Don Quixote and the social system: Interpreting Ronald Laing’s concept of ontological insecurity from Alfred Schütz’ and Talcott Parsons’ theories of social action

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Abstract
Alfred Schütz and Talcott Parsons, two towering authorities of Weberian social thought are rarely interpreted in the same theoretical perspective (with the exception of Harold Garfinkel). This article intends to show that Schütz’s later writings about the constitution of social reality in the pluralized and differentiated modern society and Parsons’s concept of the social system converge with reference to their common problem of understanding interaction. In this article, I use Ronald Laing’s psychiatric thought of the early 1960s as a starting point to discuss some of the points of intersection between Schütz and Parsons. Laing argued that psychosis is not a phenomenon of the individual mind. Rather it must be understood in terms of an interaction system that is constituted by doctor and patient. The patient cannot maintain ego borders strong enough to establish a role-based social relationship and feels ontologically insecure. It is necessary to understand the patient in his existential position which constitutes his self as a kind of role. Schütz and Parsons reflected on similar interaction systems. Schütz analyzed the little social system that is established between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza; Parsons addressed the social system between doctor and patient. It is argued that Schütz and Parsons analyzed the conditions under which a social system can be established, but they also look at its breakdown leading to the situation as described by Laing.

Keywords
Alfred Schütz, ontological insecurity, phenomenology, Ronald Laing, social system, Talcott Parsons, theory of action
Introduction

In 1951, Talcott Parsons published *The Social System*. It was a milestone of social theory which, for the first time, gave a comprehensive account on modern US-American society in systematic and theoretical terms (Gerhardt, 2011). Some years earlier, Alfred Schütz (1945) published a seminal paper that dealt with the problem of social reality and the possibility of social interaction in the pluralized and differentiated modern world. Even though different in style and situated at different levels of abstraction (Parsons and Voegelin, 2013: e37), these two approaches to social theory share an intellectual perspective of interpreting modern society as a unique type of interaction structure. Both authors take the actor’s point of view, the meaning that actors bestow on their actions and the actions of other actors, as a starting point.

Contemporary sociology does not read Schütz and Parsons in the same theoretical vein. Grathoff’s edition of the correspondence between Schütz and Parsons (1978) on the occasion of Schütz’s criticism of Parsons’ *The Structure of Social Action* and its abrupt end fueled the emphasis of their differences rather than their common ground, even though their commonalities were not completely neglected (e.g. Eberle, 1984; Srubar, 1988). Schütz’s work was popularized by Berger and Luckmann (1967). Their new sociology of knowledge intended to offer an alternative to Parsonian systems theory. The objective approach of functional systems theory distanced Parsons from a subjective and voluntaristic theory of action which Schütz emphasized throughout his life by his phenomenological approach (Psathas, 2004). Parsons methodological approach was accused for its oversocialized (Wrong, 1961), conservative (Gouldner, 1970), and too abstract (Mills, 1959) conception of man and society.

One important exception is Harold Garfinkel (1952) who studied with Parsons in the 1950s and who used the work of Schütz to show how the social system can be grounded in “the actor’s situational experience” (Gerhardt, 1999: 181). Garfinkel also knew that the common denominator of Schütz and Parsons is the sociology of Max Weber (Gerhardt, 2001, 2011). Three elements of this Weberian perspective can be distinguished: (1) The postulate that sociology and society are based in the individual human mind which also implies the constitution of alter’s subjectivity in ego’s mind, allowing for mutual orientation toward the meaning which actors bestow on their actions; (2) The human mind constitutes social reality which, unlike the objects of the natural sciences, exists independent of scientific concepts; and (3) members of modern-type societies are free in planning their activities (voluntarism), and this fact implies that researchers are free in asking questions and in constructing theoretical concepts that are thought to be fruitful to understand and to explain the social world.

Although Parsons’ and Schütz’s work of the mid-1940s and early 1950s emphasize the integrated and democratic patterns of post-war America, neither of them neglects the problem of deviance. Deviance is a prominent topic in *The Social System*. Two of its chapters are dedicated to the issue. Chapter VII deals with the development of deviant motivational processes in social systems and the corresponding mechanisms of social control by taking the complex interrelationships between personality and social system into account. Chapter X investigates the social system of modern medical practice and the corresponding mechanisms of resocialization. Resocialization is based on the concatenated roles of doctor and patient, allowing for the integration of deviant action orientations into society by the institutionalization of the sick role.
The ways by which Schütz addressed the problem of deviance are not so easy to grasp. However, he dealt with this problem in a paper on *Don Quixote and the problem of reality* that was read before the General Seminar of the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in 1953 (Schütz, 1964: XIII). By and large, this article applies the framework as developed in *On Multiple Realities* on Cervantes’ famous novel. But in this article, I venture to say, Schütz also theorizes the constitution of a social system as well as its breakdown in a way that is comparable to what Parsons did in *The Social System*.

In the following, I want to argue that the theories of Schütz and Parsons converge and complement one another in their ways of analyzing social action in social systems. Both authors theorize the problem of how interaction based on mutual understanding of actors in a situation is possible by conceptual schemes which address the actor’s point of view and the constitution of social reality in his or her mind (Eberle, 1984). And both show how mutual orientation can get lost and becomes deviant – a topic which is neglected in the literature.

To show how Schütz and Parsons address deviance as a problem of systems of interaction, I will take Ronald Laing’s concept of psychosis as a starting point. In his work, the different levels of analysis taken by Schütz and Parsons intersect. Laing criticized the psychiatry of his days by using a phenomenological and existentialist framework, arguing that psychiatry neglected both, the phenomenology of psychotic symptoms and the interaction context in which they take shape. Laing conceptualizes mental illness in interaction terms. The self, Laing argues, is divided by psychiatric positivism. It is abstracted from the interaction context in which psychotic symptoms are articulated.

In Laing’s psychiatric thought, symptoms are a function of failing to establish an integrated social system between the psychiatrist and the patient, and therapy must be based on some mental *clear area* (Brickner, 1943) that allows not only for establishing a shared definition of the situation but also for establishing the constitutive elements of ego and alter in terms of *functional prerequisites of social roles*. To understand the psychotic mind existentially, some clear ground of *intersubjectivity* must be established within the medical social system.

There is also another reason for choosing Ronald Laing as a starting point. This is his theory of deviant motivational processes which is based in the concept of *ontological insecurity*. Ontological insecurity denotes a loss of feeling that one’s ego is real. It brings together the problem of ego’s (social) reality which is the key topic of Schütz and the problem of insecurity which is a key concept in Parsons’ theory of deviance in social systems. The original context in which the term ontological insecurity was coined, however, is obscured by its more recent use in the works of Anthony Giddens. By Giddens, *ontological insecurity* gained momentum since the 1990s in sociology (Bauman, 2006), criminology (Garland, 2001), and social psychology (Van Marle and Maruna, 2010). Giddens used the complementary concepts of ontological security and ontological insecurity to analyze the constitution of and some of the consequences for social life in late modern societies that can be derived from it. In Giddens’ framework of structuration of society and self by routines, the insight that modern society is based on rationality and reciprocity of action orientation in social systems cannot be grasped. Integrating the frameworks of Schütz and Parsons, therefore, is not just a hermeneutic exercise but a plea for rethinking the problems of contemporary society by using approaches which reflect the constitution of modern society and their institutionalized forms of rationality in everyday life as well as their breakdown.
My argument has four steps. In a first step, I will reconstruct Giddens’ use of the concept of ontological insecurity. In a second step, I shall discuss Laing’s concept of psychosis and his phenomenological framework of psychiatric interaction. In the third step, I address Parsons’ concept of the social system and his analysis of deviance. It is argued that some of the presuppositions of the constitution of a social system are delegated to personal psychology and psychoanalysis, but a residual reference point remains which is the problem of how processes of internalization and institutionalization of cultural patterns prepare the common ground for the phenomenon of intersubjectivity. The constitution and the breakdown of intersubjectivity within a social system in which Don Quixote and Sancho Panza participate is the fourth step which is addressed by reconstructing Alfred Schütz paper on Don Quixote and the problem of reality.

**Anthony Giddens’ use of ontological insecurity**

Giddens used the concept of ontological security and its counterpart, ontological insecurity, to understand problems in the constitution of late modern society in terms of ongoing processes of structuration. In this context, the routines of day-to-day life for the constitution of self and society are key. Routine, Giddens (1984) emphasizes, “is integral to the continuity of the personality of the agent, as he or she moves along the paths of daily activities, and to the institutions of society, which are such only through their continued prediction” (p. 60). When a sense of trust and continuity of the object-world gets lost, regressive personality changes take place which Giddens exemplifies by an extreme example: Bruno Bettelheim’s (1960) description of “walking corpses” (Muselmänner) in concentration camps. The general unpredictability of events in the camps that was triggered by the guards’ arbitrary actions and decisions destroyed the durée of social life and its routine grounds. This situation is ontologically insecure: “The prisoners, in other words, lived in circumstances of radical ontological insecurity” (Giddens, 1984: 62).

Those who lost any sense of control over the situation died soon, whereas prisoners who managed to maintain some control over their daily lives were able to survive. The regression of personality structure, however, is not analyzed as a problem of interaction but as withdrawal from the interaction context and from identity as human agent: “They [the Muselmänner] no longer behaved as though they were human agents, avoiding eye contact with others, making only gross movements of the body and shuffling their legs when they walked” (Giddens, 1984: 62sq).

In the subsequent book *The Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens (1990) broadens this perspective. Ontological security denotes an emotional sense of “being-in-the-world” which is rooted in unconscious human life (p. 92). Persons who are “existentially unsure about whether he or she is several selves, or whether others really exist, or whether what is perceived really exists” (Giddens, 1990: 93) cannot interact with others. They are unable to inhabit with them the same social universe. To feel ontologically secure, a “basic ‘dosage’ of trust in early life that deadens or blunts these existential susceptibilities” (Giddens, 1990: 94) is necessary. This “basic trust” (Erikson, 1963) provides us with a lasting ego-identity, an inner trustworthiness, but also with trust in others which enables us to interact with them on the basis of belief in the mutuality of experience.

Having established basic trust in the course of psychosocial development, individuals become able to sustain the absence of loving caregivers from whom they depend without
experiencing existential anxieties. In this context, Giddens comes back to the routine grounds of day-to-day life which stabilize our sense of security. The trust in the caregiver’s return is based in his or her routines. The reliability of the caregiver’s activities allows for a differentiation between the patterned discontinuity of his or her presence and absence and the experience of continuity of his or her love. If routines are shattered, however, “anxieties come flooding in, and even very firmly founded aspects of the personality of the individual may become stripped away and altered” (Giddens, 1990: 98).

Giddens combines the role of routines of everyday life with Garfinkel’s (1963) research on experiments with trust. These experiments show how feelings of existential anxiety, suspicion, and hostility emerge by experiences in which trust in a reliable social order is suspended. Routines and practical consciousness provide a framework for understanding ontological insecurity as a consequence of late modernity. Routines of day-to-day-life are dissolved by processes of disembedding space, time, and (biographical) meaning in the late modern world which causes ontological insecurity if basic trust is not established to a sufficient degree. This focus on practical consciousness and routines, however, obscures the medical (and political) problems in which Laing was interested when he analyzed psychotic symptoms as functions of deviant as opposed to integrated interaction systems, a problem in which Parsons and Schütz were also interested. The frameworks of these authors shall be the topic of the next sections.

The (divided) self and ontological insecurity

Laing was dissatisfied with medical standard interpretations of the psychotic condition because they neglected the interaction context from which psychotic symptoms emerge. As a consequence, psychosis was interpreted by medical science as an individual phenomenon that can be isolated from and ascribed to a person. The self, however, cannot be divided and broken up into single atoms. It must be understood in its relationship with others. Laing argues that psychiatric texts describe psychotic behaviors without considering that they are a function of the psychiatrist’s observation. Without reflecting the observer’s point of view, symptoms become objective things, attached to the patient and detached from the interaction context from which they emerge. Laing refers to the description of a young psychotic man given by the well-known psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin who tried to get in contact with the patient and to observe his reaction to some commands and requests:

When asked where he is, he says, “You want to know that too? I tell you who is being measured and shall be measured. I know that, and could tell you, but I do not want to.” When asked his name, he screams, “What is your name? What does he shut? He shuts his eyes. What does he hear? He does not understand. How? Who? Where? When? What does he mean? […]” and so on. At the end, he scolds in quite inarticulate sounds. (Kraepelin, 1905, in Laing, 1960: 29 sq)

Kraepelin emphasized the inaccessibility of the patient. The patient did not engage in conversational interaction but appeared as someone who was just talking nonsense:

Although he undoubtedly understood all questions, he has not given us a single piece of useful information. His talk was […] only a series of disconnected sentences having no relation whatever to the general situation. (Kraepelin, 1905: 79–80, in Laing, 1960: 30)
In contradistinction to this position, Laing argues that the dialogue between Kraepelin and the patient is not a series of nonsense words. It is a dialogue between *the patient’s version of Kraepelin and his own defiant self*. Kraepelin interprets these utterances as signs of a disease and not as functions of his relationship with the patient. These are different perspectives, and Laing encourages us to take the second one and to understand the patient’s utterances as *existential expressions*.

The most interesting point of this problem for my context is that understanding the patient existentially, if this shall work at all, presupposes an integrated social system, a system of interaction in which ego and alter are constituted as personalities and in which they interact on the basis of reciprocity in terms of mutual understanding:

> It seems also that we require to orientate ourselves to this person in such a way as to leave open to us the *possibility* of understanding him. The art of understanding those aspects of an individual’s being which we can observe, as expressive mode of being-in-the-world, requires us to relate his actions to his way of experiencing the situation he is in with us. (Laing, 1960: 32)

Interpreted in the framework of Talcott Parsons, this means that the actor’s point of view has to be taken to understand social action from his or her (subjective) perspective in which the subjective meaning of social action is formed. In the example given by Laing, the patient is defiant because the psychiatrist is imposing his own categories on him and does not recognize him as a person. The patient in turn tries to defend himself against unjustified ascriptions from his point of view. The social relationship is not integrated. Therefore, the psychiatrist has to base his understanding of the patient’s situation in the latter’s existential position. If we want to interact with a patient: “We have to look and to listen to him simply as a human being” and not as “a patient and to see ‘signs’ of schizophrenia (as a ‘disease’)” (Laing, 1960: 33). Taking a perspective of reciprocity in a system of conversation allows us to “arrive at an understanding of the patient’s *existential position*” (p. 34).

Laing’s (1960) definition of psychosis is situated in this relational problem, and he argues that “psychotic” is the name for a specific disturbance of a social relationship (disjunction) as opposed to an integrated state of this relationship (conjunction), given that sanity is an *intersubjectively accepted and shared state of normality*:

> I suggest, therefore, that sanity or psychosis is tested by the degree of conjunction or disjunction between two persons where the one is sane by common consent.

> The critical test whether or not a patient is psychotic is a lack of congruity, an incongruity, a clash between him and me.

> The “psychotic” is the name we have for the other person in a disjunctive relationship of a particular kind. (p. 36)

This is the starting point for understanding ontological insecurity in terms of the self in a system of interaction which can either be integrated (conjunctive) or disintegrated (disjunctive). Understanding is not a purely intellectual process. It involves a sensitivity toward the other (the dimension of attachment or cathexis in Parsons’ frame of reference), an affectual component on which the comprehension of meaning and the will to comprehend are based. It must not be confused with the notion of
emphatic understanding. The salient point is that both, illness and sanity, are defined in terms of an integrated social system:

Within the context of mutual sanity there is, however, quite a wide margin of conflict, error, misconception, in short, for a disjunction of one kind or another between the person one is in one’s own eyes (one’s being-for-oneself) and, conversely, between who or what he is for me and who or what he is for himself; finally, between what one imagines to be his picture, attitude, and intentions he has in actuality towards oneself, and vice versa. (Laing, 1960: 35)

At the level of personal ontology or existence, the shared normative standards with reference to which ego and alter interact are categories of identity:

That is, I am accustomed to expect that the person you take me to be, and the identity that I reckon myself to have, will coincide by and large: let us say simply “by and large,” since there is obviously room for considerable discrepancies. (Laing, 1960: 36)

Insanity is an indicator for the breakdown of interaction based on these assumptions about identity, a disruption of a too radical kind.

In Laing’s (1960) conceptual scheme, persons feel ontologically secure if they have “a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person” (p. 37). Such a framework of personal existence allows us to live out into the world and to meet others, and it helps us to encounter ‘all hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity’ (Laing, 1960: 37). If a person feels ontologically secure, relationships are potentially gratifying. If a person feels insecure, they are experienced as a threat:

we can say that in the individual whose own being is secure in this primary experiential sense, relatedness with others is potentially gratifying; whereas the ontologically insecure person is preoccupied with preserving rather than gratifying himself: the ordinary circumstances of living threaten his low threshold of security.

If a position of primary ontological security has been reached, the ordinary circumstances of life do not afford a perpetual threat to one’s own existence. If such a basis for living has not been reached, the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat. (Laing, 1960: 42)

Ontologically insecure persons cannot take the realness of others or of themselves for granted. This is a deep disruption of a person’s belief system and of the way, reality is given to him or her. Laing develops a phenomenology of the anxieties experienced by persons with a low threshold of ontological security, represented by feelings of engulfment, implosion, and petrification. Engulfment is a feeling of getting drowned, and the reaction that preserves the person from engulfment is isolation. Isolation (Parsons’ withdrawal) is a way of getting out of an insecure social relation. The psychotic modes under conditions of insecurity are complete loss of being by absorption while the other person engulfs the self, and complete loneliness (isolation):

There is no safe third possibility of a dialectical relationship between two persons, both sure of their own ground and, on the very basis, able to “lose themselves” in each other. (Laing, 1960: 44)
Petrification can mean a terror, whereby one is petrified (turned into stone), or it means that a person loses his autonomy and is turned into an automaton or, as a third possibility, the other is turned into a stone or into an automaton. Depersonalization is a way of escaping an interaction system if someone is too tiresome: “One no longer allows oneself to be responsive to his feelings and may be prepared to regard him and treat him as though he had no feelings” (Laing, 1960: 46).

If the patient feels that being understood by another person means to be enclosed, swallowed up, and the like, he cannot interact with the therapist on the basis of mutual understanding and reciprocity because the social system cannot interpenetrate the personal system by stable roles which presuppose a differentiated social system and a differentiated personality, able to internalize role expectations and differentiate them from another person’s expectations.

To summarize, Laing uses a framework of interaction and conceptualizes a two-pronged structure which leads to integration (conjunction) or anomie (disjunction), but on the level of personality and not directly on the level of the social system. The new component is the breakdown of personality. The ontologically insecure person experiences alter’s will of understanding him as an intrusion and a dissolution of ego-borders. He must defend himself by isolation or “essentializing” the psychiatrist (turning him into a stone). Laing argues that in case of weak borders of personality and ego-breakdown, the constitution of ego-identity in terms of the interaction process must be clearly understood by the psychiatrist. An interaction system must be constituted in which the psychotic’s existential position is taken seriously and in which his self is respected. A kind of role (not just a deviant label) is needed in which a new sense of self is able to crystallize.

The social system and the human mind: Role-expectations, insecurity, and deviance

It can be derived from the previous discussion of Laing’s theoretical approach that mental illness and psychosis depend on the degree of conjunction or disjunction in a social relationship. One can take this relational definition of sanity and illness as a starting point for understanding the concept of social system in Parsons’ sense. Parsons’ point of reference is Max Weber (2014: 1) who suggested that sociology shall analyze social interaction, that is, action whose meaning is related to the behavior of others and oriented toward it in its course:

The frame of reference concerns the “orientation” of one or more actors – in the fundamental individual case biological organisms – to a situation, which includes other actors. The scheme, that is, relative to the units of action and interaction, is a relational scheme. (Parsons, 1951: 4)

The relationship between actor and situation (including physical objects, cultural symbols, and other actors) is not organized by stimuli that would determine motivational processes by the attainment of gratification and avoidance of deprivations. The fundamental property is the mutual openness and intelligibility of the meaning that actors can infer from the behavior of others actors, and this meaning is organized in a system of “expectations”
that is institutionalized in terms of roles and internalized in terms of personality structures. This system of mutual institutionalized role expectations constitutes the social system:

It is a fundamental property of action thus defined that it does not consist only of ad hoc “responses” to particular situational “stimuli” but that the actor develops a system of “expectations” relative to the various objects of the situation. These may be structured relative to his own need-disposition and the probabilities of gratification and deprivation contingent on the various alternatives of action which he may undertake. But in the case of interaction with social objects a further dimension is added. Part of ego’s expectations, in many cases the most crucial part, consists in the probable reaction of alter to ego’s possible action, a reaction which comes to be anticipated in advance and thus to affect ego’s own choices. (Parsons, 1951: 5)

Mutual openness toward the other in order to get one’s expectations fulfilled (gratification of needs) presupposes a “minimum stability of personality” (Parsons, 1951: 28). Representing the other in ego’s mind as an object and differentiating ego from alter as a personality structure for its own are presupposed in order to enable ego to attach to alter, to understand and to accept his expectations, hence, to take the positive and negative sanctions that are expected as a reaction to ego’s actions into account. Ego’s attachment to alter, therefore, is a psychological property as well as a property of the social system which allows for both emotional security and interpretive certainty that ego can count on alter’s reaction and that it is possible to understand him or her.

To allow for an adequate development of personality, “minimum conditions of socialization with respect for instance to the relation between affective support and security” are necessary, “without which a functioning personality cannot be built up” (Parsons, 1951: 28). These minimum conditions of socialization allow for establishing basic trust in Erikson’s sense in the attachment system formed by a newborn and a caregiver. One reason for the inadequate development of personality (deviance) is a social system to which conditions and demands ego cannot live up:

These minimum needs of individual actors constitute a set of conditions to which the social system must be adapted. If the variation of the latter goes too far in a given direction this will tend to set up repercussions which will in turn tend to produce deviant behavior in the actors in question, behavior which is either positively disruptive or involves withdrawal from functionally important activities. (Parsons, 1951: 28)

A stable relationship between two actors over time denotes system equilibrium in the cybernetic sense. It is presupposed that at least two actors, ego and alter, are “bound in” the system in a twofold way: (1) they need to internalize the standards to which mutual orientation can conform and (2) the standards of action orientation must be institutionalized. Institutionalization means the reinforcement of (normative) patterns of meaning in contexts of interaction to the extent to which individual needs and expectations to conform are congruent. And these expectations are formalized in roles. Roles, then, are zones of interpenetration between social system and personality as they are part of an individual’s personality (internalization) and of the institutionalized expectations. The institutionalization process is the basis for the “reciprocal integration of role-expectations” (Parsons, 1951: 40).

Meeting role expectations is, for the most part, not based on instrumental motives. They are met by the normative patterns that are internalized and represented by a differentiated
part of the personality system, the superego: “Conformity with role-expectations will always to a greater or less degree involve motivational elements of the character referred to in psychological discussions as composing the ‘ego-ideal’ or superego, elements of ‘self-respect’, adequacy or ‘security’ in the psychological sense.” (Parsons, 1951: 40)

The structures and social system dynamics that evoke the development of deviant motivational tendencies in human personality systems are discussed extensively in Chapter VII of The Social System. Deviance is explained in social interaction terms. Parsons distinguishes deviance at the individual level, that is, “a motivated tendency for an actor to behave in contravention of one or more institutionalized normative patterns” from deviance at the social system level where “deviance is the tendency on the part of one or more of the component actors to behave in such a way as to disturb the equilibrium of the interactive process” (Parsons, 1951: 250).

The starting point for understanding deviance is a constituted social system in which ego and alter orient their attitudes toward one another on the basis of mutual attachment. Disturbance of the system equilibrium on which these orientations are based leads to frustration on ego’s side and the necessity of readjustment of need gratification. Depending on whether conformative or alienative tendencies are stronger, the interaction process escalates in a vicious circle that lead to conformative deviance (dominance and submission) or alienative deviance (aggression and evasion). The vicious circle in turn is driven by a fundamental disturbance of the expectation system in terms of insecurity:

We may say that the need for security in the motivational sense is the need to preserve stable cathexes of social objects, including collectivities. Tendencies to dominance or submission, aggressiveness or compulsive independence, then, may be interpreted as manifestations of insecurity. (Parsons, 1951: 261)

Insecurity broadens the gap between ego’s and alter’s expectations (and sanctions), and the clear ground of shared normative assumptions gets lost: “By increasing anxiety, the impact of indefiniteness of expectations in this sense may be a factor in deepening the vicious circle of progressive motivation to deviance” (Parsons, 1951: 270). As a consequence, deviant motivational tendencies get out of touch with the structure of reciprocity that constitutes the social system and become anomic. At some point during this cleavage process, the system breaks down and the normative order gets lost.

One component of the institutionalized normative order are notions of sanity and illness. The psychotic condition as described by Laing can be interpreted as ego’s inability to live up to these normative elements. Conjunction is weakened and disjunction prevails. As a consequence, the internalized roles that allow ego to reciprocate with alter by relying on shared expectations break down. Parsons gives an outline of a social system that allows for the resocialization of formerly deviant action orientations in the reciprocal role-structure of doctor and patient. It is discussed extensively in Chapter X of The Social System. The institutionalized roles based on which doctor and patient interact are organized in a specific combination of pattern variables (alternatives of action orientations). They are (1) functionally specific (there is a clear purpose of finding causes of illness and regaining health), (2) universalistic (following the values of science), (3) affective neutral (the relationship is based on objective knowledge, not on emotional bonds), and (4) achievement-based (regaining health is an achievement of the patient under the support of the doctor) and
community-oriented (the interest of the patient is more important than the interests of the
doctor and the patient tries to regain health not only for his but for the community’s sake).
These five pattern variables constitute a system of non-coercive, rational interaction.

Medical interaction turns the socialization process upside down which is organized by
the AGIL (adaption, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance) scheme.
Corresponding to the AGIL scheme, the LIGA scheme of resocialization is underpinned
by four mechanisms of social control which are permissiveness, support, denial of reciprocity, and manipulation of rewards. In a first phase, the patient and his symptoms have
to be accepted. His deviant tendencies can be acted out without fear of negative sanctions.
The patient can express the cultural patterns which orient his actions. Support is the focus
of the second phase in which the doctor builds coalitions with the healthy parts of the
patient’s personality to fight back deviant motivational tendencies.

These ideas can be aligned with the psychiatric framework presented by Laing. Laing
argues that the patient cannot live up to a fundamental condition of the constitution of a
social system, that is, to reciprocate with the doctor in a way that makes mutual understand-
ning and orientation of action perspectives possible. Understanding symptoms in
relational terms as meaningful reaction to the doctor’s actions is the first step to allow for
the patient’s opening up his mind and transcending the condition of isolation and enclo-
sure. Some healthy parts in the patient’s personality system that have survived break-
down must be found. They can be used as a starting point, as a clear area, from which
bonds of trust and security can be built up. This basis of interaction prepares the grounds
for establishing a new self of the patient. The point of crystallization for the patient’s new
self, then, is framed by a system of concatenated roles.

To understand the process that is established between doctor and patient under the psy-
chotic condition of ontological insecurity – Parsons used insecurity in a different sense of
unstable cathexes – another level of abstraction is necessary where “the time-structure of
human action becomes central” (Voegelin in Parsons and Voegelin, 2013: e37). Time struc-
ture does not mean physical time, but time as a moment in the constitution of ego’s indi-
vidual consciousness, including the consciousness of intersubjectivity which allows for the
internalization of role expectations. This type of analysis was elaborated by Schütz.

Don Quixote: the constitution and the breakdown of intersubjectivity

Schütz (1964) discusses the constitution of a social system between the madman’s world
and the world of common sense in his paper Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality. In this
paper, Schütz does not only describe the structures and processes that constitute a social
system but also the conditions under which social reality is established in terms of intersub-
jectivity. Schütz’s starting point is the theory of multiple realities as outlined by William
James. To clarify the question, what is (social) reality, James does not ask what is real?
Rather he asks, “Under what conditions do we think things real” (Schütz, 1964: 135).
William James’ argues that the world is not given as an undifferentiated entity. It is differen-
tiated into sectors or sub-worlds: the world of dreams, myths, science, art, or even madness.
Schütz further elaborates on the ideas of James and speaks about different provinces of
meaning, which are separated from each other. The structure of meaning is different in each
of these realms, and we experience this difference by a kind of shock when we move from one province to the other. Much of the beliefs of everyday life are lost when we move into the realm of science, where the laws of logical inference strictly organize the structure of meaning (coherence, consistence, and consequence of a system of propositions). Each world has its own style of existence, which expresses its specific character of reality. Dreams are real in a different way than science or social action, but without doubt, dreams are real for a dreamer under specific circumstances and in the dream’s style of existence. Schütz deduces from this idea that there is a style of existence which enables the experience of being in the same world together with another person who experiences and thinks about reality like me: this is the phenomenon of intersubjectivity. The world of everyday life which we experience in intersubjective ways by generalizing our own perspective, supposing that others share it, is the paramount reality in which most of us bestow the accent of reality.

The theory of multiple realities vis-a-vis a shared social reality based on the experience of intersubjectivity is the starting point for Schütz’s analysis of Cervantes’ novel. Within this frame of reference, Don Quixote is living in his private sub-world of chivalry, and Sancho Panza lives in the paramount reality of common sense. Schütz analyzes the problem of reality in three steps: (1) He shows how Don Quixote’s world is constituted and kept intact when it gets in contact with the world of everyday life; (2) He analyzes how the two sub-worlds of Sancho and Don Quixote intersect and how it is possible that they find some common ground for interaction (This is the problem with which Laing deals in The Divided Self); and (3) He establishes an argument on how the reality that was constituted between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza breaks down by fraudulent interventions from outside. I want to argue that the breakdown of reality as described by Schütz is of the same nature as the disjunction of social relationships as outlined by Laing, leading to ontological insecurity which causes the breakdown of Don Quixote’s identity and, as a consequence, his death. Schütz’s analysis, however, also implies aspects of the deviant social system and experiences of insecurity as described by Parsons.

Don Quixote’s private world of chivalry does not follow the logic of everyday life; it is neither solipsistic, nor is it destroyed if confronted with the world of everyday life. According to Schütz, these worlds are open toward one another. They are not “as monolithic as it seems” (Schütz, 1964: 136). They are, in William James (1923) words, “fringed,” and the meaningful structures of one world can blend into the other. In terms of the theory of social systems, the fringes of James are an equivalent of interpenetration, for example, the interpenetration of personality and social system by establishing roles. In this way, intermingling zones of two worlds are constituted. This is also the case in the relationship between Sancho’s world of everyday life and Don Quixote’s realm of chivalry. Both realms contain “enclaves of experience transcending to other realms of reality not compatible with either of them” (Schütz, 1964: 136 sq). This fact that human sub-worlds are open toward one another is the basic condition of the phenomenon of intersubjectivity and for the possibility of constituting common grounds for interaction.

Don Quixote’s world is not illusory. It is based on systematic knowledge that is transmitted by a cultural tradition and accessible to persons living in the world of everyday life. Reading a number of canonical texts about the institution of knight errants, he constructed an “evidence infallible” of famous knights, their characteristics and actions. Don Quixote’s knowledge about the world of chivalry follows the same structure as our knowledge about and our belief in historical facts which are based in “the reality of our natural attitude”
(Schütz, 1964: 137). It accepts historical facts if they are plausible, consistent with other parts of our accumulated experiences, and handed down to us through trustworthy sources. The world of chivalry is organized by a fully fledged and consistent cultural system, encompassing ways of life, moral rules, laws and jurisdiction, and even scientific knowledge.

However, in Don Quixote’s world, the basic categories of space, time, and causality are modified and not in line with the “natural attitude” of common sense. A timespan of some days in Don Quixote’s world equates just 5 minutes in Sancho’s world. By using magic power, Don Quixote can travel intercontinental distances in just a few moments. Space and time are relative categories of subjective consciousness, an argument that is fully in line with the philosophical thought of Bergson on time and Einstein’s concept of relative space. The function of causality and motivation is fulfilled by friendly and hostile enchanters who also enable the translation of experiences between Don Quixote’s world of phantasy and common-sense experience. The enchanters transform giants into windmills and Don Quixote’s helmet into a barber’s basin. The enchanters, then, translate different schemes of interpretation or frames of reference by which experiences can be interpreted and explained. It is important to note that by the enchanters an element of rationality is introduced into Don Quixote’s understanding of the world which is not in line with the schemes of interpretation used by modern science, but which nevertheless orients Don Quixote’s interactions with others and which can be interpreted in terms of a specific kind of rationality.

Schütz shows that the constitution of Don Quixote’s attitude toward reality changes in the course of his three expeditions described by Cervantes. These changes are based in the relationships toward other persons and in the social system which is constituted thereby.

On the first expedition, Don Quixote is alone and does not engage in more than superficial social relationships. His inner sub-universe of chivalry in which knights, maidens, and castles are real remains unquestioned and intact. Encounters with others take place, but reactions to his actions support his belief system, even if this support is not intended and Don Quixote’s actions are performable within the world of everyday life without causing contradictions in his belief system.

The enchanters appear for the first time, when the priest and the barber try to cure Don Quixote. Interpreting his inner world as madness, they burn his books and wall up his library. They are in the situation of Kraepelin, the psychiatrist mentioned by Laing who does not understand the existential position of the patient. Instead of accepting the reality represented by the priest and the barber, Don Quixote defends his inner world by introducing the malign actions of the enchanters. Enchanters, in this case the archenemy, the magician Freston, are introduced “in order to maintain the accent of reality on his private sub-universe of chivalry” (Schütz, 1964: 142). Strategies of this kind are also very similar to the introduction of additional hypothesis in science in order to maintain the belief in a given frame of reference or a paradigm (Kuhn, 1962).

On the second expedition, Don Quixote is no longer alone. He establishes a face-to-face relationship with Sancho Panza, his squire, who represents the world of everyday life and common sense. Schütz argues that the worlds of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are, in principle, open toward one another. But this openness does not constitute common grounds automatically. The alignment of perspectives needs mutual sensitivity and in the possibility of taking the role of the other. The everyday life condition of social action is the belief that others use the same schemes of interpretation (a shared cultural pattern) as we do and that they follow the same system of relevances. If this experience of intersubjectivity is questioned, the
possibility of establishing communication with fellow men is destroyed. A situation of crisis emerges in which we get the impression that we are isolated from one another, enclosed in our solipsistic worlds. The experience of openness of our sub-worlds is threatened.

Approaching one another, Sancho and Don Quixote do not lose a common ground, and they begin to accept the others assumptions and schemes of interpretation to some degree. They are able to establish a common sub-universe of discourse at the fringes of the world of everyday life and of Don Quixote's private world of chivalry. A little social system is constituted in which reciprocity of perspectives and the acceptance of rationality of the other's views are established:

Both have good arguments for explaining away discrepancies. Don Quixote admits that Sancho is not a knight and, therefore, subject to other laws; perhaps his fear prevents him from seeing and hearing right; [...] On the other hand, Sancho is inclined to believe that the Knight's misfortunes are due to the fact that he has broken a solemn oath; or perhaps that he has power over real giants, but no power at all over phantoms. (Schütz, 1964: 144)

If we use a social psychiatric terminology and transpose the situation analyzed by Schütz into the realms of medical interaction as described by Laing, we could say, that the universe of discourse established between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza is a kind of zone of interference. Neuropsychiatrist Richard Brickner (1943) calls such a zone a "clear area" in which the different perspectives of the other can be accepted as reasonable and even rational and in which both know that the other accepts and acknowledges the perspective of his partner. The clear area is a glimpse of hope, a ground of rationality and reciprocity offered by the doctor on which the relationship between doctor and patient can be based in order to make progress toward healing:

When the physician observes against a paranoid background, signs of guilt and anxiety, sudden gusts of humor, or even a restrained willingness to admit that occasionally, under very special circumstances, the patient himself may possibly be in error, he may surmise a clear area on which he can go to work. [...] If he is lucky, the identification of doctor and clear area can mean enough to the basically lonely, bewildered and unhappy patient to enable him to tolerate and digest instruction as to what is wrong with him. (Brickner, 1943: 102 sq)

The world of the madman, then, is accessible and open to some degree and common grounds between the psychiatrist and the patient can be established if the patient opens his desolate isolation and identifies with the doctor's view to some degree. To do so, the patient needs a kind of role in which he (she) can be understood and in which he (she) can understand his counterpart, the doctor. This sick role stabilizes the patient's identity and gives him a kind of substitute for his damaged self. If accepted by the patient, the sick role helps protecting ego-borders and to surmount the feeling of ontological insecurity.

When criticizing the psychiatry of his day, Ronald Laing saw doctor and patient in the situation of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as described in the third expedition. This is the situation of the breakdown of the social system and of the establishment of a deviant system of interaction.

In the second part of Cervantes’ novel that was written 10 years later, Don Quixote is known to his fellow men not only by face-to-face interaction, but through literature. An anonymous audience is informed about Don Quixote’s personality in a similar way than we
know strangers through anonymous ideal types (and the mentally ill by the description of their symptoms in psychiatric textbooks): “The anonymous audience of readers has formed an ideal type of Don Quixote’s personality and his ways of acting and reacting” (Schütz, 1964: 145).

Schütz argues that the audience of the third expedition does not engage in a relationship with Don Quixote, but they treat him in a rather fraudulent way in which they want to make him believe that he is treated in sincere and open ways. The structure of social action, then, becomes anomic. A “let’s pretend” context is established, based on strategic interaction:

In order to humor him and to establish with him a universe of discourse, they build up within the reality of their daily-life-world a world of play, of joke, of make-believe and “let’s pretend,” which, so they hope, will be taken by Don Quixote as reality in terms of his private sub-universe. (Schütz, 1964: 146).

The expectation of the public does not constitute a relationship with Don Quixote that is based on reciprocity of perspectives:

But since they never bestow upon their make-believe world the accent of reality, they cannot succeed in establishing a universe of discourse with Don Quixote and, consequently, they cannot enter into a true social relationship with him. (Schütz, 1964: 146)

And this is, according to Schütz, the reason of Don Quixote’s end. Feeling that he is not taken serious as a personality, he begins to doubt in the reality of his own sub-universe. In other words, he starts feeling ontologically insecure because his audience does not support him in the belief of his own world view: “Don Quixote starts to doubt his own identity” (Schütz, 1964: 147). Instead of opening his world in sincere ways to the audience, he feels that they close their openness toward him. The clear area which formed a role system and common ground between Sancho Panza and Don Quixote in the second episode gets lost and the social system is transformed in a deviant pattern, ruled by fraud and ritualism (the “let’s pretend” attitude). Lack of reciprocity, then, pushes Don Quixote back into a situation of isolation and desperation, similar to the situation of the divided self.

**Conclusion**

Ronald Laing introduced a revolutionary concept into the psychiatry of his day by interpreting a specific group of psychotic symptoms as functions of the interaction between doctor and patient. Laing’s framework can be approached at two levels of analysis that are represented by the sociologies of Talcott Parsons and Alfred Schütz. Parsons’ framework puts institutionalized role-based interaction systems center stage which allow for mutual understanding and reciprocity of action perspectives. It must be emphasized that interaction is not only based on a common culture (shared patterns of meaning) but also on attachment on emotional grounds, providing security and trust in the openness and the benevolence of the other as an interaction partner. Schütz focused on the same problem at the level of the time structure of consciousness. His research interest, however, is the same: how is interaction based on the common ground of shared reality (intersubjectivity) possible? While Parsons shows that social system and personality
interpenetrate in terms of roles, Schütz shows that different realities overlap and fringe into one another. These fringes are the starting point for building up the little social system that is constituted by the interaction between Sancho Panza and Don Quixote.

Discussing problems of deviance, Parsons argues that insecurity is a key explanatory factor to understand processes that lead to crime and illness. Schütz, being closer to general phenomenological issues of reality, shows how the belief in one’s self can break down under conditions of a deviant social system in Parsons’ sense, that is, a system that is not based on openness, intelligibility, and reciprocity of action perspectives, but on fraud and strategic interaction in order to make fun of and to deceive the interaction partner. In this situation, Don Quixote experiences a crisis of his identity which does not only denote insecurity concerning the intentions of his interaction partners but also (ontological) insecurity concerning his identity.

In Ronald Laing’s description of the divided self, the relationship between the two levels of analysis of Schütz and Parsons becomes evident. Psychiatric diagnosis and treatment are based on the interaction system between doctor and patient and on the fringes or clear areas where the consciousness of intersubjectivity can be established between them. From Parsons’ viewpoint, roles must be established with which the doctor and the patient can identify, but these roles cannot be institutionalized and generalized in everyday life directly. They must spark off in the interaction situation between the psychiatrist and the patient based on the psychiatrist’s understanding of the meaning of symptoms communicated by the patient. Like Parsons, Laing emphasizes that the actor’s (the patient’s) point of view has to be taken seriously whose symptoms have to be understood as functions of social interaction. Psychiatry is not a technique of ascribing symptoms to patients (labeling), but a non-coercive form of rational action, based on trust and reciprocity (influence), making it an epitome of democracy and modern society.

The re-interpretation of Laing’s concept of ontological insecurity by the sociologies of Parsons and Schütz differs from the use of the term in the vein of Giddens in some important aspects. Giddens, Bauman, and others are interested in the erosion of the routine grounds of everyday life and its effects on the constitution of self and society. Laing’s psychiatric thought seen through the lenses of the sociologies of Schütz and Parsons, however, focuses on the difference between integrated and anomic social systems. Schütz and Parsons emphasize rationality and reciprocity as the hallmarks of social action in modern society and analyze the emotional and cognitive relationships between ego and alter in the context of this type of society. The social systems constituted by the relationships between doctor and patient and between Sancho and Don Quixote are two significant paradigms. But they also address anomic interaction systems as their counterpart, systems which Schütz and Parsons witnessed as researchers and as citizens in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, in Germany under National Socialist regime.

References


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