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Exercise 8: Read "Consequences of Realism for Sociological Theory-Building" by Thomas Brante (especially pages 178-185) and indicate your understanding if different layers of social analysis by looking at an IT related problem and demonstrate how analysing it through international, inter-institutional, institutional, inter-individual and individual layers would help us in understanding the problem.

International (also: global) layer

Mirrors the global perspective covering nations as well as transnational companies and organizations and is led by political system studies (imperialism, colonialism, etc.) and peace- and conflict research analyzing dependencies between participating parties (autonomous systems from national layer).

Inter-institutional (also: national) layer

Within this layer societal and institutional orders are contrasted by focusing on historical and social development studies. Different viewpoints are taken allowing a broader analysis of how institutionalized relations interact. Study targets are generally characterized by territory, cultural and political identity, economy and a law system.

Institutional layer

The institutional layer analyses formal or informal statuses and positions of participants in society as well as certain networks highlighting hierarchies and relations within and between those. Most of those relations are referred to as institutional (family, work, school, etc.).

Inter-individual layer

This layer elaborates on interaction patterns between individuals finding rituals and rules for those. Additionally behavior in conversations may be covered.

Individual layer

The individual layer focuses on how people define and ground their individual appearance and behavior (attitudes, intentions, dispositions, habitus, etc.) within social context.

What the fuck? [1]

The five layers may be studied relative autonomously. Rules and mechanisms are rather not interchangeable between layers and, therefore, need separate and isolated consideration. The division of social actors and networks into layers allows studying the targeted object on an isolated level, without the need to understand its relation to other upper or lower layers. Research on the latter relations may be postponed until a deeper understanding of those relations has been achieved by separated independent studies.

On the other hand, taking upper or lower layers into account may help understanding context and processes and should not be neglected. Still, the analysis may focus on a level at a time as different sociology techniques and methods are used depending on the layer.

Integrating research into a classification model not only allows concretization of research methods and concepts used for analysis, but also facilitates comparisons of multiple studies layer-wise. Thus multi-level analysis allows gaining more reliable results as each layer can be *proved* and compared rather independently forming an overall system.

Therefore there is a general advantage of analyzing social phenomena within this or similar frameworks separating the layer's internal binding, which defines its autonomy, and the inter-layer linkage (micro-macro-interplay).

As with all socio-technical studies also IT-related research benefits from those frameworks. Depending on the concrete questions (*target group? impact on processes and relations? etc.*), which should be answered, a more precise focus (*which layer?*) can be set leading to more accurate results.

If, for example, the impact of the introduction of email should be analyzed the target relation has to be specified (private vs. work utilization). Depending on this context the relation (cp. inter-individual layer) may be influenced by different aspects of the institutional layer (family vs. work institution) as well as individual characteristics may unfold a greater impact on the communication medium's use if the usage reason is private rather than official. Thus the upper layer describes the broader context whereas the lower one features the participating actors and their autonomic appearance and behavior. The layer to be analyzed, finally, provides the structural context – the relationship.

Cool article :)

[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZp4r_CecP8