

SOCI302/322
PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

Session 2: THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF THE
PERSPECTIVES

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2014/2015 – 2016/2017

Session Overview

OVERVIEW

In Session 1 we attempted to explain what a sociological perspective is. We also argue that sociology is a discipline of different perspectives or paradigms. This session presents two philosophical traditions: positivism and phenomenology that shape theorizing about society, social phenomena and human behaviour or action. These two philosophies have also influenced the conduct of social research in the social sciences in general: the quantitative and qualitative approaches or the “hard” and “soft” approaches to research.

Goals and Objectives

- At the end of the session, the student will be able to
- Gain understanding of the two major philosophical approaches to discovering reality or knowledge production: positivism and phenomenology
- Explain the various concepts and ideas associated with them
- Show how they influence theories and the perspectives as well as research strategy

Session Outline

The Session is divided into two topics. They are :

- Topic One : The philosophy of Positivism

- Topic Two : The philosophy of Phenomenology

Reading List

- Calhoun, Craig, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Seven Pfaff, and Idermohan Virk (2002). *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
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- Cuff E. C., W. W. Sharrock & D. W. Francis (1990), *Perspectives in Sociology*. 3rd Edition. London: Unwin Hyman
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- Edles, Laura Desfor and Scott Appelrouth (2010). *Sociological Theory in the contemporary era: Text and readings*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Sage
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- Farganis, James. (2011). *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism*. 6th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
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- Turner, Jonathan H. (1998). *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 6th Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
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- Ritzer, George (2008). *Sociological Theory*. 8th Edition or any newer or earlier editions. New York: McGraw Hill.
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- Wallace, Ruth A. and Alison Wolf (1995) *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Continuing the Classical Tradition*. 4th Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
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Topic One: The Philosophy of Positivism

- **Positivism** is a philosophy of science that assumes that the reactions or behaviour of objects and living things are greatly influenced by external forces or stimuli. We see this view clearly exhibited in the methods of the natural sciences, for example in chemistry, when the reaction of a particular chemical when subjected to heat is observed and measured or when two chemical are joined together they produce a compound.
- With the aid of measurement techniques, it is possible to come out with statements or laws that establish cause and effect relationship among these chemicals or variables. For example, when iron (a variable) is exposed to air, particularly oxygen (another variable) the result is oxidation or what we call in everyday language as rust. The iron rusts. Or again when water is heated and it boils, it turns into vapour and when the vapour condenses it turns into liquid. Once we can prove that these reactions are the same under fixed conditions, a law or theory can be generated to explain these reactions. These types of statements or laws are usually universal so long as they apply in all situations under similar conditions throughout the world.
- This positivistic approach has found its way into sociology as some sociologists view human beings and their behaviour as influenced mainly by the structures and institutions of society (external factors) and for that matter individuals' feelings, motives, their interpretations of events and situations as well as subjective states do not really matter in explaining human behaviour. Thus the attempt to apply natural science methods and logic in sociology is what is known as



Topic One: The Philosophy of Positivism (cont'd)

- Auguste Comte (1789-1857) who is credited to have coined the term sociology and regarded as one of the founding fathers of the discipline maintained that the application of the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences would lead to the development of a **positive science of society**. Comte believed that just as the natural sciences have discovered laws governing or explaining nature, so would sociology also discover the social laws to explain the functioning and dynamism of society. Comte believed that sociological laws or theories would reveal that the evolution of society followed **invariable laws**. According to Comte, social laws would also show that human behaviour was also largely governed by principles of cause and effect (i.e. human behaviour is caused by something external) that were just as invariable as the behaviour of matter, the subject of the natural sciences.
- **Positivism** in sociology assumes that human behavior is mainly determined by external factors; that is, people like matter, just react to external stimuli and so their behaviours are reactions to stimuli. It is in this respect that we say that Durkheim was a positivist. Remember that Durkheim was of the view that society through its cultural norms and values, institutions, its level of integration and regulation, to a great extent determines human behaviour. Again it is in this respect that Durkheim's **Suicide** is regarded as a classic positivistic study in sociology. Many of the system theories we shall look at in this book such as **Structural Functionalism** (which sees human behaviour as determined mainly by values and norms or the requirements of society) and Marxism (which sees human behaviour as determined by economic forces or one's location in the economy) are all positivistic in orientation.

Topic Two

The Philosophy of Phenomenology

- **Phenomenology** is a philosophical perspective developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and was developed within sociology by Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), a pupil of Husserl. As explained by Haralambos and Holborn (1995) phenomenology emphasizes the internal workings of the mind and the way people classify and make sense of the world around them. According to phenomenologists, individuals only come into contact with the outside world and its physical objects through sensory perceptions: touch, smell, hearing, sight and taste.
- According to the phenomenologists, because the objects of the world are numerous, humans are confronted with uncountable and unintelligible mass of sense experiences and impressions of colours, lights, shapes, feelings, tastes, etc. that are meaningless and difficult to grasp. In order to overcome this problem humans begin to organize their world into phenomena: they classify their sense experiences into things that appear to have common characteristics. In other words, they classify their world and its physical objects into categories for manageable comprehension. For example, all vegetations would be classified into evergreen forest, semi-deciduous forest, savannah, grassland and so on, or all water bodies into seas, rivers, lakes, ponds, etc. These objects could be re-classified into other sub-categories.

Phenomenology (cont'd)

- Husserl did not believe that this process is in any way objective. The classification according to him is entirely the work of the human mind and we cannot be sure whether these classifications are true or false. He acknowledged the existence of physical objects beyond and outside the human mind, but he maintained that since people could only come into contact with them through their senses, they could never be sure about their true nature.
- Thus in trying to secure knowledge about their world, humans had to “bracket” reality and common sense beliefs: to put them inside brackets and forget about whether they were true or false (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995:898). In every day life for example, we adopt this approach when we interact with people from different ethnic backgrounds: in the US statements such as “all blacks are like that”, in Ghana all “Ashantis or all Ewes are like that” often define how members of particular races or ethnic groups react or will react to others they consider as members of their out-groups. Because we do not know all people from particular group and practically cannot know them all we create a safe zone for ourselves by classifying them into certain categories and these become common-sense knowledge we have about them whether the categorizations are true or false.

Phenomenology (cont'd)

- Given this understanding from the phenomenologists, there is nothing like objective reality or knowledge and so they argue that it is impossible to measure human behaviour objectively. Humans make sense of their world through the process of categorization. Through language they distinguish among different types of objects, events, actions and people.
- Categorization therefore is subjective and is dependent on the opinion of those doing the observation. Thus for phenomenologists, it is impossible to produce factual or objective data because of subjectivity problems; we cannot produce and check causal relationships. Phenomenologists are therefore interested in definition of objects and situations and not explaining causal relationships (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995:16). Phenomenological views have influenced the development of a sociological perspective known as symbolic interactionism (how we interpret interaction situations and actions of others) but particularly **Ethnomethodology** which are all discussed in the other sessions.

Phenomenology (cont'd)

- A closely related but slightly different perspective to phenomenology is **Social Action Perspective**. Like phenomenologists, social action advocates disagree with **Positivism** by arguing the subject matter of the sociology and the natural sciences is fundamentally different. As a result the assumptions and methods of the natural sciences are inappropriate for studying humans in society. It is argued that the natural scientists deal with matter that have no feelings, moods, thinking ability, etc. thus it is appropriate to observe matter and explain their behaviour from outside. Atoms and molecules do not have minds, consciousness and no meanings and purposes that direct their behaviours. Matter simply reacts “unconsciously” to external stimuli, in scientific language, matter is said to “behave”. For this reason, the natural scientists can observe, measure and impose an external logic on that behaviour in order to explain it (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995:16). Natural scientists do not need to explore the internal logic of the consciousness of the matter they study because it is non-existent.
- Humans beings however have consciousness—thoughts, feelings, understandings, meanings, intentions and awareness of existence and of being. Because humans have minds and are thinking beings their actions are meaningful. They define and evaluate situations, they give meanings to situations and their actions and those of others, they consider given lines of action and their possible consequences and then initiate **appropriate** action. They simply do not respond to external stimuli as positivists would want us to believe. They do not simply behave, they act. If our actions stem from our subjective meanings and definitions of situations then according to the social action advocates sociologists should investigate the meanings that underlie human actions. For this reason, sociologists should not observe action from outside and impose an external logic on it. Rather they must interpret the internal logic or motive that directs the actions of actors.

Phenomenology (cont'd)

- **Max Weber (1864-1920)** was one of the first sociologists to outline the possibility of this perspective. Weber argued that sociological explanations of action should begin with “the observation and theoretical interpretation of the subjective states of minds of actors”. Weber argued that sociologists can derive an understanding of their subject matter in a manner that is unavailable to natural scientists such as biologists, chemists and physicists. Sociologists have an advantage of examining the subjective “meanings” individuals attach to their interactions with others. Hence Weber argued that sociologists should study the intensions, values, beliefs and attitudes that underlie human behaviour.
- Weber used the German word **Verstehen** meaning “understanding” or “insight” in describing the approach he was prescribing for the study of the subjective meanings people attach to their actions. This means that sociologists should mentally attempt to put themselves in other peoples’ shoes and determine how they think, feel and why they behave in different ways. Since it is not possible to get inside the heads of the actors, the discovery of meaning must be based on interpretation and intuition. For this reason, it is impossible to measure objectively with exactitude the meanings behind human action. Meanings are also fluid and are constantly being negotiated in interaction contexts and for that matter it is also impossible to establish cause and effect relationships. Thus where positivists emphasize facts and cause and effect relationships, social action advocates emphasize meanings and understandings. This way of thinking about individuals and their actions has also influenced a theoretical perspective known as **Symbolic Interactionism** which is discussed in other sessions.

Phenomenology (cont'd)

- The sociologist, Peter Berger seems to have simplified the two theoretical traditions when he observed that with positivism and the theories that developed from it, society is seen as a puppet theatre with its members portrayed as little puppets jumping about on the ends of their invisible strings, cheerfully acting out the parts that have been assigned to them. Meaning it seems as if society has instilled in its members values, norms and roles and human dutifully respond like marionettes (Haralambos and Holborn, 1995).
- On the other side of the theoretical divide , Berger maintains, are the social action theorists and phenomenologists who maintain that humans do not simply react and respond passively to external society, they rather actively construct society through their interactions and meanings they generate.

Session Summary

In this session have learnt about two philosophies that have influenced interpretation of reality and for that matter the perspective and theory construction These are:

The philosophy of Positivism influenced the development of structural functionalism, Marxism, Neo-Marxism, Critical theory, etc.

The philosophy of Phenomenology influenced the development of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology