

SCS 100 Project 3 | Alexander Ahmann

My inquiry concerning the subject of sociology is “do companies exploit social and economic justice movements to sell their products?” [1] This is a significant question as it can potentially explain how capitalists gain power [2] by establishing phony friendships with their customers. From my experience in this course, I have come to the conclusions that: both implicit and explicit biases affect our judgment of others, and that capitalists will exploit said biases to make a profit. [3] Specifically, the question is important to myself because I do see myself promoting for-profit companies that “piggyback” social and economic justice causes, and I would like to use the information learned from the solution to this problem to reduce that kind of behaviour.

The study of sociology has undergone an evolution, starting with a man who was willing to challenge religious doctrine. *Mandeville* (1732) introduced the virtue of selfishness [4] in his poem *The Fable of the Bees*, which argued that society needed some level of criminality and corruption to thrive. Mandeville inspired free-market economists such as Adam Smith, and is perhaps the first classical sociologist. Later, the philosopher August Comte argued that sociology should resemble physics, and even called the study “social physics.” Comte theorised that all scientific knowledge went through three stages: a theological stage, a metaphysical stage, and finally, a positivist stage. [5] This philosophy became known as *logical positivism*. Later, Karl Marx attempted to put theories of socialist economics [6] onto a scientific basis. Marx did this through his method of dialectical materialism, [7] in where Marx postulated that material wealth, as opposed to ideals, is the primary influence of real-world conditions. Later, Karl Popper and Max Weber would criticise both Marx’s dialectic materialism and Comte’s logical positivism. Popper devised the notion of falsification as the standard of scientific knowledge (*Popper, 2002*) and Max Weber argued for a value-free sociology, which culminated to *quantitative, empirical, post-positivist* social science. Today, critical theorists, social constructionists

and post-modernists believe that positivism, whether logical positivism or post-positivism, are reductionistic and over-simplified. They argue for a subjective approach that emphasises the experiences of the individual. These thinkers are also against grand theories that attempt to explain a social phenomena, and opt for aggregating multiple perspectives and explanations for social phenomena.

The study of psychology, alongside the study of sociology, also evolved. In fact, the evolution of the epistemological approaches to psychology almost mirror that of sociology. The first modern psychologists started out as philosophers, and included many famous thinkers like Rene Descartes and Christian Wolff. Crainometry and Phrenology were early theories that attempted to explain how the brain worked, [8] and Sigmund Freud developed psychoanalysis in an attempt to diagnose the unconscious mind and help those who suffered from poor mental health. [9] Around the same time, Francis Galton devised a set of statistical techniques for studying human behaviour, which eventually led to the creation of the biostatistical interpretation of genetics and the field of psychometrics. A class of applied biologists called eugenicists developed hereditarian theories of human behaviour, such as how recessive single-genes cause “various forms of insanity, feeble-mindedness, epilepsy etc.” [10] Twentieth-century psychologists also developed a construct of general intelligence by a statistical procedure called factor-analysis (*Gould, 1996*) in where the correlations between performances on specific cognitive ability tests are reduced into a single dimension called the *g-factor*. Both the hereditarian interpretation of human behaviour and the *g-factor* were discredited (*Ibid*), and the more sophisticated theory of interactionism was developed (*South et al, 2008*). Later, humanistic notions of psychology that emphasise the individual and free-will were developed.

Studying human behaviour is valuable to both the society and individual because understanding it will allow us to solve problems pertaining to helping disabled individuals and disadvantaged groups. While IQ testing does have its flaws, it can, nonetheless, be useful when diagnosing learning disabilities within individuals. [11] When considering the sociological and policy making dimensions

of society, we know from social science research (*Cushing et al, 2015*) demonstrated that ethnic are the most affected by environmental health hazards. This research can better inform policy makers and the community at large on how to help the ones most affected by environmental damage. Social science research can also assist with activism. A study conducted (*Vasi et al, 2015*) demonstrated how social media can be used to disseminate activism materials, in this case media against the fracking industry. Activists can use this model as a “stepping stone” by which to plan future campaigns.

Social science has evolved in the face of contemporary society, computers and the internet. The sociologist Robert Putnam discussed how increased usage of computers, the internet and “virtual reality” will lead to a decrease in social capital (*Putnam, 2000*). The consequences of this decrease in social capital has the potential to lead to the rise in despots and authoritarians, such as Donald Trump. [12] Because of the increased use of computers, social scientists will need to adapt and begin studying human behaviour on the internet. For example, a group of sociologists studied sexism in video games (*Kasumovic et al, 2015*) and literature has been published discussing how to data mine social media for social science research and journalism (*Vo, 2020*). What is more interesting is that new questions of ethics is being opened up as a result of a computer-focused society. *O’Neil (2016)* discussed the limitations of mathematical modelling and data mining, and how ethics are very important when working with quantitative models.

Back to my question “do companies exploit social and economic justice movements to sell their products?” Knowing the answer to this question can be beneficial to society for a number of reasons. First off, knowing when someone or some entity is exploiting a social and economic justice movement to influence others, whether to buy a product or for other motives, can be a useful exercise in critical thinking. Also, knowing when salespeople are trying to sell someone a product on the basis of social justice can be useful as knowing this information can be leveraged by consumers to know to avoid them. [12] The social sciences can be used to answer all kinds of questions that pertain to human activity, and answers to such questions can be potentially used to improve the quality of society.

Footnotes

1. Ahmann (Mar 25, 2020)
2. In a capitalistic system, money implies power; see Marx (1974). If companies can sell their products by forging “friendships” with their consumers, they can potentially get more revenue which implies a larger profit.
3. For example, advertisers tend to exploit the biases and prejudices that the populace holds in order to sell their products (Jacqueline Leshan, *personal communications*).
4. Centuries before Ayn Rand wrote *Atlas Shrugged*!
5. The original writings of Comte was synthesized to a “more complete” volume by Harriet Martineau; see Comte et al (1893)
6. Socialism is the economic system which states that the means of productions must be democratically controlled.
7. Engles et al (n.d.).
8. These theories have since been shown to be unscientific.
9. Psychoanalysis is more “controversial” than unscientific. It does seem to be useful today for therapists, but the post-positivists don’t think that it is scientific because of its inability to be falsified; see Grünbaum (1977) for a discussion.
10. <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/static/images/1081.html>
11. Although caution should be used when interpreting the results. Some argue that IQ testing is irrelevant to disability testing (see Elliott et al, 2015), however Gould (1996) has argued that it can be useful in this context. It is of my opinion that clinical psychologists should not focus on the overall g as much as performances on specific sub tests.
12. see <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/how-the-collapse-of-communities-gave-us-trump>
13. Or act in a way that best aligns with their values.

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