The 'sick role' revisited. Understanding and misunderstanding Parsons’ contribution

In 1951 social scientist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) published his book *The Social System*. Chapter X deals with the social system that regulates the rights and duties of both patient and physician. It is one of the few occasions in which Parsons offers a concrete and detailed analysis, and it is no coincidence he chose ‘modern medical practice’ as his target. During the 1930s he had done research on health care economics in the Boston area, which presented him with a lot of inside knowledge on the medical profession. Moreover, from a theoretical point of view he considered doctors to be the prototype of a professional role that is collectivity-oriented rather than self-oriented.

In the reception of Parsons' text, his contribution is usually narrowed down to the rights and duties attached to the 'sick role' (see for an exception Gerhardt 1989). Other important notions are neglected or unduly criticized, for instance: the psychosocial components of illness, the relation between incapacity and unconscious motivation, and the complex symbolism in the work of the medical profession. This paper deals with the lesser-known aspects of Parsons’ theory on the social system of doctor and patient, and takes a critical stance towards its reception in medical sociology. Support for the analytic power of Parsons’ approach is to be found in recent developments in health care (such as the juridification of the doctor-patient-relationship, and the renewed interest in alternative medicine).

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References


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