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## Structural Functional Theory, Social Work Practice and Education

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Structural Functional Theory,  
Social Work Practice  
and Education

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INTRODUCTION - THE PARSONIAN SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of structural functionalism in sociological theory does not consist of a single, unified, and consistent exposition. Different writers make different emphases, use somewhat different terminology, and include different phenomena under a variety of similar terms. Rather than attempt to deal superficially with a wide variety of theorists writing out of this perspective, we will focus primarily on the central concepts in the work of perhaps the most eminent proponent of this approach in current sociological work - Talcott Parsons - and, in turn, discuss the relevance of this framework for social work education and practice.

Viewing the Parsonian systems approach from a general perspective, the close links with the older sociological tradition of organicism can be noted.<sup>1</sup> That is, the idea of an organic system is generalized to social phenomena and made the central theoretical focus without, in the process, being related to a particular historical situation. In short, an abstract "system" is postulated in which social and cultural phenomena are conceptually handled and this "system" is regarded as analogous to biological organisms. Furthermore, the system is conceived as being "boundary maintaining" and "structure maintaining." That is, it is viewed as resisting external forces and retaining some considerable degree of stability and structure in order to remain a system. As Parsons has put this:

"The concept of an open system interchanging with environmental systems also implies boundaries and their maintenance. When a set of interdependent phenomena shows sufficiently definite patterning and stability over time, then we can say that it has a "structure" and that it is fruitful to treat it as a "system"...In so far as boundaries in this sense do not exist it is not possible to identify a set of interdependent phenomena as a system." 2

Through the use of organismic analogy, Parsons tends to apply the basic principles of systems to all phenomena from the level of the biological organisms up to, and inclusive of, the larger social order.

A variety of concepts have been introduced by the structural-functionalists for the purpose of explicating the systems scheme. A central concept is that of "function" or, in more refined terms, the concepts of "eufunction" and "dysfunction," referring to system maintaining and system disrupting activities.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, however, the concept of 'function' is distinguished from 'purpose.' While a 'purpose' is viewed as something subjective, something in the mind of the participants in a social system, the concept of 'function' is regarded as an objective consequence of action.<sup>4</sup>

Parsons has also emphasized the concept of the "functional prerequisites" of the system to refer to the essential functional problems which every social system must solve in order to continue existing as an independent and distinctive entity. In addition, there are the concepts of "functional alternatives," "functional substitutes," all of which are largely synonymous and point to the idea that certain elements of the system are not functionally indispensable but may be substituted with other elements.

A key characteristic of the system theorists in general and Parsons in particular is the focus on "dynamic equilibrium" within the social system. Essentially, this feature relates to the analogous feature of homeostasis within biological organisms. Thus for Parsons, the idea of static equilibrium is no more a characteristic of the biological organisms than it is of the social system. This, for at least two reasons: first, there is always a certain amount of continuing process within the system which provides an impulse for change of state and, secondly, there is supposedly always an element of flux in the external situation which tends to throw the system continually off balance. In short, the "dynamic equilibrium" of a social system is not so much a matter of a system remaining always in a stable state as it is of the system having the capacity to achieve some stability after each minor disturbance.<sup>5</sup> The dominant tendency is towards stability within the system as maintained through mechanisms of social control which serve the equilibrating function in Parsons' theoretical scheme. The central focus is on tension reduction and functionalism rather than tension production and disorder.<sup>6</sup> The unit of analysis in the structural-functionalist social system is the status-role.<sup>7</sup> Status refers to the location of the individual and role is essentially what the individual does in that position. Inasmuch as each person occupies a number of different statuses, the organized system of statuses and roles which can be attributed to the particular individual constitute his identity as a social actor. In turn, systems of statuses are combined into "collectivities" which are "partial social systems," each of which is composed of particular interactive roles. A network of such collectivities is seen as constituting a complex social system. It is what Parsons refers to as the concept of "institutionalization"

which ties a complex system together — meaning that actions of the individuals involved in the social system (the "social actors") are guided by shared and internalized values.<sup>8</sup> These shared values held by the social actors within the system are the "glue" that holds the system together and although perfect integration within the system is never found empirically, it is the mode of normative integration which has been sketched above that Parsons regards as fundamental in all actual social systems.

While dysfunctions are viewed as existing within the system and are seen as potentially persisting for long periods of time, they are treated by Parsons as tending to resolve themselves or to be institutionalized in the long run. Change is regarded as occurring in a generally gradual, adjustive manner within the system — the "dynamic state of equilibrium" of the system.

Parsons perceives four functional problems faced by every social system, two of which have to do with relations of the system to the external environment, the others with conditions internal to the system itself. These "social needs" or "functional prerequisites" of the system arise out of social interaction and not out of the peculiar nature of the social actors constituting the system. Parsons argues that every social system must solve four functional problems in order for the system to exist as an independent entity.<sup>9</sup>

The first "functional prerequisite" relates to the instrumental problems of goal attainment. Essentially, this refers to the coordination of activities in such a way that a system moves toward whatever goals it has set itself. Second, there are the problems of adaptation to the external situation of the system. Included in these are not only the problems of coming to terms with the environment but also the active manipulation of either the environment or the system itself. Third, there are the internal problems of integration referring to the relations of individual social actors in the system to one another and the problem of establishing and maintaining a level of solidarity or cohesion among them. Finally, there are the related problems of pattern maintenance and tension management. Both are concerned with conditions internal to the system itself which have consequences for system functioning. The problem of pattern maintenance and tension management is essentially that faced by the social actor in reconciling the various norms and demands imposed by his participation in any particular sub-system with those of other sub-systems in which he also participates.

Parsons has applied this type of scheme to role differentiation within social systems. For example, in the systems of the family, a husband-father is viewed as the specialist in the instrumental function relative to the interactions of the family with the external environment while the wife-mother is the specialist in the expressive or social-emotional areas concerned with relations internal to the family. Also,

this scheme has been applied in terms of analyzing structural differentiation among social sub-systems in the same larger system or society. That is, Parsons argues that for each of the four functional problems of the social system of society, there will be a corresponding "functional sub-system" of the society.

Parsons argues that the economy is the adaptive sub-system of the society. That is, economic institutions are primarily developed to deal with adaptive problems faced by the social system. With respect to problems of pattern maintenance and tension management, the family is regarded as primary although other sub-systems are also seen as playing a part. Because it is the major socializing agency of society and as a result of the extent to which it plays a part in the day to day management of tension, Parsons sees the family as having primacy in dealing with the pattern maintenance and tension management system needs while educational institutions, religious groupings, and hospitals are secondarily included. Goal attainment problems fall within the primacy of the state, polity, or, more specifically, the government. In short, the task of defining system goals and moving toward them is primarily the delegated responsibility of government. The integrative sub-system is the most diffuse of all and is divided among the state, the church, and many other structures about which important cultural values are focused.

According to Parsons, each of the functional sub-systems of a society can itself be analyzed as a social system with its own system problems. This point has been previously alluded to relative to the discussion of the role differentiation within the family. Thus for each of the sub-systems, the other sub-systems are viewed as the most significant part of the environment and all of the sub-systems are regarded as having interchanges with one another. This is what Parsons has referred to as the "inherent relativity" in this frame of reference. Any element is seen as relative to the system within which it is viewed, while the system itself is relative to the system or systems within which it acts as an element.

Diagrammed in crux form, Parsons' scheme resembles the following:

<u>Intra-Societal Functions</u>		<u>Sub-System</u>
Pattern Maintenance and Tension Management	—————>	Family
Integration	—————>	State, Church
Goal Attainment	—————>	Polity
Adaptation	—————>	Economy

#### CRITICAL COMMENTS

It would be an enormous tasks to systematically deal with all of the criticisms which have been directed toward the structural function-

alists. Instead, the aim here will be to briefly identify some of the major types of criticisms which have been made.

A general point made against the structural functionalist orientation is that it reflects a conservative ideological bias in favor of the dominant institutions of the particular social system or society under consideration.<sup>10</sup>

Related to the charge of a conservative ideological bias is the criticism pointing to the inability of the structural functionalist approach to handle the problem of social conflict and change. It is argued that while mature organisms, by the very nature of their organization, cannot change their given structure beyond very narrow limits, this capacity is precisely what distinguishes social systems.<sup>11</sup> Dahrendorf, for example, has noted that there is a primary emphasis placed upon value consensus within the social system and consequently there is an inability of this viewpoint to allow for structurally generated conflicts.<sup>12</sup> The concept of dysfunction, from this criticism, is seen as a residual one which has been thrown in after the fact and is unable to explain serious conflicts in the structure of particular social systems.

Related to the issue of change and conflict is the charge of the "over-socialized" conception of the individual found in structural functionalist theory. The individual is viewed as essentially a social creature depending entirely upon training provided by, and experienced in, the social system. The almost total malleability of the individual is stressed, so that, in principal, conflicts between the individual and the group are totally eliminated.

Parsons has also been charged with failing to delineate specifically what constitutes a "dynamic" or "moving" equilibrium.<sup>13</sup> In this connection, Sprott<sup>14</sup> has noted that the emphasis of the systems theorists upon equilibrium is implicitly illogical and infers disequilibrium rather than the converse, as a consequence of the fact that a constant tendency towards equilibrium presupposes original imbalances away from which the system moves. To operationally define the equilibrium of the system under consideration raises a whole host of problems. Unless one can state with some precision what the defining conditions of the systemic equilibrium are, there would not seem to be any way to pin the abstraction down to empirical reality. Furthermore, to argue as Parsons does that there is a strain toward equilibrium within the social system is to posit a hypothesis that can only be examined on empirical evidence applicable to the particular case. Social phenomena may or may not illustrate homeostatic tendencies at any given time or place -- the issue is ultimately an empirical one.<sup>15</sup>

Hemple has questioned the very nature of the "functional indispensability" of any particular social or cultural phenomena and he notes that, "in all concrete cases of application, there do seem to exist alternatives."<sup>16</sup> Along this line Bendix and Berger argue that

every social phenomena has consequences for both the continued adaptation and impairment of the social structure.<sup>17</sup> As opposed to this view, the Parsonian framework argues for an either/or function or dysfunction for the particular social fact of the system. In addition, Bendix and Berger have noted that the concept of system boundaries is open to serious questions on the grounds that because we are not able to specify the limits of what is possible in society, we are unable to define the boundaries of a system.

#### STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALISM IN SOCIAL WORK

Howard W. Polsky has written extensively from a structural functionalist perspective on problems related to the residential treatment of children and adolescents. Polsky's first published work,<sup>18</sup> while not making direct use of a systems approach, can be seen as setting the theoretical stage for the use of systems theory in all of his later publications. The central finding of the "Cottage Six" study was a demonstration of the negative effects of the peer sub-culture upon the formal goals of the residential treatment unit and the consequent extent to which the institution unwittingly supported the deviant values of this peer group. Essentially, then, Polsky's study focused upon the relationship between the informal peer group culture and the formal goals and values of the larger and official institutional culture. The extent to which he found that the dominant reference group for the youth was the informal, as opposed to formal and official goals and values of the institution, led him into the use of the Parsonian framework from which to theoretically understand the social relationships of the residential unit and the manner in which these relationships effect and are effected by the treatment goals.

In a later publication,<sup>19</sup> Polsky explicitly formulated his systems perspective and pointed to the utility of this framework for understanding the cottage system as well as for guiding practice skills in the direction of "neutralizing" the deviant values of the peer group and replacing them with more positive ones. The language and concepts of Parsonian systems theory are made explicit in this paper by Polsky. Thus, he defines a "social system" as, "a distinctive entity of interdependent parts (statuses)...<sup>20</sup> and further, he notes;

By social system is meant a boundary-maintaining interdependence of parts that make up a whole in moving equilibrium. A system must be distinguished from an entity: a system consists of parts that are in some way different from one another in nature or function; these parts must be coordinated if the system is to maintain itself as a system rather than a collection or congeries. Social systems are supported by mutual orientations of their interacting actors and by the internalization of relevant values. <sup>21</sup>

In both of these "definitions" the Parsonian concept of "system" can be noted. For as was noted earlier, in Parsons' treatment the unit of analysis in the social system is the status-role and a system of statuses constitute a collectivity or sub-system out of which is formed the social system. Polsky directly adopts this conceptualization in the above quotations. These quotations also reflect the emphasis on the interdependence of the status relationships constituting the system, the emphasis on "boundaries," the phenomenon of "moving equilibrium," along with the stress placed upon the common value orientations which have been internalized by the social factors and which function to support the system. All of these concepts stem directly from Parsons' scheme. While Polsky uses the concept of "moving equilibrium" and Parsons that of "dynamic equilibrium," the difference is more semantic than substantive.

By using the notion of the "functional prerequisites" of the system as formulated by the functionalists, Polsky develops a systems paradigm for analyzing the interactions which occur in a residential treatment unit. The paradigm is a four-fold scheme based on a two way axis of internal, external, and instrumental, expressive. The system is conceived as having both external dimensions — "in order for a system to maintain equilibrium it has to be able to adapt facilities in the environment to achieve goals and gain satisfaction<sup>22</sup>— and internal dimensions — "...it must be able to resolve frictions and tensions satisfactorily."<sup>23</sup> Combined with these dimensions are those relating to the functions of the system — the task oriented or instrumental function of the system which relates to the achievement of system goals and the expressive function relating to the resolution of problems arising within the system.

Summarizing the scheme, Polsky identifies four functional "needs" of any social system: the external expressive, resolving environmental problems; external instrumental, the achievement of environmental goals; internal instrumental, achieving internal equilibrium of the system; and internal expressive, resolution of internal tensions.

Diagrammed:

	<u>External System</u>	<u>Internal System</u>
Instrumental	Ext. - Instr.	Int. - Instr.
Expressive	Ext. - Exp.	Int. - Exp.

The paradigm proposed by Polsky can be seen as essentially amounting to the Parsonian paradigm of the functional prerequisites of the social system. In turn, the scheme is applied to the basic problems associated with the negative influence of the peer sub-culture upon the formal treatment goals of the residential unit. In his later work Polsky has brought this scheme to full Parsonian bloom.



In two later publications, Polsky and Claster have filled in the outline of the four-fold scheme as follows:<sup>24</sup>

	<u>Instrumental</u>	<u>Expressive</u>
<u>External</u>	Adaptation	Goal Attainment
<u>Internal</u>	Pattern Maintenance and Tension Management	Integration

This scheme is then used to assess the nature of the adult-youth interactions in the residential treatment cottage social system. Polsky argues that each of the four cross-classifications can be regarded as a key function arising out of the role assumed by the adult staff member in his interaction with the youth. Thus the system "need" or function of adaptation corresponds to the adult role of monitor, custodian, or supervisor; goal attainment is regarded as corresponding to the adult role of counselor, guide, or teacher; pattern maintenance and tension management corresponds to the role of nurturer, comforter, and supporter; the integration function corresponds to the friend, mediator, judge role.<sup>25</sup> The scheme is presented as follows:

	<u>Instrumental</u>	<u>Expressive</u>
<u>External</u>	System Need-Adaptation Functional Role-Monitor	System Need - Goal Attainment Functional Role-Guide
<u>Internal</u>	System Need-Patt. Maint. Functional Role-Supporter	System Need- Integration Functional Role-Friend

More analytically, the scheme is presented by Polsky and Claster as follows:<sup>26</sup>

	<u>INSTITUTION</u>	
	<u>Instrumental</u>	<u>Expressive</u>
<u>External</u>	Adaptation "Monitor Role"	Goal Attainment "Guide" Role
	<u>COTTAGE</u>	
<u>Internal</u>	Pattern Maintenance "Supporter" Role	Integration "Friend" Role

Essentially, the "monitor" role relates to an orientation by the adult toward the youth relating to complying with the regulations of the larger institution. From the diagram it can be noted that the adult staff role of "monitor" corresponds with the external-instrumental functional system "need" of adaptation. Similarly, the role of "guide" relates to helping the child formulate and work towards particular goals which are compatible both with his perceived needs and the values of the institution. Both of these role relationships—"Monitor" and "Guide" — relate to the relationship of the social system of the cottage unit with the external social system of the larger institution in which it is situated. The two functional needs of pattern maintenance and tension management and integration are correspondingly related to the functional roles of "supporter" and "friend." Both are seen as contributing to the maintenance of the internal system — i.e. the social system of the cottage unit. The role of "supporter" characterizes the nurturing role of the adult insofar as he enables the youth to function within the system of the cottage unit. Finally, the integrative function is fulfilled by the adult assuming the role of a "friend" in the form of an informal relationship — i.e. in such forms as informal conversations directed toward no specific goal.

By analytically breaking down the various role functions performed by the adult directly involved in working with youth in institutional settings, Polsky argues that one is able to more effectively analyze the total function of the institutional setting as manifested in the role of the cottage worker. As he puts it:

Uncovering the complex interplay of functions underlying an apparent unitary role enables us to develop a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics, conflicts, and potentialities of the cottage worker's role.

Polsky also argues that the particular roles which are emphasized will largely determine the nature of the ongoing interaction between the adults and the youth, largely determine the nature of the interplay between the informal and formal cultures, and consequently affect the treatment atmosphere of the cottage.

While the scheme is presented in a structural manner and does seem to imply relative stability, Polsky's orientation is toward perceiving the dynamic nature of the theoretical scheme. That is, while any particular child care worker may, at any one point in time, be interacting with a youth on the basis of one of the functional roles, superordinately that child care worker should be flexibly shifting from one role to another vis-a-vis the particular situation of the specific children with whom he is interacting. In turn, the actual extent to which each particular role is manifested by different child care workers within any one institutional setting will, it is argued, affect the nature of the cottage sub-culture.

Looking more critically at the systems paradigm and the uses to which it is put by Polsky and Claster, a number of concerns present themselves. First, it should be noted that in the original formulation of the paradigm of system "needs" or functional prerequisites, Parsons and his colleagues held that maximizing efforts to resolve one of the problems, intensified one of the other problems.<sup>28</sup> That is, it is postulated that resolving adaptation problems will increase problems of integration, the resolution of goal attainment will intensify the problem of general pattern maintenance, and the converse is also seen as true. For example, in a decision making group when the members cooperate in assessing information (adaptation) prior to making a decision (goal attainment), they will strain their personal relationships (integration), and temporarily prevent each other from fulfilling other needs and goals (pattern maintenance and tension management). In short, the interrelations of the system is stressed through the dynamic interplay between the four functional problems. However, in Polsky and Claster's use of the paradigm this interplay between the system needs appears to have been lost. Nowhere is the reader presented with an indication of the "connectedness" of the system needs to each other. The closest the authors come to this point is in their discussion of a cottage system's overemphasis on a particular orientation and the effects this is likely to have on the general quality of the cottage atmosphere or culture. For example, overemphasis on the adaptation function and the "monitor" role is likely to result in a custodially oriented cottage system. However, the question then arises; what of overemphasizing the "guide" role of the goal attainment need; will this result in effects upon the pattern maintenance function and the "supporter" role? According to Parsons' work this would seem to be the result. Polsky and Claster do not relate to this at all. We must assume, however, that such an event would be forthcoming.

In later sections of their book,<sup>29</sup> Polsky and Claster briefly allude to a scheme for differentiating the major types of child care worker role orientations. And in a more recent work,<sup>30</sup> Polsky has more extensively dealt with this scheme and has related his analysis much more in the direction of focusing on the problematics of values and of change in the cottage system. The scheme is presented as follows:<sup>31</sup>

concern for youth	High (1,9)	(9,9)	
autonomy, maximizing	(1,1)	(1,9)	
peer group initiative			
and involvement	Low		High
		concern for production,	
		goal consumption	

Although Polsky does not refer to any theoretical connections between this scheme and his earlier systems model, it would appear that he has, for all intent and purposes, retained the earlier scheme in modified form. Essentially, what he seems to have done is to reduce the four functional needs of the system to two axis of a graph, each of which contain two role orientations or functional needs. One axis contains the adaptation and pattern maintenance functions — now reformulated as the "concern for production and goal consumption." The vertical axis can now be seen as combining the goal attainment and integration spheres which are now called "concern for youth autonomy, maximizing peer group initiative and involvement." While Polsky has changed the labels and modified the scheme to emphasize role orientations of workers, the essential thrust of the scheme remains the same.

Several further features of this paper by Polsky should be noted, all would seem to be themes that run through his earlier work as well. First, after Parsons, Polsky makes the basic assumption that as social systems, society or social groups are held together or made possible through the existence of common norms which, in effect, regulate the "war of all against all." Durkheim's question, "How is society possible?," is answered through an emphasis on common normative patterns. These patterns, in turn, are seen as deriving from the processes of socialization. As was previously indicated, Parsons has made this point quite explicit in his work. Polsky adopts this perspective throughout all of his published work dealing with a systems framework. As he puts it:

The selective reception of input is governed foremost by the underlying values of the members composing the social system which insures a stability of their interaction in interdependent events, the basic stuff of human systems. 32

and further, we are informed:

The ultimate hold, however, upon the members are the system norms, the justification and idealization of its functions and a common acceptance of the rules to get the job done. These norms emerge out of the social experience and culture of the larger society into which members are born and socialized, principally by parents and their surrogates. 33

Thus the reader is told that the orderly processes which occur in the social system are not to be attributed primarily to the contemporary social structure of the system but, instead, to the fact that individuals in the system have at some time in the past — in childhood — internalized the roles and norms of the system. While this type of explanation certainly has a degree of plausibility for the institutionalized aspects of society, it seems doubtful whether it can serve as more than a partial explanation for the problematic and changing aspects of the system. From this perspective, change in the system is treated and defined

largely as a by-product of the malfunctioning of social control mechanisms. Conflict and change come to be regarded as "pathological" consequences arising out of certain dysfunctional aspects of the system and the focus is then on the means by which control is to be restored. The functional consequences of social conflict<sup>34</sup> are largely ignored as is the fact that dissensus and conflict are simultaneously generated out of the structural conditions of the social system.<sup>35</sup>

It should also be noted that while Polsky has been relatively consistent in his use of the Parsonian framework, some modifications can be detected over the course of his various publications. Thus, while in his original work he emphasized a "closed system,"<sup>36</sup> Polsky has more recently noted that, "it is dangerous to assume explicitly or implicitly a closed system."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in contrast to his earlier work in which he used the concepts of "function" and "dysfunction" in a loose evaluative sense, in his more recent work Polsky makes quite explicit the normative problem of who is to say what individual or organizational needs are functional or dysfunctional for the particular system under consideration. Thus while he notes that:

Evaluating social arrangements as functional or dysfunctional is equivalent to classifying them as normal or pathological.<sup>38</sup> he also notes:

Making judgments about the functioning of the system and the human needs that are being served by it, I well realize, presupposes a whole catalog of assumptions...<sup>39</sup>

Polsky is thus well aware of the nature of the evaluative problem. Being aware, the way is then open for him to specify objective criteria of what is to be considered as "functional" or "dysfunctional" for the particular system under consideration. He seems to fail in this by presenting the rather vague and abstract concept of "maximizing individual autonomy" as the crucial differentiating factor. The subjective nature of this concept and the consequent lack of specific empirical referents makes it appear as rather worthless. It can, quite literally, mean anything to anybody.

The fact that Polsky has directly adopted the Parsonian framework from which to view the "needs" and structure of the residential cottage system leaves him open to a number of the criticisms levied against Parsons. It is evident from his increased sophistication in the use of this model that he is aware of the criticisms and has attempted to modify his scheme in the direction of taking them more fully into account. However, there still remains the fact that Polsky's scheme is rife with anthropomorphisms in the form of the system "seeking" equilibrium, and having "needs." Furthermore, Polsky's work tends to emphasize stability and structure over the processual nature of social reality. While Parsons has ingeniously attempted to answer this criticism by arguing that all theory construction inherently entails a

process of "mythologization" in which the investigator must abstract from the empirical world,<sup>40</sup> he seems to lose sight of the fact that while theory construction may indeed be viewed as a process of "mythologization" this does not necessarily mean that the "connectedness" of phenomena or the rendering of them as essentially static need necessarily follow. In short, the processual nature of social reality can be treated on a theoretical level without being made static.

#### CONCLUSION

The most general feature of the structural functionalist systems approach is the emphasis placed upon the unitary or holistic nature of particular phenomena under investigation. The emphasis is on a synthetic orientation as opposed to one which is more analytic in nature. Viewing the profession of social work from this orientation one would not perceive discrete, largely air-tight compartments of casework, group work, community organization, administration, research, education, and so on, but instead would look to a more holistic conception of social work. Thus the logic of the systems approach leads away from increasing differentiation within the profession and in the direction of a unified, social work process which can be traced throughout the various sub-fields. Hearn has explicitly related to this point:

...if individuals, groups, and communities can all be regarded as systems, and if there are certain properties common to them all, it seems likely that there may also be certain common principles that define their operation and that the latter may form a part, at least, of a unified conception of social work. 41

As Hearn brings out in the above statement, the systems principle of perceiving commonalities in terms of principles of organization from the level of the individual through the levels of the group, the community, and the larger social order, leaves the way open for a unified conception of the social work process which, in turn, has relevance for the methods of casework, family treatment, group work, community organization, and administration. This holistic type of orientation, however, directly entails the basic assumption that elements of social phenomena cannot be regarded as isolated from one another but must be seen as ultimately linked through a network of relationships. The social work analyst or practitioner must assume the relatedness of all phenomena — tinkering in one place has reverberations across space and time. The focus is on the systemic relations of elements rather than on the nature of an element, in and of itself, in a relationship. Thus the use of the systems perspective should sensitize the worker to the possibility that a change in one part of the system may have effects in another part due to the interdependence of the system ele-

ments. Moreover, the consequences of the changes effected may be neither linear or desirable in nature. That is, a change strategy injected into the system may have cumulative or amplified undesirable effects in certain parts of the system while having minimal effects in other parts. As a glaring example of this process in the form of a national change strategy -- the "war on poverty" -- we can note the host of unanticipated consequences arising out of the implementation of the "maximum feasible participation" clause in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.<sup>42</sup> It should be noted, however, that the desired changes may be brought about in one part of the system, not only by focusing directly upon it but also by the alteration of more distantly removed elements. Thus, in effect, systems analysis directs attention to the multiple possibilities of intervention into the system with respect to solving a particular constellation of problems.

In itself, as has been noted, the structural-functionalist scheme tends to overstress the stable properties of social life. On the other hand, the conflict view of social life espoused by such theorists as Marx and Dahrendorf tends to over-stress the instability and disintegrative aspects of social systems. Rather than being necessarily anti-theoretical views, these can, as Dahrendorf has noted,<sup>43</sup> be seen as complementary views of social reality. Thus, for example, in Polsky's use of the Parsonian framework, by incorporating the disjunctive elements of the system into the analysis the reader could be provided with a more coherent and "realistic" assessment of the total configuration of elements which go to make up the system of the residential treatment unit. The consensual and dissensual, the stability and instability, the integrative and disintegrative elements of the unit would then be more fully elaborated. Also the extent to which conflict contributes to the integration of the system and the extent to which consensus can prevent integration would be more amenable to empirical analysis. As it is, Polsky completely omits such considerations from his work. Thus, while his analysis of the social system of the residential cottage until is insightful, it is also one-sided. A goal for social work theory is to combine into a balanced theoretical perspective both aspects of the empirical world with relevant intervention strategies based upon such a synthesis.

Most generally, then, the structural functionalist variant of systems theory would seem to have great relevance for the development of a social work model in the form of focusing upon the contextual "system" in which the social phenomena under consideration occur. This attempt to focus on the contemporaneous interrelatedness of phenomena bears quite obvious connection to Kurt Lewin's "field theory." In his terms, field theory analysis proceeds not by picking out one or another isolated element within a situation, the importance of which cannot be judged without consideration of the situation as a whole, but rather by

starting with a characterization of the situation as a whole. Watzlawick, and his co-authors have put this well:

...a phenomenon remains unexplainable as long as the range of observation is not wide enough to include the context in which the phenomenon occurs. Failure to realize the intricacies of the relationships between an event and the matrix in which it takes place, between an organism and its environment, either confronts the observer with something "mysterious" or induces him to attribute to his object of study certain properties the object may not possess. 44

And in a very different context, Roszak has related to this necessity for "global vision:"

Our habit is to destroy this receptive peripheral vision in favor of particularistic scrutiny. We are convinced that we learn more in this way about the world. And, after a fashion we do...We learn what one learns by scrutinizing the trees and ignoring the forest, by scrutinizing the cells and ignoring the organism, by scrutinizing the detailed minutiae of experience and ignoring the whole that gives the constituent parts their greater meaning. In this way we become ever more learnedly stupid. Our experience dissolves into a congeries of isolated puzzles, losing its overall grandeur. 45



FOOTNOTES

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- 3 Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, Glencoe, The Free Press, 1957, pp. 19-84.
- 4 Robert K. Merton, Ibid., pp. 23-24.
- 5 Talcott Parsons, Ibid., p. 37.
- 6 See, for example, Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, eds., Towards A General Theory of Action, New York, Harpers, 1962, p. 107.
- 7 Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, Ibid., pp. 95-96.
- 8 Talcott Parsons, The Social System, Glencoe, The Free Press, 1951, p. 8.
- 9 Talcott Parsons, "An Outline of the Social System," Ibid., pp. 38-41.
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- 17 Reinhard Bendix and Bennett Berger, "Images of Society and Prob-lems of Concept Formation" in L. Gross, Ibid., p. 112.
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- 19 Howard W. Polsky, "A Social System Approach to Residential Treat-ment," in Henry Maier, ed., Group Work as a Part of Residential Treatment, New York, National Association of Social Work, 1965.
- 20 Howard W. Polsky, Ibid., p. 117.
- 21 Op. Cit., p. 118.
- 22 Op. Cit., p. 122.

- 23 Op Cit., p. 122.
- 24 Howard W. Polsky and Daniel S. Claster, The Dynamics of Residential Treatment, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1968; Howard W. Polsky and Daniel S. Claster, "The Structure and Functions of Adult-Youth Centers," in Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif, eds., Problems and Youth, Chicago, Aldine, 1965, pp. 189-211.
- 25 Howard W. Polsky and Daniel S. Claster in Sherif and Sherif, Ibid., p. 193; Howard W. Polsky and Daniel S. Claster, Ibid., p. 11.
- 26 Sherif and Sherif, Ibid., p. 197.
- 27 Howard W. Polsky and Daniel S. Claster, The Dynamics of Residential Treatment, p. 11.
- 28 Talcott Parsons, "An Outline of the Social System," in Talcott Parsons, et al, pp. 38-41.
- 29 Howard W. Polsky and Daniel S. Claster, Ibid., pp. 171-173.
- 30 Howard W. Polsky, "System as Patient: Client Needs and System Function," in Gordon Hearn, ed., The General Systems Approach: Contributions Toward An Holistic Conception of Social Work, New York, Council on Social Work Education, 1969, pp. 12-25.
- 31 Howard W. Polsky, Ibid., p. 23.
- 32 Op Cit., p. 12.
- 33 Op Cit., p. 13.
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