. They have tried to show that the system of stratification based on unequal rewards and prestige are necessary for maintaining order in society and ensuring its progress.

6.5 CRITICISM OF DAVIS AND MOORE'S THEORY

On the face of it the Davis-Moore theory appear rational and realistic. After all in all societies which believe in social and occupational mobility. This is in contrast to a society where there is no mobility as people are assigned roles accordance with their birth. In India too the Constitution grants equal rights to all citizens. It bans discrimination on the basis of caste, race, religion and gender. This is similar to most modern societies where a person's ability is more important than his birth. Under these circumstances the Davis-Moore theory appears realistic as it offers an explanation for the existing inequalities in society. There have been several criticisms of this theory. In fact after it was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1945, it aroused a great deal of interest. Several well-known sociologists of that time reacted by writing articles either in support or in criticism of the theory. As a result this journal had a special issue containing these articles. It is widely recognized that of the critical articles Melvin Tumin's was the most comprehensive. We shall discuss the points he raised he raised in the following paragraphs.

Tumin began his criticism with the statement that functionally important positions are highly rewarded. While it was a fact that rewards were unequal as some received more reward and prestige than other's it could not be categorically stated that these positions are functionally more important. It is possible that some workers in a factory are more necessary for maintaining production than their managers are, though the managers are better rewarded. In such cases if the workers are removed production will be hampered but if some managers are removed it may be still possible to maintain production. Therefore, how could functional importance of a position be measured? A society needs doctors, lawyers, workers and farmers. Each of these positions are functionally important for the existence of a society. Davis and Moore have not provided the means of measuring the functional importance of these positions. In fact some sociologists argue that the importance of position is a matter of opinion and not an objective criteria.

Tumin argues that unequal rewards to people may not necessarily stem from the functional importance of positions. The role of power in determining the importance of positions and thereby appropriating higher rewards is also in also important means of determining the rewards. For example in India workers in the organised sector are better paid and get more social security than the workers in the unorganised sector. This is mainly because the former are unionised and have greater bargaining power than the latter who are not unionised and hence have little protection. The type of work done by workers in both sectors is similar but the rewards as well as the prestige are higher in the organised sector. Hence power play a more important role in determining higher rewards than functional importance.

Tumin challenges the justification of higher rewards on the basis that these positions involve greater training. He argues that training does not necessarily mean sacrifice as the individuals also learn new skills, gain knowledge and thereby benefit. Moreover the rewards for such cases are disproportionate to the sacrifices made during training.

The proportion that unequal rewards help to motivate people in improving their work is also not true according to Tumin. In reality there are barriers to motivation. The system of stratification does not allow the talented people to have equal access to better opportunities. Social discrimination is present in every society and this acts as a barrier. In India where social inequalities are higher it is difficult for the child of a poor person to get better education in order to improve his position. This is true in America as well where Afro-Americans and coloured people are economically worse off and hence they cannot compete for better positions.

There is every possibility that in a system of unequal rewards, those who receive higher rewards will ensure that their children get the same rewards. They will also create barriers

to prevent other from getting into the same positions that their children are in. Doctors may be interested in getting their children into the profession. They will not only try to ensure that their children get in but will also try and prevent other children from getting into profession. T.B. Bottomore in his study *Elites and Societies* shows that even in developed countries such as Britain and France where the stratification system is more open an overwhelming majority of the civil servants were children of civil servants.

The fact is that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy do not have access to the improving their knowledge and skills which will make them competent enough to get the better position. Tumin notes that motivation through unequal rewards can be possible in a system "where there is genuinely equal access to recruitment and training for all potentially talented that differential rewards can conceivably be justified as functionally important. This is rarely possible in most societies." Hence he asserts that "stratification systems are apparently antagonistic to the development of such full equality of opportunity." Tumin therefore argues that those already receiving differential positions can manipulate functionally important positions. Hence Tumin tries to prove that the functional theory of social stratification is not realistic.

6.6 LET US SUM UP

Social stratification exists in all societies. Every society has its hierarchy in which the different individuals are placed. The main problems for the structural functionalists, such as Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, was how individuals occupy these different positions, and who do we need these difference. They concluded that stratification was not only inevitable in all societies but it was also very necessary for them as it promoted stability and order.

Talcott Parsons tried to explain that all members of society accepted these inequalities because they believed that this was the only way order and stability could be maintained. Therefore the pattern of social stratification and social inequality become a part of the values of that society. He stressed on the role of the value consensus in determining the nature of stratification in a social system.

Davis and Moore extended Parsons argument and tried to examine why certain positions carry different degrees of prestige. They found that positions which are functionally more important for society carry higher rewards and greater prestige. They explained the reasons for this.

This criticism put forth by Melvin Tumin of Davis and Moore's propositions show that functional importance is not the only criteria for deciding on which positions carry higher rewards. There are other factors such as power and status based on birth. Even the so called open societies are influenced by these criteria. He challenges all the major propositions in the theory and he feels that stratification can become antagonising to members of society.

6.7 KEY WORDS

- Value consensus** : Agreement by all members of a social system on what is accepted for all.
- Functional Prerequisites** : Those values that are necessary for promoting order and stability and thus necessary for the survival of that society.

6.8 FURTHER READINGS

R. Bendix and S.M. Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status and Power*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1967.

6.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress

- 1) Functionalist theory explains how a society is able to survive. The functionalists view society as an organism with various parts. Each of the part is separate but they form an integrated whole, and contribute to its stability. Thus the system of stratification in a society is also necessary for its integration and stability.
- 2) Values are shared beliefs. Thus values consensus emerges because all members of a society want order and stability in their daily life. Thus order, stability and co-operation are based on the value consensus. This value system is what creates ranking and creates stratification. Thus it is the value system which creates stratification in a society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) This basic requirement for any society is to allocate various different roles effectively. There are four aspects to these:
 - i) all roles in society must be filled.
 - ii) the most competent people must fill these positions.
 - iii) Training for the job is necessary.
 - iv) Roles must be performed consciously.
- 2)
 - i) False
 - ii) True
 - iii) False