Uncertainty, Transcendental Orientation, and Social Change: Parsons' Theory as a Theory of Social Change

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1．Uncertainty as a Fundamental and Critical Subject-matter

The Uncertainty of society and human life—including illness and death, especially in modern society—was a subject of critical importance for Talcott Parsons as a sociologist his entire career. However, this reading runs contrary to the prevailing interpretation of his works. Yet if you read his collected articles on *National Socialism* – namely his articles, documents and records of activities on the anti-Nazi campaign, edited by Uta Gerhardt—you can see how deeply sensitive Parsons is to the built-in social strain of modern society and therefore the uncertainty of the modern world.

For Parsons Nazism is not a phenomenon peculiar to Germany in a certain historical period; instead, it is just an obvious manifestation of fundamental social strain and the instability of modern society. It may be worth noting that Z. Baumann once claimed that almost all the literature ever written on the Holocaust—including history, novels, and works of the social sciences, including sociology—have treated it "as an event explicable only in terms of the extraordinary convolutions of German history, of inner conflicts of German culture, … with much the same parochializing, marginalizing effect" (Bauman, 1989, p.211-2). Therefore, "only such explanations of the Nazi crimes have been accepted as are conspicuously irrelevant to us, to our world, to our form of life" (Bauman, 1989, p.211). This claim, however, fails to convince completely in light of the exception of Talcott Parsons' theoretical stance toward Nazism.

While the articles in *National Socialism* are the first literature of reference by Parsons on the subject, the second is to be found in his very last manuscript, written in 1979—the year of his death—entitled "Health, Uncertainty and the Action Situation" (unpublished).

One passage that provides a starting point goes like this:

"My general argument is that orientation to uncertainty and with it the

contingency of unpredictable changes in the situation of action is a built-in feature of the behavioral and action process of living phenotypical organisms which grows in relative importance as further steps are made in the process of the evolution of living systems." (Parsons, 1979, p. 6).

Parsons begins with this fundamental human condition of uncertainty, and proceeds to arguments of "generalized symbolic media of interchange", as a stabilizing yet flexible (keeping "freedom of choice") mechanism to articulate uncertain situations, especially those of the social situation, with social functions in a social system. In the papers written in his later years Parsons began to introduce a new medium, namely, "health." For him "health" may be another "generalized symbolic medium" to bridge "between the organic and the phenomena of culture or action" (Parsons, 1979, p.22) by interchanging this medium of "health."

There has been a famous, almost stereotyped interpretation of Parsons theory on the issue of uncertainty and double contingency that the issue is immediately linked with and solved by his notorious "scheme" of "integration by common value" which should successfully and rigidly stabilize the social system. However, especially after he introduced the idea of the "generalized symbolic media", the story may be altered quite substantially. In the following I explore this alternate story from a certain aspect.

Another unpublished manuscript entitled "Mental Illness and Modern Society" written in 1967 may serve as a bridge by linking two of the above-mentioned manuscripts.

I hope the following quotations from this manuscript will attract your attention as much as they have mine.

"It is extremely important that both openness to social change and innovation on the part of social system and openness to creativity on the part of the individual personality are dependent on certain kinds of loopholes in the system of social control about which we have been talking. It seems very likely that the relation here is a genesis parallel of that between the maintenance of a species type through selective processes and the process of genetic mutation. Like most mutations in the genes, probably most patterns of deviant behaviour are dysfunctional from the point of view of the long run development of the social system, certainly most of them are eliminated by processes somewhat analogous to those of natural selection. At the same time, it is in this area that we find the

creative processes of variation which are germs of progressive, revolutionary change. If alternatives were having mechanisms for insuring conformity to fully established and institutionalised behavior patterns and having relatively uncontrolled variability, our societies would probably be more unstable than they are as would probably suffer impaired prospects of institutionalising constructive change because of the sheer starkness of the dilemma between controlled behavior and what might be broadly called anarchistic patterns. I would like to close, therefore, by suggesting that mental illness, with the institutional framework within which it is defined and controlled, constitutes a kind of buffer mechanism which is particularly important to processes of orderly, social change. It is a way of containing some of the more dangerously disruptive products of the various kinds of strain to which I have alluded, but one which need not be so rigid or repressive as to inhibit too greatly the more constructive elements.   It seems to me that, in the general perspective of both the psychiatric profession and others, it is very important to keep this kind of functional perspective on the significance of mental illness in mind." (Parsons, 1967, pp.10-11).

In these passages, Parsons talks about "loopholes in the system of social control", say the loopholes in the "sacred canopy"(P. Berger) for the "openness to social change" and "openness to creativity" in suggesting the "function" of mental illness for both order and social change at the same time. My point is that to spell out this idea, Parsons needed to develop the theoretical device called "generalized symbolic media."

Let me now put this issue of openness to social change and creativity in a broader theoretical context in Parsons' works not solely confined to the case of mental illness.

(1) Parsons' interpretation of the arguments on Herrschaft of M.Weber.
   in *The Structure of Social Action*   (Parsons, 1937).

The first context is Parsons' interpretation of Max Weber's theory on "Herrschaft," the domination or authority.   In the *Structure of Social Action*, Parsons made his famous interpretation of Weber's three fundamental ideal types of legitimation of authority or domination. According to Parsons, Weber's basic starting point of these three types is the legitimation by charisma. " Charisma is directly linked with legitimacy, is indeed the name in Weber's system for the source of legitimacy in general."(Parsons, 1937,p.663). Then, from this "source", through the process of transforming this charisma into a routine, "routinization" (Parsons, 1937,p.664), the

other two types of legitimation emerge. One is legitimation by tradition and the other is through hierarchical institutionalisation such as the bureaucracy of medieval Christianity to legitimation by rational- legal authority. "The essential point is that the quest of the source of legality always leads back to a charismatic element"(Parsons, 1937, p.665).

The point here is that Parsons thought of charisma as a power for transforming or transcending the settings of the status quo, the fundamental starting point, and driving force of history.

(2) Revision and Extension of Mannheim's scheme of Utopia and Ideology

The second context is Parsons' revision and extension of K. Mannheim's scheme of Utopia and Ideology. In a long unpublished—and therefore unknown—manuscript entitled *Sociology of Knowledge and the History of Ideas* (Parsons, 1974-75), Parsons tries to revise and extend Mannheim's famous scheme of Utopian movements in history in order to introduce a more "comprehensive" (Parsons, 1974-5, p.96) scheme than Mannheim's.

Parsons succeeds to the idea of utopia from Mannheim as a special type of "total ideologies" and correctly assesses it as " a conception of an ideal state of affairs not yet present in actuality, which some persons or social groups have become committed to attempt to actualize in the reality of concrete action systems. They thus differ from ideologies, in so far as the latter do not delineate existing states of affairs, in the commitment to implementation of nonfactual ideal patterns." (Parsons, 1974-5, p.95).

In short, utopia both for Mannheim and Parsons is not just an illusionist fantasy, but meant to be an actual social movement which takes place in a society as a whole, as a totality. In this attempt Parsons proposes a scheme in which "Conservative utopia (in Mannheim's sense) and Liberal ones succeed and balance each other" (Parsons, 1974-5, p.96).

One of the reasons which makes it difficult to understand this part of the article comes from the fact that Parsons at this stage had not fully developed the idea of his combination of four "revolutions" in modern history—namely, the "democratic" and "industrial" revolutions as one pair in early modern, and "educational" and "expressive" revolutions as another pair in contemporary modern history. He actually mentions the first three "revolutions" to delineate his own "comprehensive" scheme, but never uses the term "expressive revolution" here in the article. Still one can utilize the conception of "expressive revolution", the pair item to the "educational revolution" he developed later on, for describing Parsons' scheme in this article.

It might be said that Mannheim's Anabaptist utopian movement, a part of the Reformation, is fro Parsons an element of "democratic revolution" and that the Enlightenment as a Liberal Utopia for Mannheim, also falls under the category of "democratic revolution" for Parsons. While "Conservative Utopia" termed by Mannheim is for Parsons an element of "industrial revolution," the point for Parsons is that these two "revolutions" do not stand in sheer antagonism to each other; instead they have an intimate relationship with each other. Therefore, "Tory conservatism" which Parsons calls it to distinguish it from the Old Regime, also has some elements called " Tory democracy" which involving "religious pluralism." In this context, " 'liberal' utopian structure broadly presumed religious pluralism and nations composed of citizens"(Parsons, 1974-5, p.103). In this process of formation of citizens and citizenship, the "liberation" of individuals also comes into play. "What may be said to have been 'liberated' in this process is that the performance capacity of the individual, seen on the background of its previous embeddedness in a matrix of particularistic solidarities" (Parsons,1974-5, p.106). For the process, "emergence of a differentiated *occupational* system" (Parsons,1974-5, p.105) an essential part of "industrial revolution", was again the antecedent or concomitant condition. Thus, these two "democratic" and "industrial" revolutions have an "intimate relationship" with each other.

There are, however, a more important pair of revolutions for Parsons—namely, the "educational " and "expressive " revolutions in the contemporary modern age that correspond to the pair of "industrial" and "democratic" revolutions in the early modern age. As parallel pairs, "industrial" and "educational" revolutions on one hand, and "democratic" and "expressive" revolutions on the other, have some resemblance.

In other words, "industrial" and "educational" revolutions fall into "Conservative utopia" in Mannheim's sense, while "democratic" and "expressive" revolutions fall into Mannheim's "Liberal utopia."

As Parsons reflects on his contemporary era, "there seems to have been emerging another important mode of 'conservatism' in our sense," that is the "conservatism of the 'affluent society' " (Parsons, 1974-5, p.106) which has a strong connection with the "educational revolution."

It is the following passage, in this sense, that seems to me to be the most interesting.

 "In a sense parallel to the other processes of 'liberation' we have taken note of, this process may be said to be in the course of the liberation of *intelligence*, as a free and mobile factor in societal process, relative to previous particularistic embeddedness in structures of status groups, classes and the like. The acquisition of higher intelligence

has become a resource in utopian principle accessible to all, though of course not necessarily with guarantee of equal success in the level attained or in its use"(Parsons, 1974-5, p.108-9).

In this way, educational revolution has "intimate relationships" with liberal utopia, and therefore democratic revolution. Also, as you see, another aspect of the same process is "the development of the complex of professions in the occupational sphere" as the "outcome of the process of social change" that can be called " 'professional' conservatism (Parsons, 1974-5, p.111).

What about the "expressive revolution"? Parsons mentioned the "new oppositional ideology" against the "institutionalization of the professional complex" (Parsons, 1974-5, p.113). "There does, however, seem clearly to be a radical wing of it [student power revolution] which has a certain resemblance to those of the corresponding wings of the other 'liberal' utopian movements" (Parsons, 1974-5, p.113-4). As I pointed out, Parsons did not use the term "expressive revolution" here but it is clear that he meant it in this context. Parsons' attitude toward it at this time seemed ambivalent (and perhaps it remained ambivalent till the end of his life). It seems that he left it an open question "whether this resemblance [to the "chiliastic, orgiastic" Anabaptists] indicates that a larger cycle, both of social change and of ideologies and utopias is in course of completion and that, possibly, a 'new Reformation' is under way" (Parsons, 1974-5, p.114).

As B.S. Turner put it, Parsons surely was not a nostalgiast—that is, a sociological thinker who is caught in a nostalgic way of thinking or framework. Parsons actually criticized and even despised nostalgic types of sociological theorizing. Criticizing them, Parsons used the term "Gemeinschaft romanticism," which is deeply connected with the birth of sociology as a discipline that Parsons himself mentioned in his last big volume of manuscripts for the book entitled *American Societal Community*.

It seems to be exactly because of the Parsons' contempt for "Gemeinschaft romanticism"—the nostalgic way of sociological thinking—that he wanted to analyze the Utopian consciousness, (a sort of mentality which I call "trans-status quo mental movement") to "reason out" this type of human activity and to canalize this inevitable movement toward a reasonable route for social change.

(3) Structuralist frame of human condition and social change

The third context is concerns Parsons' last formula of theorizing in his entire career. Fig.1 is made from an article which he contributed to the volume entitled *Structural Sociology,* edited by Inno Rossi, which appeared in 1982, but was written in

1979, the year of his death.

In this article Parsons mentions many thinkers such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Noam Chomsky, Roman Jakobson and physiologists such as James Dewey Watson, the descrier of the double helix structure of DNA, and so on.

In the article Parsons' centers his theorizing in the "articulation"(using Parsons' own term) between deep structure and surface structure or latent structure and patent structure. In latent structure there are two elements derived from different theoretical sources. One, "constitutive symbolism" comes from Durkheimian tradition; the other, the Telic System, from Weberian sociology of religion. Other elements he takes from physiology, such as an argument on genotype, DNA as information, code and program. To indicate the transformational process from the deeper, latent structure to the surface, patent structure, sociologists term it a process of institutionalization, as Parsons put it.

At the same time, however, another process may be traced in the opposite direction or vector; that is, from the surface, patent toward the deep, latent structure. This is the transcendental orientation of charisma, religion in general, or the Utopian consciousness. Furthermore, in these processes of double direction, there are some agencies which intervene. These are, according to Parsons, the "generalized symbolic media". In other words, these constitute the "mediating agency" which intervene in the process of this transformation (institutionalization) to create, select, combine and innovate.
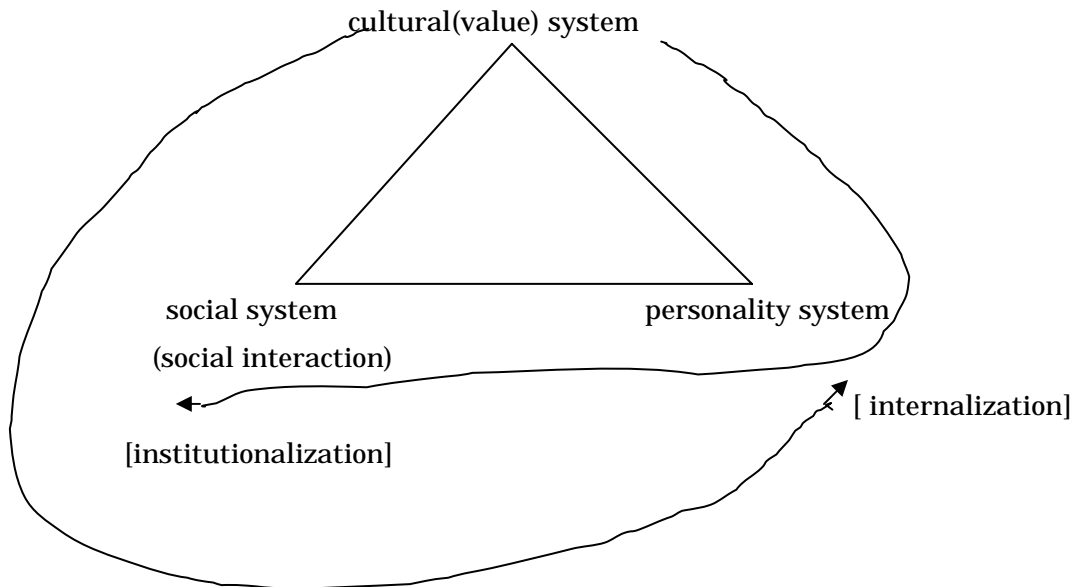
Considering the broader background of his theoretical reasoning, it can be said that Parsons' arguments on mental illness and social change are just forays to his more broadly explored terrain of people's "transcendental orientation" in relation with social change or social evolution.

Also in this context, Dennis Wrong's claim appears quite wrong, when one sees that the canalization of the "trans-status quo mental movement" is the Alfa and Omega of Parsons' sociology. In contrast to Wrong's claim of "over-socialized man," Parsons' "man" sometimes appears trans—social (and cultural), in the sense that if she or he is fully socialized then she or he should have enough potentiality and capability to utilize Utopian cultural resources as well as ability to adapt to the status quo.

2. Parsons' Theory as a Theory of Social Change

Even when one begins with the issue of "uncertainty", one my still arrive at a very static, "over-socialized" world. There has been a prevailing interpretation that Parsons' theoretical stance is something that starts with uncertainty—namely

"double-contingency"—and reaches the stark, "mechanic" world of full integration through shared "common-value." In paraphrase, one might illustrate this as follows.

cultural(value) system

social system

(social interaction)

personality system

[internalization]

[institutionalization]

In the arrangement in this figure, the cultural, (value) system is internalized in one's personality system through social interaction, such as interactions among family members. At the same time, the cultural, (value) system is institutionalized in the social system through the intermeshing of personality systems (roles).

This is a scheme that seems to describe a stark and closed loop. It also seems to be telling us that once this loop is established, society will be stabilized forever.

Since one's "socialization" seems to mean this internalization process of a value system, this theory looks like resembles Freud's "super-ego"—that is a common interpretation. However, if this is the case, there will be no room for social change.

There are "loopholes", say, on the "sacred canopy" (P. Berger) that Parsons himself pointed out in the "Mental Illness" manuscript. In actuality, he was always talking about social change, social evolution.

"spinning-off"   " spinning-off"

culture value

social   personality

"spinning-off"
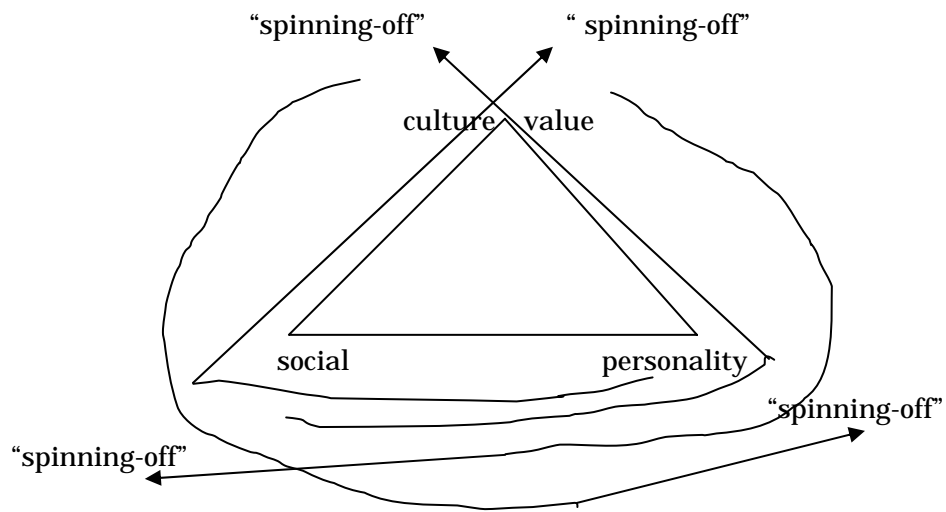
"spinning-off"

Accordingly, there are what I will call "spinning-off" processes or movements through these "loopholes" that Parsons was aware of. Logically there are 6 directions in the "spinning-off" processes. Two towards the cultural system, two towards the social system, and two towards the personality system.

The Following examples can illustrate a few of this "spinning-off" movements.

If we take the personality system as a starting point, a religious leader with a charismatic personality can arouse a small sect with his or her followers in the social system area through social interaction, which leads to the creation of a new value orientation over the existing value system. Or, taking the social system as a starting point, a sort of Utopian movement could create a new type of personality among the people involved that will result in a new value orientation.

In the case of "value-pressure" as the driving force of social evolution, the main concern is a vector that starts with the value system and moves through personality toward the social system, spinning-off over the social system.

Linking these "spinning-off" movements, there emerges a helix movement, up-grading the stages. In each stage, the movement touches the three points of the triangle—namely those of the cultural, social and personality.

It seems to me that the entire movement of this helix structure was what Parsons called "social evolution." I use the meaning of the term "social evolution" in this context, however, in a sense, not exactly identical to the concept Parsons developed in

The Evolution of Societies (1977a), but more generally. In the book, Parsons introduced a special paradigm called "a paradigm of a phase of 'progressive' change", and its "conceptual roots lie in the four-function paradigm, not as applied to a 'statically equilibrated' system, but specifically adapted to the analysis of processes of social change" (Parsons, 1977b, p.274). This "paradigm of a phase of progressive change" consists of such conceptions of "differentiation", "adaptive upgrading", "re-integration or inclusion", and the "value generalization."

However, among the ideas he developed in the book, one which is especially interesting to the present paper is that of "value-pressure."

"To return to the problem of process. A first point concerns what I have called 'value-pressure.' Assuming that a value-pattern has in fact become internalized and institutionalized to a significant degree, discrepancy between the valued 'ideal state' and the actual state of affairs becomes a source of strain. The commitment to the ideal then constitutes a set of factors exerting pressure toward changing the actual state in the direction of conformity with normative standards. This pressure is likely to be stronger in proportion as the value-pattern is 'activistic,' i.e., calls for positive goal-attainment and active adaptation rather than more passive 'adjustment' to the system's environments" (Parsons, 1977b, p.310).

"I have suggested that differentiation is in part a consequence of value-pressure" (Parsons, 1977b, p.311).

It should be noted, however, that this is not a one-way direction of change from value to society, but a two-way interactive process. The "factors of 'interest' " come from the opposite direction. "This is one of main reasons why maintenance of the 'integrity' of the value-pattern, as I have called it, is empirically problematical" (Parsons, 1977b, p.310).

Out of this "problematical" situation, social change will ocur. "If the combined 'pressure' of these factors is sufficient they will bring about some kind of 'outlet' for the tendency to change. For this to happen new structures and processes are necessary. Hence the most likely outcome, other than the inhibition of the movement for change, is the 'splitting off' of new structures from some already present and the performance of old, but newly emphasized functions, which were part of the functions of old structures, in new structures." (Parsons, 1977b, p.275).

Here, it seems to me that Parsons uses the term "outlet" just as he did "loopholes" in the mental illness manuscript; both lead to social change.

In the discourse of "value-pressure," Parsons puts the idea of emergence of variations or innovations in the code elements of the normative structure—namely

language and law system—which provide the pool for evolutional potentiality that has a functional flexibility.   Relating to these arguments of "potentiality" and "flexibility," Parsons' other idea of "generalized symbolic media" as a new tool for analyzing social transformation reveals a great efficiency. In this context, the "symbolic media" are meant to be devices for the generalization of mutual anticipation and expectation among actors, create mutual trust in a long run, and through the feedback (reflexive) mechanism, provide a pool of massive potentiality for flexible correspondence with or regulation of changing situations.

In this sense, in combination with the conception of "generalized symbolic media," we are now able to analyze the transformation of society or social change in terms of these newly introduced ideas of evolutional potentiality for innovations. Thus, the following figure may indicate, basically, Parsons' theory as a theory of social change as social evolution:

social evolution

culture, value

social   personality

12
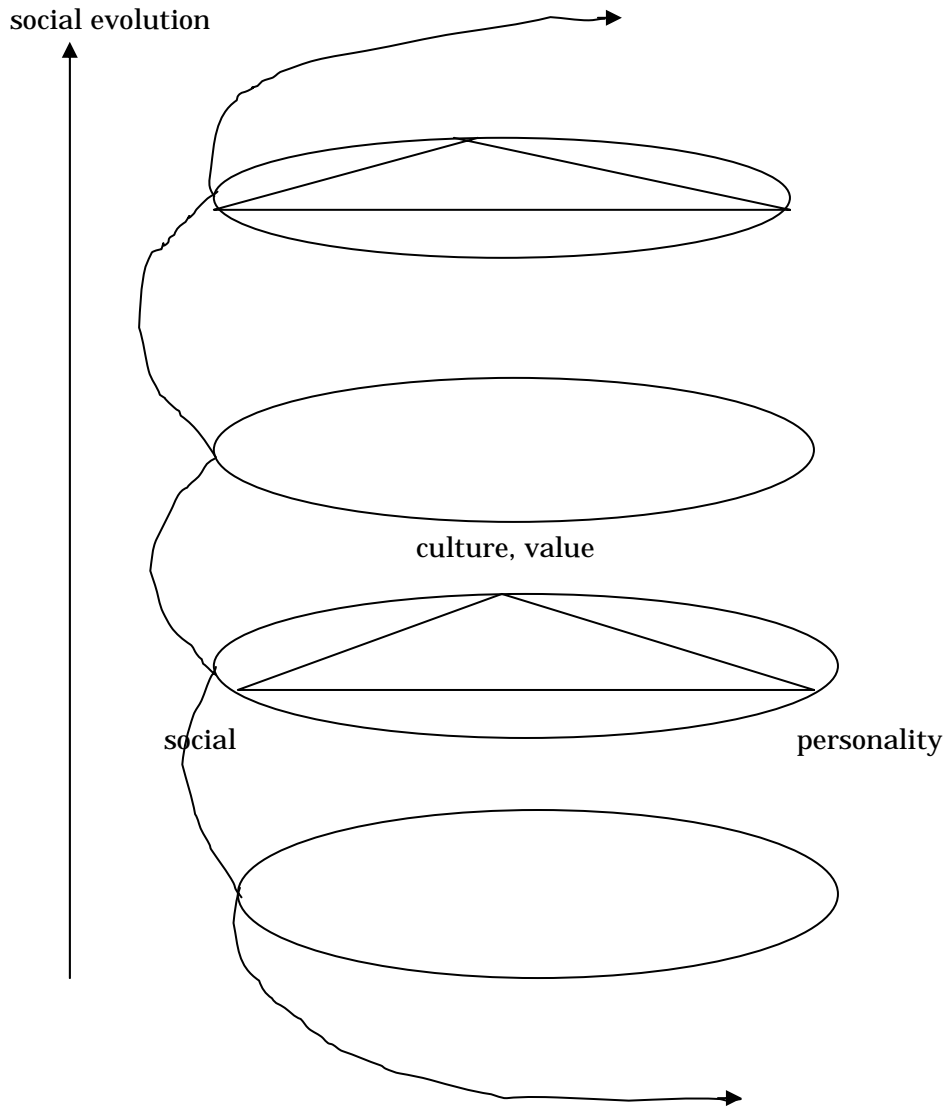
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