Introduction to Sociology/Sociological Theory

Introduction

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 a phenomenon occurs. An example of a sociological theory is the work of Robert Putnam on the decline of civic engagement.[1] Putnam found that Americans involvement in civic life (e.g., community organizations, clubs, voting, religious participation, etc.) has 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 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. In short, Putnam's theory clearly encapsulates the key ideas 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. Because such theories are dependent on context and specific to certain situations, it is beyond the scope of this text to explore each of those theories. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce some of the more well-known and most commonly used grand and middle-range theories in sociology.

**Importance of Theory**

In the theory proposed above, the astute reader will notice that the theory includes two components: The data, in this case the findings that civic engagement has declined and TV watching has increased, and the proposed relationship, that the increase in television viewing has contributed to the decline in civic engagement. 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 and 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 now 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.

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 understand cause and effect relationships in social life. And to find the cause and effect relationship is the major component of the sociological theory.

**Prominent Sociological Theories**

As noted above, there are many theories in sociology. However, there are several broad theoretical perspectives that are prominent in the field (they are arguably paradigms). These theories are prominent because they are quite good at explaining social life. They are not without their problems, but these theories remain widely used and cited precisely because they have withstood a great deal of criticism.
As the dominant theories in sociology are discussed below, you might be inclined to ask, "Which of these theories is the best?" As is often the case in sociology, just because things are different doesn't mean one is better than another. In fact, it is probably more useful and informative to view these theories as complementary. One theory may explain one element of society better than another. Or, both may be useful for explaining social life. In short, all of the theories are correct in the sense that they offer compelling explanations for social phenomena.

**Structural-Functionalism**

*Structural-Functionalism* is a sociological theory that originally attempted to explain social institutions as collective means to meet individual biological needs (originally just *functionalism*). Later it came to focus on the ways social institutions meet social needs (*structural-functionalism*).

Structural-functionalism draws its inspiration primarily from the ideas of *Emile Durkheim* [3]. Durkheim was concerned with the question of how societies maintain internal stability and survive over time. He sought to explain social cohesion and stability through the concept of *solidarity*. In more "primitive" societies it was *mechanical solidarity*, everyone performing similar tasks, that held society together. Durkheim proposed that such societies tend to be segmentary, being composed of equivalent parts that are held together by shared values, common symbols, or systems of exchanges. In modern, complex societies members perform very different tasks, resulting in a strong interdependence between individuals. Based on the metaphor of an organism in which many parts function together to sustain the whole, Durkheim argued that modern complex societies are held together by *organic solidarity* (think interdependent organs).

The central concern of structural-functionalism is a continuation of the Durkheimian task of explaining the apparent stability and internal cohesion of societies that are necessary to ensure their continued existence over time. Many functionalists argue that social institutions are functionally integrated to form a stable system and that a change in one institution will precipitate a change in other institutions. Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs that function like organisms, with their various parts (social institutions) working together to maintain and reproduce them. The various parts of society are assumed to work in an unconscious, quasi-automatic fashion towards the maintenance of the overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as being functional in the sense of working together to achieve this state and are effectively deemed to have a life of their own. These components are then primarily analysed in terms of the function they play. In other words, to understand a component of society, one can ask the question, "What is the function of this institution?" A function, in this sense, is the contribution made by a phenomenon to a larger system of which the phenomenon is a part. [4]

Thus, one can ask of education, "What is the function of education for society?" The answer is actually quite complex and requires a detailed analysis of the history of education (see, for instance, this article on the history of education), but one obvious answer is that education prepares individuals to enter the workforce. [5][6] By delineating the functions of elements of society, of the social structure, we can better understand social life.
Durkheim's strongly sociological perspective of society was continued by Radcliffe-Brown. Following Auguste Comte, Radcliffe-Brown believed that the social constituted a separate level of reality distinct from both the biological and the inorganic (here non-living). Explanations of social phenomena therefore had to be constructed within this social level, with individuals merely being transient occupants of comparatively stable social roles. Thus, in structural-functionalist thought, individuals are not significant in and of themselves but only in terms of their social status: their position in patterns of social relations. The social structure is therefore a network of statuses connected by associated roles.

Structural-functionalism was the dominant perspective of sociology between World War II and the Vietnam War.

**Limitations**

Structural-functionalism has been criticized for being unable to account for social change because it focuses so intently on social order and equilibrium in society. For instance, in the late 19th Century, higher education transitioned from a training center for clergy and the elite to a center for the conduct of science and the general education of the masses. In other words, education did not always serve the function of preparing individuals for the labor force (with the exception of the ministry and the elite). As structural-functionalism thinks about elements of social life in relation to their present function and not their past functions, structural-functionalism has a difficult time explaining why a function of some element of society might change or how such change occurs. However, structural-functionalism could, in fact, offer an explanation in this case. Also occurring in the 19th Century (though begun in the 18th) was the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution, facilitated by capitalism, was increasingly demanding technological advances to increase profit. Technological advances and advanced industry both required more educated workforces. Thus, as one aspect of society changed - the economy and production - it required a comparable change in the educational system, bringing social life back into equilibrium.

Another philosophical problem with the structural-functional approach is the ontological argument that society does not have needs as a human being does; and even if society does have needs they need not be met. The idea that society has needs like humans do is not a tenable position because society is only alive in the sense that it is made up of living individuals. Thus, society cannot have wants and/or needs like humans do. What's more, just because a society has some element in it at the present that does not mean that it must necessarily have that element. For instance, in the United Kingdom, religious service attendance has declined precipitously over the last 100 years. Today, less than 1 in 10 British attend religious service in a given week. Thus, while one might argue that religion has certain functions in British society, it is becoming apparent that it is not necessary for British society to function.

Another criticism often leveled at structural-functionalist theory is that it supports the status quo. According to some opponents, structural-functionalism paints conflict and challenge to the status quo as harmful to society, and therefore tends to be the prominent view among conservative thinkers.

**Manifest and Latent Functions**
Merton (1957) proposed a distinction between manifest and latent functions. Manifold functions are the intended functions of a phenomenon in a social system. Latent functions are the unintended functions of a phenomenon in a social system. An example of manifest and latent functions is education. The manifest purpose of public education is to increase the knowledge and abilities of the citizenry to prepare them to contribute in the workforce. A latent function of the public education system is the development of a hierarchy of the learned. The most learned are often also the most affluent. Thus, while education's manifest function is to empower all individuals to contribute to the workforce and society, it also limits some people by creating boundaries of entry into occupations.

Conflict Theory

A prominent sociological theory that is often contrasted with structural-functionalism is conflict theory. Conflict theory argues that society is not best understood as a complex system striving for equilibrium but rather as a competition. Society is made up of individuals competing for limited resources (e.g., money, leisure, sexual partners, etc.). Broader social structures and organizations (e.g., religions, government, etc.) reflect the competition for resources in their inherent inequalities: some people and organizations have more resources (i.e., power and influence) and use those resources to maintain their positions of power in society.

Conflict theory was developed in part to illustrate the limitations of structural-functionalism. The structural-functionalist approach argued that society tends towards equilibrium, focusing on stability at the expense of social change. This is contrasted with the conflict approach, which argues that society is constantly in conflict over resources. One of the primary contributions conflict theory presents over the structural-functional approach is that it is ideally suited for explaining social change, a significant problem in the structural-functional approach.

The following are three primary assumptions of modern conflict theory:

- Competition over scarce resources is at the heart of all social relationships. Competition rather than consensus is characteristic of human relationships.
- Inequalities in power and reward are built into all social structures. Individuals and groups that benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained.
- Change occurs as a result of conflict between competing interests rather than through adaptation. Change is often abrupt and revolutionary rather than evolutionary.

A heuristic device to help you think about society from a conflict perspective is to ask, "Who benefits from this element of society?" Using the same example as we did above, we can ask, "Who benefits from the current higher educational system in the U.S.?" The answer, of course, is the wealthy. Why? Because higher education in the U.S. is not free. Thus, the educational system often screens out poorer individuals not because they are unable to compete academically but because they cannot afford to pay for their education. Because the poor are unable to obtain higher education, this means they are also generally unable to get higher paying jobs which means they remain poor. This can easily translate into a vicious cycle of poverty. Thus, while the function of education is to educate the workforce, it also has built into it an element of conflict and inequality, favoring one group (the wealthy) over other
groups (the poor). Thinking about education this way helps illustrate why both structural-functionalist and conflict theories are helpful in understanding how society works.

Conflict theory was elaborated in the United Kingdom by Max Gluckman and John Rex, in the United States by Lewis A. Coser and Randall Collins, and in Germany by Ralf Dahrendorf, all of whom were influenced by Karl Marx, Ludwig Gumplovicz, Vilfredo Pareto, Georg Simmel, and other founding fathers of European sociology.

Limitations

Not surprisingly, the primary limitation of the social-conflict perspective is that it overlooks the stability of societies. While societies are in a constant state of change, much of the change is minor. Many of the broader elements of societies remain remarkably stable over time, indicating the structural-functional perspective has a great deal of merit.

As noted above, sociological theory is often complementary. This is particularly true of structural-functionalism and social-conflict theories. Structural-functionalism focuses on equilibrium and solidarity; conflict-theory focuses on change and conflict. Keep in mind that neither is better than the other; when combined, the two approaches offer a broader and more comprehensive view of society.

Symbolic Interactionism

In contrast to the rather broad approach toward society of structural-functionalism and conflict theory, Symbolic Interactionism is a theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between humans and society. The basic notion of symbolic interactionism is that human action and interaction are understandable only through the exchange of meaningful communication or symbols. In this approach, humans are portrayed as acting as opposed to being acted upon.\[11\]

The main principles of symbolic interactionism are:\[12\]

1. human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them
2. these meanings arise of out of social interaction
3. social action results from a fitting together of individual lines of action

This approach stands in contrast to the strict behaviorism of psychological theories prevalent at the time it was first formulated (in the 1920s and 1930s). According to Symbolic Interactionism, humans are distinct from infrahumans (lower animals) because infrahumans simply respond to their environment (i.e., a stimulus evokes a response or stimulus -> response) whereas humans have the ability to interrupt that process (i.e., stimulus -> cognition -> response). Additionally, infrahumans are unable to conceive of alternative responses to gestures. Humans, however, can. This understanding should not be taken to indicate that humans never behave in a strict stimulus -> response fashion, but rather that humans have the capability of not responding in that fashion (and do so much of the time).
This drawing illustrates the idea of the "looking-glass self" by illustrating that we can internalize how other people view us and then reflect upon those external appraisals without having to actually converse with others.

This perspective is also rooted in phenomenological thought (see social constructionism and phenomenology). According to symbolic interactionism, the objective world has no reality for humans, only subjectively-defined objects have meaning. Meanings are not entities that are bestowed on humans and learned by habituation. Instead, meanings can be altered through the creative capabilities of humans, and individuals may influence the many meanings that form their society. Human society, therefore, is a social product.

Neurological evidence based on EEGs supports the idea that humans have a "social brain," that is, there are components of the human brain that govern social interaction. These parts of the brain begin developing in early childhood (the preschool years) and aid humans in understanding how other people think. In symbolic interactionism, this is known as "reflected appraisals" or "the looking glass self" and refers to our ability to think about how other people will think about us. A good example of this is when people try on clothes before going out with friends. Some people may not think much about how others will think about their clothing choices, but others can spend quite a bit of time considering what they are going to wear. And while they are deciding, the dialogue that is taking place inside their mind is usually a dialogue between their "self" (that portion of their identity that calls itself "I") and that person's internalized understanding of their friends and society (a "generalized other"). An indicator of mature socialization is when an individual quite accurately predicts how other people think about him/her. Such an individual has incorporated the "social" into the "self."

It should also be noted that symbolic interactionists advocate a particular methodology. Because they see meaning as the fundamental component of human and society interaction, studying human and society interaction requires getting at that meaning. Thus, symbolic interactionists tend to employ more qualitative rather than quantitative methods in their research.

**Limitations**

The most significant limitation of the symbolic-interactionist perspective relates to its primary contribution: it overlooks macro social structures (e.g., norms, culture) as a result of focusing on micro-level interactions. Some symbolic interactionists, however, would counter that if role theory (see below) is incorporated into symbolic interactionism - which is now commonplace - this criticism is addressed.
Role Theory

Another more micro-oriented approach to understanding social life that also incorporates the more structural elements of society is Role Theory. Role theory posits that human behavior is guided by expectations held both by the individual and by other people. The expectations correspond to different roles individuals perform or enact in their daily lives, such as secretary, father, or friend. For instance, most people hold pre-conceived notions of the role expectations of a secretary, which might include: answering phones, making and managing appointments, filing paperwork, and typing memos. These role expectations would not be expected of a professional soccer player.

Individuals generally have and manage many roles. Roles consist of a set of rules or norms that function as plans or blueprints to guide behavior. Roles specify what goals should be pursued, what tasks must be accomplished, and what performances are required in a given scenario or situation. Role theory holds that a substantial proportion of observable, day-to-day social behavior is simply persons carrying out their roles, much as actors carry out their roles on the stage or ballplayers theirs on the field. Role theory is, in fact, predictive. It implies that if we have information about the role expectations for a specified status (e.g., sister, fireman, prostitute), a significant portion of the behavior of the persons occupying that position can be predicted.

What’s more, role theory also argues that in order to change behavior it is necessary to change roles; roles correspond to behaviors and vice versa. In addition to heavily influencing behavior, roles influence beliefs and attitudes; individuals will change their beliefs and attitudes to correspond with their roles. For instance, someone over-looked for a promotion to a managerial position in a company may change their beliefs about the benefits of management by convincing him/herself that they didn’t want the additional responsibility that would have accompanied the position.

Many role theorists see Role Theory as one of the most compelling theories bridging individual behavior and social structure. Roles, which are in part dictated by social structure and in part by social interactions, guide the behavior of the individual. The individual, in turn, influences the norms, expectations, and behaviors associated with roles. The understanding is reciprocal.

Role Theory includes the following propositions:

1. people spend much of their lives participating as members of groups and organizations
2. within these groups, people occupy distinct positions
3. each of these positions entails a role, which is a set of functions performed by the person for the group
4. groups often formalize role expectations as norms or even codified rules, which include what rewards will result when roles are successfully performed and what punishments will result when roles are not successfully performed
5. individuals usually carry out their roles and perform in accordance with prevailing norms; in other words, role theory assumes that people are primarily conformists who try to live up to the norms that accompany their roles
6. group members check each individual's performance to determine whether it conforms with the norms; the anticipation that others will apply sanctions ensures role performance

Limitations

Role theory has a hard time explaining social deviance when it does not correspond to a pre-specified role. For instance, the behavior of someone who adopts the role of bank robber can be predicted - she will rob banks. But if a bank teller simply begins handing out cash to random people, role theory would be unable to explain why (though role conflict could be one possible answer; the secretary may also be a Marxist-Communist who believes the means of production should belong to the masses and not the bourgeoisie).

Another limitation of role theory is that it does not and cannot explain how role expectations came to be what they are. Role theory has no explanation for why it is expected of male soldiers to cut their hair short, but it could predict with a high degree of accuracy that if someone is a male soldier they will have short hair. Additionally, role theory does not explain when and how role expectations change.

Impression Management

An extension of role theory, impression management is both a theory and process. The theory argues that people are constantly engaged in controlling how others perceive them. The process refers to the goal-directed conscious or unconscious effort to influence the perceptions of other people by regulating and controlling information in social interaction. If a person tries to influence the perception of her or his own image, this activity is called self-presentation.

Erving Goffman (1959), the person most often credited with formally developing impression management theory, cast the idea in a dramaturgical framework. The basic idea is that individuals in face-to-face situations are like actors on a stage performing roles (see role theory above). Aware of how they are being perceived by their audience, actors manage their behavior so as to create specific impressions in the minds of the audience. Strategic interpersonal behavior to shape or influence impressions formed by an audience is not a new idea. Plato spoke of the "great stage of human life" and Shakespeare noted that "All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players".

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a school of thought introduced into sociology by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann with their 1966 book The Social Construction of Reality. Social constructionism aims to discover the ways that individuals and groups create their perceived reality. Social constructionism focuses on the description of institutions and actions and not on analyzing cause and effect. Socially constructed reality is seen as an on-going dynamic process; reality is re-produced by people acting on their interpretations of what they perceive to be the world external to them. Berger and Luckmann argue that social construction describes both subjective and objective reality - that is that no reality exists outside what is produced and reproduced in social interactions.
A clear example of social constructionist thought is, following Sigmund Freud[18] and Émile Durkheim,[19] religion. Religion is seen as a socially constructed concept, the basis for which is rooted in either our psyche (Freud) or man's need to see some purpose in life or worship a higher presence. One of the key theorists of social constructionism, Peter Berger, explored this concept extensively in his book, *The Sacred Canopy*.\[20\]

Social constructionism is often seen as a source of the postmodern movement, and has been influential in the field of cultural studies.

**Integration Theory**

Recently, some sociologists have been taking a different approach to sociological theory by employing an integrationist approach - combining micro- and macro-level theories to provide a comprehensive understanding of human social behavior. Numerous models could be presented in this vein. George Ritzer's\[21\] Integration Model is a good example.

Ritzer proposes four highly interdependent elements in his sociological model: a macro-objective component (e.g., society, law, bureaucracy), a micro-objective component (e.g., patterns of behavior and human interaction), a macro-subjective component (e.g., culture, norms, and values), and a micro-subjective component (e.g., perceptions, beliefs). This model is of particular use in understanding society because it uses two axes: one ranging from objective (society) to subjective (culture and cultural interpretation); the other ranging from the macro-level (norms) to the micro-level (individual level beliefs).
The integration approach is particularly useful for explaining social phenomenon because it shows how the different components of social life work together to influence society and behavior.

If used for understanding a specific cultural phenomenon, like the displaying of abstract art in one's home, the integration model depicts the different influences on the decision. For instance, the model depicts that cultural norms can influence individual behavior. The model also shows that individual level values, beliefs, and behaviors influence macro-level culture. This is, in fact, part of what David Halle finds: while there are art consumption differences based on class, they are not predicted solely by class. Displayers of abstract art tend not only to belong to the upper-class, but also are employed in art-production occupations. This would indicate that there are multiple levels of influence involved in art tastes – both broad cultural norms and smaller level occupational norms in addition to personal preferences.

References

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