

Introduction

Sociology can be defined as the study of human beings as social animals, it is a scientific study of social phenomenon, human interaction and culture, and it attempts to explain the social worlds of individuals and groups and how they interact. Sociological theory attempts to look beyond common sense explanations.

Sociology as with other social sciences has its roots in philosophy and has developed theories to explain behaviour and relationships within society.

Sociology can be divided into two main camps, structural and action theories. This essay will attempt to explain these theories within different aspects of society, how they affect society as a whole. It will then go on to evaluate the strengths and weakness within the theories.

The consensus theory is a study of society as a whole (the Macro sociology). It focuses on what binds society together and existence of consensus (agreement) with societies made up of various social institutions.

Emile Durkheim (1855-1917), the founder of the functionalist theory believed that society was a complex economic system with a sophisticated division of labour; he saw the division of labour as social institutions. Durkheim sought to comprehend the utility of social and cultural traits by explaining them in terms of their contributors to the cooperation of an over all system, the cohesive bonds of social order and how the loss of the commonly held values leads to social instability and disorientation of the individual. Durkheim sees social norms as the regulating of peoples behaviour by means of institutionalised values. He attempted to establish sociology as a science by explaining a distinct reality separate from individuals and restraining their behaviour, this most famous methodology was that social facts must be considered as things. Durkheim applied this principle to social integration. Durkheim believed that once socialisation has taken place and the value of consensus has been embraced that this would bring social order to society.

Religion, education and laws are also used to maintain social order and are considered stable forces within society. Religion strengthens social solidarity and promotes value consensus, it brings people together reinforcing social morals and values. Religious ceremonies within the community cement the collective consciousness.

The family system, bringing children up to respect social values, by teaching them the norms of behaviour, eating, sleeping at the appropriate times, disciplining them and giving them the love and encouragement that they need to help them integrate with society.

The education system builds upon the work done within the family, educating to the norms of society.

The religious system, teaching moral and spiritual values, and the

Political systems, where politicians decide what policies to govern its country by.

Everyone in society accepts the values and morals thus ensuring the continuous functioning of society and its well being. Children are brought up to be sociable and accept law-abiding behaviour and to know which behaviours are acceptable and which are not. This sense of right and wrong is carried throughout life through adulthood and instils order and cooperation within society with everyone knowing what role they are expected to play. The functionalist has always been criticized as an ideology that glorifies the status quo and that it pays little attention to conflict and change as essential features of life, it simplifies the relationship between the individual agency and the structures of social action.

Conflict theorists argue against consensus and instead suggest social order is founded on coercion and that society is based on unequal divisions in society. Functionalism assumes homogeneity of interests between different groups in society.

Karl Marx(1818-1883) was a revolutionary who thought that society was fundamentally flawed, different parts of society being in conflict with each other. Marx theory was that there were two lines of division among the conflicting social interests, the theory of economics which turns the wheels toward a desired outcome and that all forms of property are upheld by the

coercive power of the state classes formed by the property division. The bourgeoisie, the owners of production and the proletariat the non owners. Marx believed the violent social coercion by those in power could be challenged by revolution, an uprising of the working classes would bring a freer, fairer social order which would mean the people rising up to sweep away social inequalities and build a new social organisation. Marx argued that social power is economic power his theory was based on the study of class conflict. His view was that society would not have a class system at all if everyone owned all property in a shared wealth system and would create a more egalitarian system.

The strengths and weaknesses of the consensus and conflict theories

Consensus theorists assume that societies are based on consensus, they assume that every one agrees on important perceptions, sentiments and values. Consensus theorists believe that societies cannot survive unless their members share at least some of the common sets of values, attitudes and perceptions and there is an over emphasis placed on these beliefs. The theory does not take into account that people may not want to be involved in interest groups and may prefer to take a more apathetic stance. Conflict theorists recognise that there has to be a level of agreement between members of society so as to interact with one another but have the view that individuals, classes and groups within society are in competition with each other. Consensus theorists assume homogeneity of interest through shared values whereas conflict theorists argue that society is heterogeneous in nature and is characterised by competing interest groups. Consensus theorists assume that disorder is a result of anomie (lack of regulation and values) which serves a purpose and brings about repair, however the conflict theorist would say that disorder is as a result of disagreement between the haves and the have nots and the oppressed must push for radical change. Consensus theorists would say society is maintained by the collective consciousness in contrast the conflict theorist would say it is a direct result of the dominant ideology.

The underlying conflict theory

The main conflict theorists are fundamentally concerned with the study of social power and the struggles that take place within society. Society is made up of infrastructure and superstructures that are designed to maintain power between the social classes. The infrastructure is the inner framework of society and the superstructure the institutions such as government and police etc.

The feminist theory also comes under the heading of conflict theories; it is based on the inequality of women, the male domination and exploitation within society and seeks to redress this inequality through reform. Marxist feminism focuses on the belief that capitalism is the main cause of woman's suppression, the patriarchy as a multi layered system of oppression of gender. The women were denied the basic right of education and excluded from reason. Women's oppression is a result of class inequality in exploitative societies; women are defined as purely domestic labourers providing cheap labour for the economy. Feminist Marxists examine the role of ideology within patriarchal societies.

Liberal feminists believe that gender inequalities in society are as a result of sexism and discrimination against women. Liberalists believe that cultural stereotyping has deprived women of their individual rights, legal equality and equal opportunities. The aim of liberal feminists is to fight for changes to the laws and legislations and to achieve this pressure groups have been founded to pressurise the government into making those changes. Liberal feminists believe women should be free and be as equal as men are in a capitalist society.

Structural theories are the external social forces that shape human behaviour within social institutions such as family, education, religion and political beliefs and ideas. Structural theories work on a macro level and the emphasis is on the larger social systems and structures that shape an individual's behaviour.

Action theory is human behaviour to which is attached subjective meaning. Social action theory can be related to the past, present or future behaviour of others. Action theory is the opposite of structural theory and is viewed on the micro level of sociology study. It is a panoramic view of society, and the results of people's conscious social action.

Action theory is the analysis of action starting with the individual actor. There are two main forms of action theory, the hermeneutic and the positivist and both are also closely related to the doctrine of symbolic interactionism.

Phenomenology comes under the heading of action theories it is the study of how people perceive things and how individuals or groups make sense of

the world that they live in. Phenomenologists look at the way people react in their customs and cultures and how human actions are acted out in a taken for granted way which if challenged, generates anxiety and discomfort. Phenomenologists believe society is fragile and tentative and constantly being realised by Individuals.

Ethnomethodology refers to the study of the methods people use to make sense of the social world they are part of its function is to find out how members of society perceive and act upon the social world they live in. the view is that society is constantly being made by people in their everyday actions.

Max Weber (1864-1920) attempts to provide a bridge between structural and action theories, that strengths could be a weakness. His approach has lead to the development of conservative thought in sociology. His focus on motive as inciting behaviour overlooks the roll of external social forces. Weber's focus on types of authority overlooks the roll that ideology and power play in determining who holds positions of authority. His concept of Verstehen encourages empathetic or the use of empathy in the social sciences.

Weber developed a comprehensive and coherent framework of social science, which recognised the problems of the interpretation of the social action. He argued that sociology could not develop the concepts of the state and family unless they could be stated in the terms of individual action. Sociology had to look at understanding the meaning of actions.

Weber distinguished four types of action theories.

Traditional- actions, which are performed because they have been performed in the past.

Affectual- actions to express emotions.

Instrumental- action in which the actor compares different means to a goal and assess the utility of the goal itself.

Value rationality- the actor takes the goal as an end in itself and may not even compare the different means to the goal.

Weber believes that the four types of action theories are ideal and it is empirically possible for actions to be a mix of one or more types.

Most social scientists agree that action theory provides the underlying framework for the social sciences in general. We focus on action logic as a formal language because actions are the key to understanding social phenomena.

The interactionist approach has been applied to the education system in the 1960's there was a study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1967) which applied the interactionist theory. The experiment was to find out if encouraging children to think that they were special and had potential to do well would influence them. They took random children of varying ability and after a year they found that the encouragement worked and the children singled out had indeed done very well and some even increased their IQ. They concluded that instead of concentrating efforts on the children that in the schools opinion 'deserved' their attention leaving the out the other children who were not doing quite so well was wrong and that all children had the potential to do well and so deserved the same chances in life.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the assumption that social reality is a social construction and that individuals define, interpret and negotiate in social interactions. The theory is dynamic in nature, it is based on the theory that life is a repeating cycle of people interacting with one another and trying to understand the meanings behind behaviour and actions. Language is the most important factor of symbolic interactionism although other forms of communication such as body language and the way a person dresses are important too, and it is the combination of these things which affect how individuals react to each other. Symbolic interactionists believe in a theory of self concept which is, how people look at themselves and how they can manipulate or change their own self concept depending on the situation that they are in or who they are interacting with. Symbolic interactionism allows an individual to make sense of their world and how they choose to act and behave can have an effect on society itself.

George Herbert Mead(1863-1931) focuses on symbolic interactionism, which is interaction using symbols conveying a conceptual meaning for example object names such as table, chair etc. Mead looks at symbols as representative such as police uniforms convey a meaning of law and order. Meanings have to be shared in order to be understood, symbols in the form of language are fundamental to human survival. Mead believes in his theory of Mind, Self and society that self exists as a separate and relatively consistent phenomenon and that individuals have self-concept, self-image and self esteem and is shaped by the perception of how others see them.

Labelling theory was significantly influenced by symbolic interactionism. Labelling is giving identity to ones self or having one imposed upon you. The labelling theory of deviant behaviour in criminals can be applied to individuals or groups who display a heterogeneous category of behaviour. Labelling can affect a person's behaviour; To label a person "insane" may affect the recovery of that person and may represent an important stage in the process of becoming mentally ill.

Conclusion

Social actions should be the focus of sociology as there is a need to understand the meanings of behaviour and to recognise the impact social structures have in shaping societies behaviour. Therefore the structural and action theories are relevant in evaluating a complete view on the mechanism which is society.

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Bibliography

Sweeney, Tony; Lewis, John; Etherington Neil: *Sociology and Scotland*. Unity Publications 2003.

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Class handouts and class notes.

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