

Talcott Parsons: A Voice from the Past, an Opportunity Missed, and a Road Not Taken

John E. Tropman and Emily Nicklett
With Documentary Material from Talcott Parsons
(December 13, 1902–May 8, 1979)

Abstract: In this paper, the authors discuss the history of correspondence with the well-known sociologist, Talcott Parsons, in 1977 and again, just before his death in May 1979. A prolegomenon introduces Parsons, contextualizes the correspondence, and explains how the authors came to collaborate on this project, which seeks to preserve the history of this correspondence with a leading school of social work. The discussion begins with a brief introduction to Parsons, followed by each of the other's reflections on the project. There follows a section on Parsons himself and a note on the collaboration.

Keywords: Talcott Parsons, social work, sociology, AGIL model of social organization

Introduction

Talcott Parsons was arguably the most famous sociologist of the twentieth century. Sandro Segre's (2012) *Talcott Parsons: An Introduction* offers a recent discussion of Parsons' work, a periodization of his foci, and a discussion of the reception of his work in an extensive secondary literature. From Parsons' position at Harvard University he taught many students who became renowned sociologists in their own right, among them Robert K. Merton and Edward Shils. He was primarily a "grand theorist," but he also wrote about organizational structure in the context of such substructures and subcultures as the medical profession, the university, and the sociology of health and aging.

Tropman's Interest in Parsons

My interest in Parsons began when I was an undergraduate at Oberlin College taking an introductory sociology course taught by J. Milton Yinger. Yinger's interest in religious values, which explored the religious-based discrimination experienced by minorities in the United States, led me to Max Weber, and thence to Parsons. Simultaneously, I took a medieval and modern European history class with Bernard Silberman, who is now director of the Workshop on East Asia at the University of Chicago. Silberman was also interested in Weber and discussed his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in class. This inquiry brought me back to Parsons and values

again. So I read everything he wrote—much of it a slog. He seems to have thought in German and written in English, a hurdle for readers since English lacks the combinatorial/conceptual fluidity of German.

My interest was further piqued during a senior sociology seminar taught by Joseph Elder, now professor emeritus at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Elder had studied with Parsons at Harvard. During the seminar, Elder shared personal observations about Parsons, one of which stuck with me. Because Parsons was so popular, Elder recalled, he and other students (all taller than Parsons) encircled Parsons so that he could leave the lecture hall in peace. I contacted Elder to confirm the substance of the anecdote. Elder replied (personal communication):

I will stand by the account you attribute to me about being part of a buffer (at least once) around Talcott so he could get from the lecture hall to his office. Another factor of the buffer might have been that a small group of us grad students were taking a "reading course" with Talcott about Max Weber. And the only way we were going to have our "reading session" with him was to extricate him from the undergraduates and the lecture hall and transport him back to his office.

Parsons' grand theory, which focused on the structure of social action, always held a certain appeal to me, since I am generally a big-picture person. His focus on values and their structure was of specific interest and influenced my later work. During the 1970s, I

developed a grammar of values that I called a “conflict theory of values,” a perspective that envisioned values in juxtaposed sets. By juxtaposed I mean abutting rather than opposing, like plus sign (+) rather than a minus sign (-). In fact, it was the achievement and equality tension, used in S. M. Lipset’s *The First New Nation* (1963), which started me down the competing values path.

Using comparative and developmental analysis, Lipset compared early American society with emerging nations and their varieties of democracy. He took seriously the “concept of values as a constitutive part of the structure of society,” and—of primary importance to me—focused his analysis on “the balance between ... equality and achievement ... against the background of a basic individualism.” To do so, he analyzed critical cases of religious institutions and trade unions within the United States, and political development within modern industrialized democracies, including the U.S., as discussed by Parsons (1964, 374-375) in his review of the book.

Other value juxtapositions quickly revealed themselves, among them fair play and fair share in allocative processes; competition and cooperation in market orientation; clan and market style organizations; and adhocery and bureaucracy in forms. Parsons positively reviewed an early concept paper exploring these ideas, which I later developed as *American Values and Social Welfare: Cultural Contradictions in the Welfare State* (Tropman, 1989).

Nicklett’s Interest in Parsons

I (Emily Nicklett) became a Parsons enthusiast as a doctoral student. I was enrolled in Renee Anspach’s “Sociology of Health and Illness” seminar at the University of Michigan. Through the process of preliminary and qualifying exams in Public Health and Sociology, I had become familiar with several of Parsons’ theories. Anspach’s presentations and facilitated discussions presented Parsons’ work as a prominent chapter in the biography of medical sociology and social gerontology.

In an early chapter in the history of medical sociology, Hippocrates stressed the importance of the clinical case study for understanding the human body and patterns of disease (Oliver, 1925; Porter, 1999). Much later, Emile Durkheim (1951 [1857]) discussed how society and social change affect the health and well-being of certain individuals in society (in the case of *Suicide*, those individuals are white Protestant males). More recently, Parsons focused on the interaction between society and systems of health and illness. Parsons argued that society and these systems function only in relation to one another. For example, these systems identify clinicians as gatekeepers to “the sick role” (Parsons, 1951; 1975). These gatekeepers provide checks and balances to ensure society has a plentiful and productive workforce. Unfortunately for Parsons, what became known as structural functionalism fell out of favor among sociologists, who in turn approached health-related inequalities with conflict theory, post-structuralism, and postmodern approaches.

However, Parsons’ contributions to the fields of medical sociology and social gerontology are as relevant as ever. The sick role—negotiated by clinicians and policymaker gatekeepers—remains the legitimate temporary relief from society’s obligations, and competition for the label has grown more fierce. Societal changes, including higher healthcare costs, aging populations, and increased prevalence of chronic diseases, bring additional barriers to entry to the sick role, while the cost of and demand for the sick role have increased. Health and social systems continue to work together to regulate eligibility criteria for the sick role.

Parsons’ sociological contributions should be taught to students interested in careers involving advocacy for individuals, communities and societies. Parsons’ insight that social change is limited by parameters or norms, and that these parameters or norms are both shaped by the social structure and are resistant to change, is hardly controversial. Students of advocacy learn that it is necessary to identify barriers and facilitators to desired change, as well as to consider stakeholders in support of and opposition to this process. Our students need to characterize and understand social and structural barriers to change in a

society that resists change.

How It Began

In 1977, I (John Tropman) secured a grant supporting a project entitled, “American Values and the Elderly,” through which I explored the value sets of American seniors. Since Talcott Parsons had written on the life course, I contacted him and secured him as a consultant on the project. We arranged a meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In August 1978, I met with Parsons in his office at Harvard. He was a small man with a trimmed moustache, but he was a giant in sociology. To get a sense of his influence, refer to Gideon Sojberg’s (2015) obituary of Walter Firey. (Firey wrote one of the best sociological books I have ever read: *Land Use in Central Boston* [1947]. Do not be fooled by the title.)



Parsons and I had a wonderful conversation. We explored American values, the elderly, the integration of a society’s elements into its members’ personalities and visa versa, his cautiously appreciative views of Robert Merton – Merton’s approach was toward “theories of the middle range” – and Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He was an excellent, if complex, conversationalist. His demeanor was courtly, formal, but interested and interesting all the same.

And it was a conversation, a back and forth. I had no sense that this giant in the field was lecturing me or putting on professorial airs of any sort. Parsons’ reflections on that meeting are detailed in his letter of September 25, 1978 (see below), and in our subsequent correspondence.

We laid plans for him to visit Ann Arbor – a first for him – after he returned from Germany in spring 1979. My public reason for suggesting the visit was to extend his consulting relationship with the American Values and the Elderly project: His work on the life course could contribute substantively to its development. My private reason was to interest him in a longer-term relationship with the University of Michigan School of Social Work and Department of Sociology.

I had an eye toward developing a sociology of the professions focus and, more particularly, a sociology of social work emphasis. This might have fostered an *interprofessional* focus that was parallel to but distinct from the *interdisciplinary* focus for which the University of Michigan was well known.

Though professionals frequently collaborate across professions in the contemporary workplace, they often train alone. The neologism interprofessionality points to the interaction of teaching, learning and scholarship between and among professional training centers; among them schools of social work and public health and policy, business, medicine, and nursing.

(Re)Introducing Talcott Parsons

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was among the preeminent sociologists of the twentieth century. A founding member of Harvard University’s sociology faculty, he authored numerous books and articles, beginning with *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). He aimed to develop a unified theory of action that moved beyond the theoretical realm. It was a goal he never fully achieved, in part because of the book’s large size and complex prose style. The sociological collegium seemed to prefer Robert Merton’s “theories of the middle range,” which sought to connect theory and empirical knowledge in specific areas that could then coalesce into a general theory. Merton

commented: “We sociologists can look ... toward progressively comprehensive sociological theory which, instead of proceeding from the head of one man, gradually consolidates theories of the middle range, so that these become special cases of more general formulations” (1949).

In spite of Parsons’ interest in grand theory, he also had an interest in the sociology of specific sectors and fields, and it is this interest to which we turn. For us, his best and most accessible works remain his essays, most notably in *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* (1960) and *Social Structure and Personality* (1970). The former contains his famous essay, “A Sociological Approach to the Theory of Organizations,” and the latter includes a series of essays on the fit between person-in-context, including “Stages of the Life Cycle” and “Health and Illness.” These shorter works seem most timeless and accessible.

The Tropman/Nicklett Collaboration

Our collaboration arose from out of a mutual fondness for Parsons, and our common use of Parsons’ AGIL table. Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latency (AGIL) Theory describes the social system as an entity that defines parameters or norms, and opportunities to change those norms. Due to the subsequent maintenance of the current social structure, the social system is resistant to change. Parsons’ AGIL table helps identify barriers to making change. The “flow” of the table starts with adaptation and proceeds clockwise. Barriers occur as the flow from one cell into the next is impeded.

Although we have different foci (Tropman in management and leadership; Nicklett in aging and health), our Parsons connection emerged in conversation. We found ourselves working together around Talcott Parsons and the AGIL table. Nicklett worked with the table to examine life-course gerontology and Tropman sought to use it as a template for organizational change. As we chatted, we laughed often. We were relatively certain that we were the only people in miles who even knew what the AGIL table was. Tropman’s interest was

especially focused, as he examined two books on successful organizations: Peters and Waterman’s *In Search of Excellence* (1982) and Collins’ *Good To Great* (2001). These books chronicled similar experiences. Both books looked at the growth of successful companies (Goal Achievement in the AGIL Table), derived lessons from them, and then discovered that many organizations in the authors’ “sample” crashed and burned (failure to integrate in the AGIL Table). Perhaps, for Tropman, getting to great and staying great are two different things.

We had many discussions about Parsons. One of the more striking elements we noticed was the amazing similarity between Parsons’ AGIL table and Deming’s Plan Do Check Act Cycle, evident in a review of Figures 1 and 2.

The only immediate difference is that Parsons began his table in the upper left, and Deming in the upper right.

Though a statistician, Deming was an intuitive sociologist, and he had a complete grasp of the concepts inherent in Parsons’ integrated view of systems. That is, he grasped synthesis between and among organizational structure and culture (horizontal) and between and among levels of social organization (societal, communal, organizational, family/group, and personal).

Deming’s system-based approach was very similar, if more modest. He focused on organizations and the need to understand that an organization’s products depended on the whole organization. At a lecture of his that Tropman attended in Detroit, Deming argued that 75% of an organization’s outputs depended on “common causes of variation” (integration of all parts and elements, or lack thereof). He also commented on America’s over-fascination with “the individual” as opposed to the system.

Parsons and Deming’s “integrative view” of “people in context” support and underpin a core element of social work’s approach to problem managing and solving. Each of us uses Parsonian insights in our teaching.

Figure 1. Parsons' AGIL Model of Social Organization

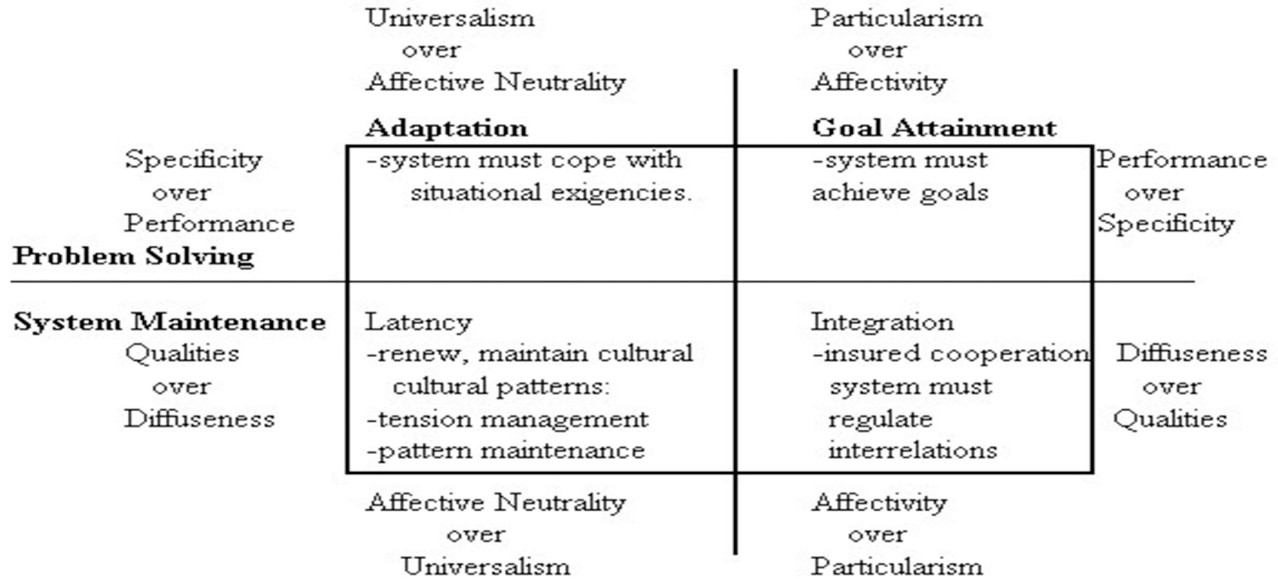
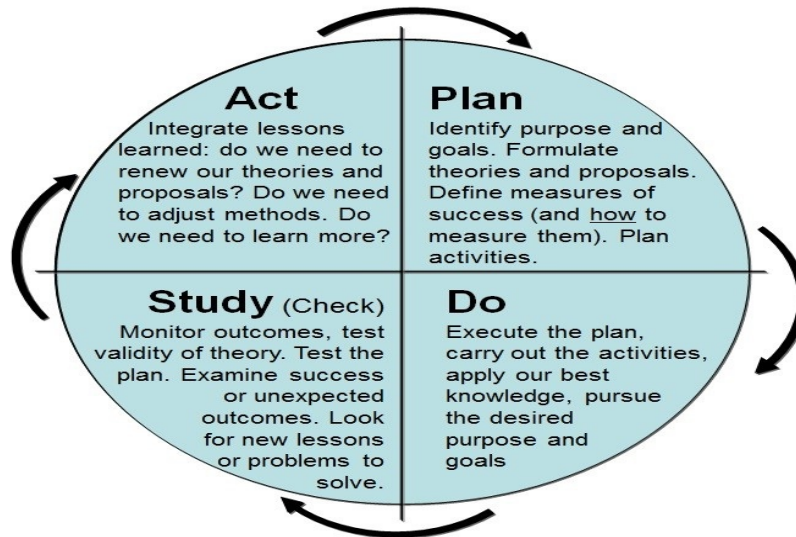


Figure 2. Deming's Plan Do Check Act Cycle



After a fruitful collaboration, John Tropman and Emily Nicklett decided to seek publication of the Parsons-Tropman correspondence, and to discuss their appreciation for him for two primary reasons. One reason was simple historical interest in how the field of academic sociology developed. The other was connected with our shared interprofessional agenda: Each of us has disciplinary *and* professional backgrounds, shaped in no small measure by the broad range of Parsons' work.

We believe that, had Parsons visited Ann Arbor, the engagement might well have stimulated his—and the university's—interest in the sociology of the professions and their importance, both singly and severally, in the social structure.

Further, we suspect that the concept of *interprofessionality* might have emerged in conversation, especially in the University of Michigan soil of interdisciplinarity, and the fertile ground of the Joint Program in Social Work and Social Science, offered then and now, by the School of Social Work and five academic departments (anthropology, economics, psychology, political science, and sociology).

Who knows? Had that visit occurred, the University of Michigan might now offer joint doctoral programs between the School of Social Work and the School of Public Health, as well as the present interdisciplinary offering.

Table 1. The Parsonian Universe

THE PARSONIAN UNIVERSE		
All Parts and Elements Need to be Integrated		
	Social Structure	Social Culture
Levels of Social Organization		
Society		
Community		
Organization		
Families/Groups/Associations		
Individuals		

We might also have had the impetus to study the issue of professional confluence and succession. Bader's (2014) recent article, "Is the MSW the New MBA," might be a case in point. There, the author argues that the collaborative core of social work might be as important as, or in some cases more important than, the competitive focus of the MBA. But, one might ask, could not some of the initiatives we discuss here have been undertaken even without a Parsons visit? The answer is, of course, yes! However, our reflections illustrate what students of change have often observed: It is difficult to initiate change from within an organizational entity. Sometimes an outside *disruptive force*, a technology or behavior that fundamentally changes the way an

organization does business, is needed. Investments in the *status quo* are powerful retardants to innovation. A visit from a world-famous sociologist with interest in the professions might have spurred us to think outside the box. The University of Michigan's missed opportunity to engage with, learn from, and apply the theories of Talcott Parsons in the context of professional training is indeed a loss.

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(Please turn the page for the correspondence)

The Letters

At the afternoon meeting in August 1978, Tropman and Parsons discussed the *American Values and the Elderly Project* [Editor's note: Tropman's book of that title] and the concept of conflicting values. Parsons was quite loquacious and a bit hard to follow, so Tropman asked him to summarize his thoughts. The September 1978 letter is a result of that request.

The letters are presented here in their original form. In many ways they are classic Parsons, with all of the circumlocution he was known for. His style is recursive, almost stream-of-consciousness. But he does touch on the life cycle, focusing especially on financial and health issues of the elderly as a part of the life course.

As an odd curiosity, Parsons was a guest at Keansei Gakuin University, the very school where Tropman had previously served as a Fulbright lecturer. His translator was Professor Saeko Murayama, now deceased, who was a 1976 graduate of the Joint Doctoral Program in Social Work and Sociology at the University of Michigan and had been one of Tropman's students.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
William James Hall
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May 21, 1979

Mr. John Tropman
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Our Town MI 48109

Dear Dr. Tropman:

First, ... I stressed ... "instrumental activism... This in turn, it seems to me, can be translated" into the complex which has been called institutionalized individualism. ... This has some bearing on the problem of the independence of individuals, but looked at complementarily, in terms of their capacity to contribute to what are in some sense socially and culturally valued concerns. The problem of the status of individualism is very deeply grounded in our cultural tradition.

I have been taking the formula **instrumental activism** to characterize the most general value pattern institutionalized at the societal level. As you are aware, I tend to derive this particularly from the ethic of ascetic Protestantism as analyzed by Weber but without special stress on the economic field of application.

Under that, I would speak of two directions of further development. One of them is what I have called specification to more and more concrete levels. As I developed it, as you will remember, the formula instrumental activism was meant to apply to a society as a whole. If one speaks, however, of the values institutionalized in an occupational role this is at a very much lower level of specification. Even if the concept role does not apply only to a specific individual but to a category of roles assumed by individuals, still one type of occupational role is one among many types of roles in the society as a whole and roles are not the only components of institutionalized structures in a society. You will remember I have tended to treat the other three as collectivities, norms, and values. Specification is a matter of how the value pattern articulates with other three components of social

structure at the requisite level of specifications.

The other direction of elaboration of development is that of functional differentiation. . The mode of rationalization, however, which applies to a family unit and the relations of its members to each other, should be, in my opinion, carefully distinguished from two other particularly common rationalities.

A second and the one which Weber stressed in his famous essay is usually called economic rationality. I think of this as focused on the orientation of acting unit – individual or collective – to one or more market situations and the measure of rationality has to do with costs and benefits evaluated in terms of money.

Still a third field of rational action is the cognitive, which Gerald Platt and I have made the centerpiece of our study of the American university [editor's note: *The American University*]. We think of the university as a collectivity-type, which is focused about the implementation of a particular set of values of rationality – those having to do with the generation and transmission of knowledge. Of course, differentiation of types need not apply only to the sectors of the society in which values of rationality are paramount but another set is conspicuous in such fields as style of life, the arts, and perhaps one may say, religion, although “rational theology” is by no means unimportant in the latter set.

I would like also to call your attention to the fact that the concept which I have used of **value-generalization** should be regarded as the obverse of specification, as referred to above. The fullest exposition of this concept can be found in the essay entitled “Comparative Studies and Evolutionary Change,” which was reprinted as chapter eleven of my volume of essays entitled *Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory*. This concept is based on the assumption that in the course of social evolution, in the early stages the generalized value patterns corresponding to instrumental activism are couched at rather low levels of generalization and that one necessary feature of an evolutionary process is to redefine them at higher levels of generalization. Just to take one example: it seems to me that the step in Western religious history of Judaism to Christianity constituted such a step in value generalization, as did in a much more secular sphere the step in socio-economic development which centers around the Industrial Revolution and which included above all labor as a factor of production in the market system on an unprecedented level.

This (line of thinking ed.) leads over into another, but closely related, set of considerations. It seems to me that sociological consideration of the state of relatively contemporary American and other industrial society has focused very heavily on stratification on the basis of social class. There has been good justification for this emphasis but I think it tends to obscure the emergence of certain other themes. The most important single rival to social class has been, I think, **ethnicity**. And they have to a considerable degree historically tended to be correlated though I think this correlation has diminished rather rapidly in recent decades.

However this may be, I think what we have been seeing is a strong tendency to the emergence into prominence of a third basis of stress and emphasis which focuses in what we may call the Gemeinschaft area of the social structure. Using the old anthropological-sociological formula, I would speak of this as the complex concerning “age and sex.” The earlier emphasis in this field has been on the earlier phases of the age structure. I think it is correct to say that it first involved a heavy emphasis on the importance of child training which was the focus, you will remember, of the “culture and personality” movement which centered in social anthropology but in a certain alliance with psychoanalysis. The focus of interest gradually moved upward in the age scale. A second major phase was focused on problems of adolescence.

Then came the phase of what I have called the educational revolution, which involved after World War II the enormous expansion of the system of higher education. Naturally a tension could hardly be denied when there

erupted in the later sixties the pite of student disturbances which is green in all of our memories (you don't have to be nearly as old as I am to have vivid memories of that). You may remember that Platt and I in our book on the American university coined the concept "studentry" because we felt that this was not a phenomenon essentially of adolescence which focused at the secondary school level.

It seems to me that we have recently been seeing still another phase of this developing focus of interest in the emergence of gerontology and whole study of aging and the elderly. I happen to agree very much with my friend Matilda Riley's emphasis and that of her associates **that aging should not apply as a concept only to the later phases of the life course, as they call it, but that it begins at birth if not at conception.** This to me is to say that the problems of the elderly should be seen in the context of consistent analysis of the whole individual's life course from birth to death. I presume that this perspective is very congenial to you and your group.

Since seeing you, I have read a draft paper by Matilda Riley which is to be published I think in the next issue of *Daedalus*. [editor's note: Matilda White Riley, "Ageing, Social Change and the Power of Ideas," in *Daedalus* 107(4), pp. 39-52]. This is, I think, her most theoretically systematic attempt so far to pull these things together and it proved to be an exceedingly suggestive paper for me. What it seems to me has been happening is that the age-sex complex, as I have called it, has begun to occupy the center of societal concern in a sense in which that was not true a generation and more ago. At least relatively this is leading to a downplay of the previous stress on social class on the one hand and ethnicity on the other. The very fact that college students could be the focus of a major set of disturbances quite comparable in national "seriousness" to waves of strikes or to race riots seems to me to be one major symptom of the change I have in mind. The bases of this change constitute major themes of the book I have been working on, which I think I mentioned to you.

It very much concerns our attitudes toward the elderly because, after long and major sector of the life course the problem arises, Well, what are our attitudes toward these persons who have reached this particular life situation? From one point of view differentiation between saints and reprobates put in the Puritan terminology, or the deserving sector of the population and the undeserving sector. I don't think it is quite that definite and simple.

This leads to the exceedingly complex problem area of the relations of work and leisure [editor's note: He is referring here Chapter 3 in John Tropman, *American Values and Social Welfare*, 1989. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.] From one point of view, work is considered decidedly meritorious and leisure is the earned reward for meritorious work. However, it is not possible to make things as simple as that. You and I discussed at some length the reservations that various "elderly" people, including myself, have about the life of leisure.

We then turn to problems of the significance of human mortality and the death complex. I reviewed the three ventures that I have made in collaboration with Victor Lidz and also Renee Fox into the analysis of the symbolism about the currently popular view of the "denial of death" in American culture. It seems to me from my own self-observation and that of other elderly persons that we are not simply "waiting to die" and we are not obsessively preoccupied with the fact that eventually we must die, which of course is as fact taken for granted.

As contrasted with this feeling I would strongly emphasize the continuity of the various phases of the life cycle. There is a long series of transitions from one to another phase, such as from early childhood to what Freud called latency, from that to adolescence, from adolescence to studentry, early adulthood, and so on. We can, as your group has done, make use of Erikson's schema of life cycle phases. There are, however, certain basic continuities at least once the main orientations have been settled as in Erickson's concept of identity. I think most "normal" adults achieve certain stabilization by early adulthood which follows them through in the various world contacts in which they have to participate.

Let me now comment briefly on two somewhat different issues. **In our personal discussion**, you remember that I expressed that it did not seem to me that the anxieties and fears of the elderly were nearly so much focused on death, leading to the famous “denial of death” hypothesis, but that they rather concerned anxieties about incapacity and disability. As you know, I have strongly stressed the importance of the demographic changes which have occurred in about the last century as a result of which there are very greatly reduced numbers of what Victor Lidz and I called adventitious deaths and a greatly increased proportion of the age cohort who live into the stages of life which tend to be called elderly. This, of course, means that having survived the most important exposure to infectious diseases and having better food and hygiene than formerly, the elderly are increasingly exposed to what have sometimes been called the “degenerative diseases,” many of which do impose disabilities although people afflicted with them are often not immediately threatened with death. Vascular difficulties would be a major field to cite for them.

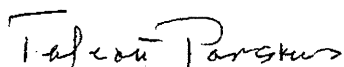
Also, as you know, I would strongly stress the importance of certain aspects of individualism in our society and culture and one major focus of this is the high valuation of personal independence. The fields in which this becomes important and the way it does are exceedingly various and there are many subtle complexities.

However, there is a particular relevance of this set of considerations to the status of the elderly. Much of the discussion previously has centered on the financial aspect of dependency, which, for example, underlays the development of the Social Security system in which the pensions for retired people constitute by a good deal the largest component.

I think we have recently been seeing an important shift away from the emphasis on the financial problem of the elderly to **the capacity problem** which is of course very much bound up with health. The surfacing of this problem at the national political level in the recent act of Congress on retirement problems seems to me to be a very important symptom of a set of changes which have been going on. I think we covered this area fairly thoroughly in our discussion. I would merely like to re-emphasize that I consider it as very substantial importance.

These are some of the main theoretical considerations that your program suggested to me. I hope they will prove stimulating to you and your group. I think the practical problems have been dealt with in the insert above at the beginning of the part of the memorandum I have dictated today.

Sincerely,



Talcott Parsons

University of Michigan
School of Social Work

November 30, 1978

Professor Talcott Parsons
Dept. of Sociology
Harvard University
Cambridge, Mass 02138

Dear Professor Parsons:

I hope that this note finds you now returned from a successful visit in Japan, and that the trip was a positive one for you and your wife. Our staff found your comments most useful and are proceeding to some thinking along the values system lines you suggested in your letter. I do hope that we will have the occasion sometime after the first of the year to have you be a brief guest here in Our Town. At that time we could discuss the possibility of a short piece which might be included in our anthology, but would give you the opportunity to share some of your thoughts on the social system and the role of the elderly in that social system. One point of departure might be the concept of institutionalized activism which we discussed at the meeting in August. I hope, by the way, to be East this summer – the Cape again and Vermont. I mention it now in the hope that I have that we could meet during that time at your convenience.

With all personal regards, I remain,

Sincerely yours,

John E. Tropman, Ph.D. Research Scientist

JET/

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
William James Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

March 27, 1979

Professor John E. Tropman, Ph.D.
Institute of Gerontology
The University of Michigan
520 E. Liberty Street
Our Town MI 48109

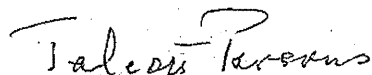
Dear Dr. Tropman:

Thank you very much for your letter. I am very glad to be in touch with you again. You ask two very practical questions to which I think I can give quite specific answers.

The first is about the possibility of coming to Our Town for a day's conference. In principle, I would be glad to do that, but must impose certain time schedule constraints on the proposal. Just a month from now, I am taking off for what in turn will be another month's trip in Western Europe. I have enough obligations coming up before my departure for Europe, so it would be out of the question for me to try to fit in a trip to Our Town before that departure. This means I would not be available before quite late May or early June. To complicate matters further, I have agreed to go to Salzburg, Austria, to attend the annual meeting of the World Federation for Mental Health which is scheduled to run from July 8 to 13. The period between late May and early July is none too long, but it could well be that a visit to Our Town could be fitted in during that period. If not, it would have to be postponed until after the middle of July.

The second question is whether I would be willing to contribute a statement or a chapter or a memorandum for your proposed publication on the problem of values and the status of the elderly in American society. I think I would be very glad indeed to do so, provided that there would not be a deadline which would obligate me to deliver a manuscript before the end of the summer or the early fall. I am very glad that you referred in your letter to Professor Murayama [Editor's note: This is a reference to Saeko Murayamar, who received her Ph.D. in Social Work and Sociology from the University of Michigan in 1976]. I saw a good deal of her during my stay at Kwansei Gakuin University. Indeed for my formal lectures, she was my senior official translator and served me very well. I had very pleasant and cordial relations with her and here in Massachusetts I record my professional engagements in a calendar entitled "Beautiful Japan 1979", which she kindly presented me with when I was about to leave Japan. I value my association with her greatly.

Sincerely,



Talcott Parsons

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
William James Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

April 26, 1979

Ms. Jane McClure [Editor's Note: Ms. McClure was on the staff of the American Values and the Elderly Project.]
Institute of Gerontology
The University of OurUniversity
Our Town MI 48109

Dear Ms. McClure,

Thank you for your note. I think a visit to Our Town around June 7th or 8th would be entirely satisfactory from my point of view. Of the two days, I think the 7th would be preferable since I would like to be back here on the Friday with the weekend in view.

I am starting out on the European trip I mentioned to Dr. Tropman this coming weekend. I expect to return on Sunday, May 20th. I presume that would be time enough to be in touch about het more specific arrangements. You can reach me by telephone on Monday or Tuesday of that week or write a letter which will be waiting for me on my return.

Sincerely,



Talcott Parsons

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
William James Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

April 26, 1979

Ms. Jane McClure
Institute of Gerontology
The University of OurUniversity
Our Town MI 48109

Dear Ms. McClure,

Thank you for your note. I think a visit to Our Town around June 7th or 8th would be entirely satisfactory from my point of view. Of the two days, I think the 7th would be preferable since I would like to be back here on the Friday with the weekend in view.

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Sincerely,



Talcott Parsons

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
William James Hall
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

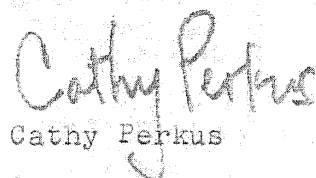
May 21, 1979

Professor John E. Tropman, Ph.D.
Institute of Gerontology
The University of OurUniversity
520 E. Liberty Street
Our Town MI 48109

Dear Professor Tropman,

Mrs. Parsons asked me to write to you and say that she knew Professor Parsons was looking forward to meeting with you in Our Town next month.

Sincerely,


Cathy Perkus