

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

The paper argued that society is in constant need of sociology to find solution to its numerous social problems. Sociological theory was presented as coherent ideas, organized and tested which provide logical explanations for given social phenomena. Sociological theories range from descriptions of single social processes to paradigms for analysis and interpretation. They are grouped into four theoretical traditions: functionalism, conflict, symbolic interactionism and utilitarianism the paper behaves that the trust of sociological theorizing is human social interaction or relations. It was highlighted that the main concern of sociology was the gust for social order and social control theory helps sociologists in finding solution to societal social problems. It helps sociologists in predicting future events it was further argued that sociological theories can be applied to political, economic, business, technological, socio-cultural and urban problems. Sociological theory provides society with the ingredients for explaining the nature, form or content of social action.

Introduction

A theory is a statement of how and why processes work or the world operates. Within sociology, theories attempt to explain why groups of people choose to perform certain actions and how societies function or change in a certain way. Theories are an essential part of the framework used to organize specific social phenomena within the social sciences.

It's important for social sciences, like psychology, economics, and sociology, to follow theoretical perspectives as a framework for understanding phenomena, such as the ways people form groups. Without theories, we would just have a huge list of individual tendencies, or decisions people make, or types of people, but we wouldn't have any way of organizing the field. Theories help us see overall themes across many specific types of behaviors or decisions in the social world. Examples of sociological theories include structural-functionalism, social conflict theory, symbolic interactionism and feminism, among others.

Sociologists develop theories to explain social phenomena. A theory is a proposed relationship between two or more concepts. In other words, a theory is explanation for why or how a phenomenon occurs. An example of a sociological theory is the work of Robert Putnam on the decline of civic engagement (Putnam, 2001). Putnam found that Americans involvement in civic life (e.g., community organizations, clubs, voting, religious participation, etc.) have declined over the last 40 to 60 years. While there are a number of factors that contribute to this decline (Putnam's theory is quite complex), one of the prominent factors is the increased consumption of television as a form of entertainment. Putnam's theory proposes: "The more television people watch, the lower their involvement in civic life will be".

This element of Putnam's theory clearly illustrates the basic purpose of sociological theory: it proposes a relationship between two or more concepts. In this case, the concepts are civic engagement and television watching. The relationship is an inverse one - as one goes up, the other goes down. What's more, it is an explanation of one phenomenon with another: part of the reason why civic engagement has declined over the last several decades is because people are watching more television. Putnam's theory clearly contains the key elements of a sociological theory,

Sociological theory is developed at multiple levels, ranging from grand theory to highly contextualized and specific micro-range theories. There are many middle-range and micro-range theories in sociology. Sociological theories are dependent on context and specific to certain situations. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the saying that sociological theory is dead.

Sociological Theory Explained

According to Scott & Marshall (2005:662), "a theory is an account of the world which goes beyond what we can see and measure". It embraces a set of interrelated definitions and relationships that organizes our concepts of and understanding of the empirical world in a systematic way. For clarity, however, a theory refers to a set of coherent ideas, organized and tested, and which provide a logical and a possible explanation for a given social phenomenon.

The focus of sociological theory is on human social interaction or relations. According to Charles (2010:8), the desire for an orderly and progressive society as well as an orderly and progressive man has been the main thrust of sociological theorizing. Even, early philosophers including Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau etc, were preoccupied with the problems of society and man. Sociological theory could be said to have its origin in the Hobbesian problem of order and social control — "How can order and sanity be maintained in society to avoid a state of normlessness and instability, while ensuring the development of such society?" Sociological theory is a set of assumptions, assertions, and propositions used in explaining the nature, form, or content of social action. According to Max Weber, social action is action that takes others into account. At the individual or group level this refers to interpersonal influence: how people are affected by co-present others or the expectations associated with generalized others, so that they dress, talk, and act in predictable ways.

Sociological theories are statements of how and why particular facts about the social world are related (Macionis and Gerber, 2010). They range in scope from concise descriptions of a single social process to paradigms for analysis and interpretation. Some sociological theories explain aspects of the social world and enable prediction about future events (Keel, 2002), while others function as broad perspectives which guide further sociological analyses (Calhoun, 2002). A sociological theory is a set of ideas that provides an explanation for human society. Theories are selective in terms of their priorities and perspectives and the data they define as significant. As a result they provide a particular and partial view of reality. Sociological theories can be grouped together according to a variety

of criteria. The most important of these is the distinction between Structural and Social action theories.

Kenneth Allan proposed the distinction between sociological theory and social theory. In Allan's usage, sociological theory consists of abstract and testable propositions about society. It often heavily relies on the scientific method, which aims for objectivity, and attempts to avoid passing value judgments. In contrast, social theory, according to Allan, focuses on commentary and critique of modern society rather than explanation (Allan, 2006). Social theory is often closer to Continental philosophy; thus, it is less concerned with objectivity and derivation of testable propositions, and more likely to pass normative judgments (Sanderson, 2006).

Prominent sociological theorists include Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton, Randall Collins, Samuel Coleman, Peter Blau, Niklas Luhmann, Marshal McLuhan, Immanuel Wallerstein, George Homans, Harrison White, Theda Skocpol, Gerhard Lenski, Pierre van den Berghe and Jonathan H. Turner. Prominent social theorists include: Jirgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, Dorothy Smith, Alfred Schlitz, Jeffrey Alexander, and Jacques Derrida. There are also prominent scholars who could be seen as being in-between social and sociological theories, such as Harold Garfinkel, Herbert Blumer, Claude Levi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman (Sanderson, 2006).

The field of sociology itself-and sociological theory by extension-is relatively new. Both date back to the 18th and 19th centuries. The drastic social changes of that period, such as industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of democratic states caused particularly Western thinkers to become aware of society. The oldest sociological theories deal with broad historical processes relating to these changes. Since then, sociological theories have come to encompass most aspects of society, including communities, organizations and relationships (Calhoun, 2002).

The contemporary discipline of sociology is theoretically multi-paradigmatic (Abend, 2008). In Randall Collins¹ well-cited survey of sociological theory, he retroactively labels various theorists as belonging to four theoretical traditions: functionalism, conflict, symbolic interactionism, and utilitarianism (Collins, 1994). Modern sociological theory descends predominately from functionalist (Durkheim) and conflict-centered (Marx and Weber) accounts of social structure, as well as the symbolic interactionist tradition consisting of micro-scale structural (Simmel) and pragmatist (Mead, Cooley) theories of social interaction. Utilitarianism, also known as "rational choice" or "social exchange", although often associated with economics, is an established tradition within sociological theory. Lastly, as argued by Raewyn Connell, a tradition that is often forgotten is that of social Darwinism, which brings the logic of Darwinian biological evolution and applies it to people and societies. This tradition often aligns with classical functionalism and is associated with several founders of sociology, primarily Herbert Spencer, Lester F. Ward and William Graham Sumner. Contemporary sociological theory retains traces of each of these traditions and they are by no means mutually exclusive.

Structural functionalism

A broad historical paradigm in sociology and anthropology, functionalism addresses the social structure as a whole and in terms of the necessary function of its constituent elements. A common analogy (popularized by Herbert Spencer) is to regard norms and institutions as 'organs' that work toward the proper-functioning of the entire 'body' of society (Urry 2000).

The perspective was implicit in the original sociological positivism of Comte, but was theorized in full by Durkheim, again with respect to observable, structural laws. Functionalism also has an anthropological basis in the work of theorists such as Marcel Mauss, Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown. It is in Radcliffe-Brown's specific usage that the prefix 'structural' emerged. Classical functionalist theory is generally united by its tendency towards biological analogy and notions of social evolutionism. As Giddens states: "Functionalist thought, from Comte onwards, has looked particularly towards biology as the science providing the closest and most compatible model for social science. Biology has been taken to provide a guide to conceptualizing the structure and the function of social systems and to analyzing processes of evolution via mechanisms of adaptation ... functionalism strongly emphasizes the pre-eminence of the social world over its individual parts (i.e. its constituent actors, human subjects) (Giddens, 1996).

Conflict Theory

Social conflict is the struggle between segments of society over valued resources (Aghababa, 2011). From the perspective of social conflict theory, in the West, by the nineteenth century, a small population had become capitalists. Capitalists are people who own and operate factories and other businesses in pursuit of profits. In other words, they own virtually all large-scale means of production. However, capitalism turned most other people into industrial workers, whom Marx called proletarians. Proletarians are people who, because of the structure of capitalist economy, must sell their labor for wages. Conflict theories draw attention to power differentials, such as class, gender and race conflict, and contrast historically dominant ideologies. It is therefore a macro level analysis of society that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and social change (Macionis and Gerber, 2010). Karl Marx is the father of the social conflict theory, which is a component of the four major paradigms of sociology. Other important sociologists associated with this theory include Harriet Martineau, Jane Addams and W. E. B. Du Bois. This sociological approach doesn't look at how social structures help society to operate, but instead looks at how "social patterns" can cause some people in society to be dominant, and others to be oppressed. However, some criticisms to this theory are that it disregards how shared values and the way in which people rely on each other help to unify the society (Macionis and Gerber, 2010).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interaction; often associated with Interactionism, Phenomenological sociology, Dramaturgy, Interpretivism, is a sociological tradition that places emphasis on subjective meanings and the empirical unfolding of social processes, generally accessed through analysis. The approach focuses on creating a framework for building a theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals. Society is nothing more than the shared reality that people construct as they interact with one another. This approach sees people interacting in countless settings using symbolic communications to accomplish the tasks at hand. Therefore, society is a complex, ever-changing mosaic of subjective meanings (Macionis, 2012). Some critics of this approach argue that it only looks at what is happening in a particular social situation, and disregards the effects that culture, race or gender (i.e. social-historical structures) may have in that situation (Macionis and Gerber, 2010). Some important sociologists associated with this approach include Max Weber, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman,

George Romans and Peter Blau. It is also in this tradition that the radical-empirical approach of Ethnomethodology emerges from the work of Harold Garfinkel.

Feminism

Feminist theory offers a perspective for understanding human behavior in the social environment by centering women and issues that women face in contemporary society. Feminism reflects "a world view that values women and that confronts systematic injustices based on gender" (Chinn & Wheeler, 1985: 74). A feminist lens asks us to see individuals, groups, family, and organizations in their social, political, economic, ethnic, and cultural contexts. The intersection of these contexts produces the potential for oppression that is rooted in gendered relationships (Lay and Daley, 2007).

Feminist sociology is a conflict theory and theoretical perspective which observes gender in its relation to power, both at the level of face-to-face interaction and reflexivity within a social structure at large. Focuses include sexual orientation, race, economic status, and nationality. At the core of feminist sociology is the idea of the systematic oppression of women and the historical dominance of men within most societies: 'patriarchy'. Feminist thought has a rich history, however, which may be categorized into three 'waves'. The current, 'third wave', emphasizes the concepts of globalization, postcolonialism, post-structuralism and postmodernism. Contemporary feminist thought has frequently tended to do-away with all generalizations regarding sex and gender, closely linked with antihumanism, posthumanism, queer theory and the work of Michel Foucault (Mahony and Zmroczek. (1997); Ritzer and Goodman, 2004).

Feminist theory is a way of looking at the social world through the lens of gender inequality. The focus is on male and female power. Feminist theory addresses the roles women have in society and the ongoing battles women face. Most importantly, this way of thinking about the social world focuses on the rights of women, including: economic, sexual, reproductive, property, and voting rights. Riley (1999) lists three assumptions of feminist theory thus: gender is an organizing principle of all societies; gender is a social construction; gender theory necessarily involves the politics of inequality. Chafetz (1997) adds a fourth assumption: men and women think differently. Scientific assumptions, according to Chafetz (1978), are taken-for-granted truths about the world that do not need to be confirmed. Assumptions serve as the building blocks of theories.

Feminist theory uses the conflict approach to examine the reinforcement of gender roles and inequalities. Conflict theory posits that stratification is dysfunctional and harmful in society, with inequality perpetuated because it benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. Radical feminism, in particular, evaluates the role of the patriarchy in perpetuating male dominance. In patriarchal societies, the male's perspective and contributions are considered more valuable, resulting in the silencing and marginalization of the woman. Feminism focuses on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on the assertion of male supremacy.

Feminism has evolved in different arenas rather than as one unified concept. The labels that define those arenas have varied. The most commonly used are eight separate feminist theories: black feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, lesbian feminism, liberal

feminism, Marxist feminism, materialist feminism, and socialist feminism (Andermahr, Lovell, & Wolkowitz, 1997; Evans, 1995).

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is often referred to as exchange theory or rational choice theory in the context of sociology. This tradition tends to privilege the agency of individual rational actors and assumes that within interactions individuals always seek to maximize their own self-interest. As argued by Josh Whitford, rational actors are assumed to have four basic elements, the individual has (1) "a knowledge of alternatives," (2) "a knowledge of, or beliefs about the consequences of the various alternatives," (3) "an ordering of preferences over outcomes," (4) "A decision rule, to select amongst the possible alternatives" (Macionis and Gerber, 2010). Exchange theory is specifically attributed to the work of George C. Homans, Peter AU and Richard Emerson. Organizational sociologists James G. March and Herbert A. Simon noted that an individual's rationality is bounded by the context or organizational setting. The utilitarian perspective in sociology was, most notably, revitalized in the late 20th century by the work of former ASA President James Coleman.

Is Sociological Theory Dead: Assessing the Importance of Theory

Sociological theories are not dead, but are still used to establish relationship or correlation between two or more variables and explain social events and phenomena. The Putnam's theory of civic engagement cited in the introduction section of this paper has two components: the data, which refer to the findings that civic engagement has declined and TV watching has increased, and the proposed relationship, which shows that the increase in television viewing has contributed to the decline in civic engagement (Putnam, 2001). Data alone are not particularly informative. If Putnam had not proposed a relationship between the two elements of social life, we may not have realized that television viewing does, in fact, reduce people's desire to find time for participating in civic life. In order to understand the social world around us, it is necessary to employ theory to draw the connections between seemingly disparate concepts.

Another example of sociological theorizing illustrates this point. In his own classic work, *Suicide*, Emile Durkheim was interested in explaining a social phenomenon, suicide, and employed both data and theory to offer an explanation.

By aggregating data for large groups of people in Europe, Durkheim was able to discern patterns in suicide rates and connect those patterns with another concept (or variable): religious affiliation. Durkheim found that Protestants were more likely to commit suicide than were Catholics. At this point, Durkheim's analysis was still in the data stage; he had not proposed an explanation for the different suicide rates of the two groups. It was when Durkheim introduced the ideas of anomie and social solidarity that he began to explain the difference in suicide rates. Durkheim argued that the looser social ties found in Protestant religions lead to weaker social cohesion and reduced social solidarity. The higher suicide rates were the result of weakening social bonds among Protestants (Durkheim, 1997).

While Durkheim's findings have since been criticized, his study is a classic example of the use of theory to explain the relationship between two concepts. Durkheim's work also illustrates the importance of theory: without theories to explain the relationship between concepts, we would not be able to hypothesize cause and effect relationships in social life or outline processes whereby social events and patterns occur. And to propose cause and effect

relationships and/or outline processes in social experience are the major components of sociological theory.

The availability of theories, however, keeps us in a state of readiness to offer and apply these solutions or remedies whenever we are confronted with such problems under available conditions. In addition, theories are useful to sociologists in a number of ways: a good theory helps sociologists in predicting future events; theory generates new ideas, which may be similar to or different from existing ones; if a theory is critically analysed and discussed or investigated, a new theory could emerge in the process; Theory can suggest hypotheses (Skidmore, 1979); and theory strives to elaborate facts between different empirical situations.

According to <https://www.booktopia.com.>, sociology was in serious trouble in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Harvard University was down to only 67 students majoring in sociology in 1992. Yale's department faced a 40% cut in faculty and near extinction. In the last decade, Washington University (St. Louis, MO) and the University of Rochester shut down their departments. George Washington University (Washington, D.C.) regrouped in order to stave off further cuts. However, in the past decade, sociology has surged back and become more important than ever to policy makers and pundits. Almost all Nigerian universities and institutions of higher learning offer sociological courses. Sociological theories can be applied to a host of contemporary political, economic, business, technological, socio-cultural and urban issues or problems, among others. Thus, sociology and sociological theories are not dead. They play critical or essential role in the society.

Conclusion

A theory refers to a set of coherent ideas, organized and tested, and which provide a logical and a possible explanation for a given social phenomenon. Sociological theories are statements of how and why particular facts about the social world are related. They range in scope from concise descriptions of a single social process to paradigms for analysis and interpretation. Some sociological theories explain aspects of the social world and enable prediction about future events, while others function as broad perspectives which guide further sociological analyses. A sociological theory is a set of ideas that provides an explanation for human society. Theories are selective in terms of their priorities and perspectives and the data they define as significant. As a result they provide a particular and partial view of reality. Sociological theories can be grouped together according to a variety of criteria. The most important of these is the distinction between Structural and Social action theories.

The focus of sociological theory is on human social interaction or relations. According to Charles (2010:8), the desire for an orderly and progressive society as well as an orderly and progressive man has been the main thrust of sociological theorizing. Even, early philosophers including Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau etc, were preoccupied with the problems of society and man. Sociological theory could be said to have its origin in the Hobbesian problem of order and social control - "How can order and sanity be maintained in society to avoid a state of normlessness and instability, while ensuring the development of such society?"

Sociology is a very important discipline the world over because of its usefulness in society. The availability of sociological theories, however, keeps us in a state of readiness to

offer and apply these solutions or remedies whenever we are confronted with such problems under available conditions. In addition, sociological theories are useful to sociologists in a number of ways: a good theory helps sociologists in predicting future events; theory generates new ideas, which may be similar to or different from existing ones; if a theory is critically analysed and discussed or investigated, a new theory could emerge in the process; theory can suggest hypotheses; and theory strives to elaborate facts between different empirical situations.

Because of its importance, almost all Nigerian universities and institutions of higher learning offer sociological courses. Sociological theories can be applied to a host of contemporary political, economic, business, technological, socio-cultural and urban issues or problems, among others. Thus, sociology and sociological theories are not dead. They play critical or essential role in the society.

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