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What is Sociology?

Notes

Introduction

- Sociology is the study of human social life, it has many sub-sections, ranging from the analysis of conversations to the development of theories to try to understand how the entire world works.
- society changes over time, sociology is rooted in significant societal changes, it was an attempt to understand these changes
- some early sociologists include Marx, Weber and Durkheim
- they employed *sociological imagination*: the ability to situate personal troubles within an informed framework of social issues (after C. Wright Mills)
- Sociological imagination enables understanding larger historical schemes in terms of their meaning for the inner and outer life of individuals
- Wright Mills said people need to be able to use information and reason to understand the world and themselves
- stepping outside of their personal worldview and seeing what influences behavior, attitudes and culture
- sociological imagination is more than common sense, it's based on science, not feelings
- sociological theories are tested and proven/disproves using scientific methods
- Sociology == putting social events into their environment and trying to understand social phenomena by collecting and analysing empirical data

History

- it emerged in the early 19th century in response to modernity
- more cultural exposure, breakdown of traditional norms and customs -> nuanced understanding of the world was needed
- Sociology tries to understand the how and why of this development
- Sociology was coined by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) in 1838, meaning study of companion(ship)
- he argued for The Law of Three Stages:
 - theological stage: religious view of society
 - metaphysical stage: society understood as natural
 - positivist stage: pinnacle of social development, society is governed by reliable knowledge and is understood through science, primarily sociology
- other classical theorists are Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Ferdinand Toennies, Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, Max Weber
- most of them were not trained Sociologists, but historians, philosophers, economists, thus they researched a variety of topics, but most only left impressions on Sociology
- in the 1890s, the first books and university courses on Sociology started appearing in the USA and Europe, later in the 1920s some appeared in Germany and Poland
- during this time, multiple international Associations of Sociologists were founded

- because many early sociologists were from other sciences, they stressed the importance of the scientific method and employed similar methods to natural sciences. This set Sociology apart from theology, philosophy and metaphysics
- this led to it being accepted as an empirical science
- later Weber developed a concept of *Verstehen* (understanding), which is more subjective
- today there is quantitative sociology (meaning of social phenomena using numbers and quantities) and qualitative sociology (understanding social phenomena), and both are often used in conjunction with each other
- social science diverges from Humanities in the fact that it emphasizes the scientific method or other rigorous standards of research
- with Isaac Newton there was a new concept of what was *science* and what were humanities, such that pressure was put on other disciplines to use mathematical relationships to express ideas
- Sociology was one of the first disciplines to embrace this
- statistical research became more common at the beginning of the 20th century
- Freud and James were pioneers in combining scientific inquiry with exploration of human relationships
- John Dewey formulated three phases of inquiry:
 - problematic situation with inadequate typical response
 - isolation of data or subject matter
 - reflective, which is tested empirically
- this signaled a development from humanities to social sciences

Sociology Today

- Sociology holds a niche for the study of social life
- some topics: macro-structures that organize society (race, gender, social class, ethnicity, family etc.), social processes that break down macro-structures (deviance, crime, divorce), micro-processes (interpersonal interactions, socialization of individuals)
- Sociology has historically been a very western discipline

Questions

1. *What is Sociology?*

Sociology is the study of human interaction, social life and the processes that shape individuals and societies

2. *Describe the process of professionalization of sociology.*

Because the first sociologists were trained in other, generally scientific disciplines, they put great emphasis on scientific and empirical methods in their research, which helped separate sociology from other disciplines of the humanities that do not do this. Early sociologists were trying to research the drastic societal changes that took place in their time and doing so with scientific methods paved the way for sociology to be accepted as a scientific discipline. John Dewey's three phases of inquiry describe this process well (see History towards the end)

3. *How is sociology related to other sciences?*

When it comes to studying humans and their actions, Psychology looks at it at the smallest scale, generally on an individual level. Sociology goes beyond that and examines how groups of people behave and what shapes them or how they shape each other. Economics looks at how groups of people and other entities handle wealth and production, Political Science concerns itself with the study interactions of even larger groups of people: communities, cities, states, countries and international organizations. As far as research methods go, Sociology is similar in nature to how Physics and other natural sciences handle research, a legacy from its early days when most Sociologists came from those disciplines.

4. *What do you think of Comte's Law of Stages?*

I think that his stages make sense at first glance. Roughly speaking, the first two stages fit the conception of history most people have. But of course it is way too simplistic to be correct. I know too little about history to refute his first two points using facts, but I would say that the third stage is too idealistic to be correct in any case. I can not imagine that there will ever be a time when society is governed by reliable knowledge and understood only through science. Even today, in a time where we are very technologically and scientifically advanced (definitely metaphysical stage)

society is still in many cases ruled by people's feelings and opinions, even though those opinions may be scientifically proven to be incorrect (e.g. the existence of climate change, or the (lack of) effectiveness of repressive laws and prison systems). Thus I would say that his third stage will probably never actually happen. It would be nice, but I do not think that it is realistic.

5. *What is the scientific stage according to Comte?*

The scientific stage is the final stage of societal development, where society is governed by scientific knowledge and understood through the lens of science. This stage seems utopian, as nice as it could be, I do not believe this stage can become reality yet. I am also sceptical of the idea that there can be a world where humans put aside their opinions and feelings and only follow science and reason. That seems non-human to me. It might also deprive us of empathy and have us at the mercy of science, which, as much as we try, might be incorrect. As good as science and the scientific method are at finding the truth, they can be wrong or just applied incorrectly, even if it's just by accident. Thus I think blindly trusting science is never a good idea.

6. *What is the significant trend of sociological research currently?*

Recently, sociologists have realized that sociology has historically been a very Western science, it generally ignored other regions of the world. This realization led to sociologists focusing on non-Western societies and broadening their research to gain a better understanding of them. This goes back to the roots of sociology, trying to understand the changes societies go through, and with globalization today there may be more change than ever before.

News

“Boris Johnson Finds His Party Loyalists Aren't as Loyal as Trump's” - New York Times 08.09.2019

- over the past years Britain and the USA had very similar populist views and strategies, but recently there has been a divide
- while Trump has almost no dissenting voices in his party, Johnson was recently blocked in his plan to withdraw from the EU even without a deal, he expelled 21 members of his own party in response
- this 'rebellion' is threatening his hold of power and might be a lesson to dispirited Republicans
- MPs actually spoke out instead of being complicit, like dissenting Republicans
- the big difference is attributed to the magnitude of the threat of a no-deal Brexit, which might be catastrophic
- Republicans do not see Trump as a comparable threat to the US and still largely agree with his policies, so they do not rebel on the same level
- Trump has a tight hold of the Republican Party, one that Johnson lacks
- Trump got elected and has his 4 year term safe, while Johnson is much more dependent on other parties and people, also he lacks the same kind of grass roots movement Trump has
- maybe if Trump proposed something similarly radical as the UK is facing, Republicans would rise against him, but for now they seem content with the way things are going