

AN OVERVIEW OF PERSPECTIVES AND THEORIES IN SOCIOLOGY

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Abstract

This study which is on perspectives and theories in Sociology, discussed the various paradigms and theories in the sociological enterprise and affirmed that perspectives and theories are nets neatly cast to catch what people perceive as the real world: to rationalize, explain, embellish and master it. It argued that theories also create a clear picture of the real world, to make it finer. Sociology, theory, sociological theory, sociological perspective and models were some of the related concepts examined in the study. Macro, middle-range and micro sociological theories were also clearly distinguished. The study majorly engaged in a critical analysis of various perspectives and theories such as evolutionism, functionalism, structuralism, conflict (Marxism), ethnomethodology and phenomenology, among others. Theories and perspectives and their various points of convergent and divergence were further interrogated. The study concludes that different perspectives and theoretical debates should be encouraged in academic sociology, as such divergent views and debates have the capacity to enhance the growth of scientific sociology.

Keywords: Theories; Real World; Scholarly debates; Sociology; Sociological Perspectives.

Introduction

Sociology is the scientific discipline that studies human societies and cultures. Sociologists make observations about the various events which occur in different societies and they write down their experience and impressions. In Sociology, experts may also conduct reliable and valid research in various aspects of human societies and their different cultures. And also engaged in writing down their various account of incidence on phenomenon observed as proof of their results. This scenario represents various ways of sociologically periscoping societies and their cultures. Scientific sociology is founded on the premise that the social world is orderly; that social life-like natural realm-is patterned, and hence, amenable to generalization and prediction. Incidentally, there have been substantial disagreements among theorists and Methodists concerning how to go about identifying the science of society. A new theory is frequently presented which promises to explain some phenomena better than an established theory. In the process, new views continually emerge in sociology (Okereke, 2008).

Paradigms, perspectives, approaches, model and schools of thought proliferate with competing claims. Almost all of the specific views have important implications for the nature of sociological theory in terms of its form, range, and the ease with which its basic concepts must be measurable. Apparently, crisis looms large in the discipline as any rational coherent thought is hindered in the situation. Critics deride the state of affairs as giving "appearance of disciples of a cult rather than students of science (Vivas 1960:79). A sociological perspective is a way of viewing and examining any social phenomenon for example criminality, poverty, society, wealth, culture, the economy, man, politics, religion, with the aid of what we refer to as **concept**, this concept provide new lead or central concept which serves as the "compass" the guide, the process of viewing the subject- matter to a logical conclusion. Richard (1978), opined that the application of concepts to new situations have a gestalt character. Our view of complex set of event tends to be structured in terms of the choice of the concepts used. For example, viewing politics as *dirty* game would make the analyst to search for all that is dirty about politics. At the end of gathering all information that an analyst can find dirty about politics he would produce what could be called the "dirtiness" or "negative" view of politics.

Again, an analyst that views society from the perspective of the concept of "function" would assemble together all the nitty-gritty acts, behaviours, issues, interactions and processes that amount to "functionalism" in society or its culture. The end product of the findings of such an analyst would therefore be called "functionalist" perspective of society. However, the major merit of the perspective is that it provides humanity with the different ways suggested by some particular concepts for analyzing different aspects of subject-matters. There is no perspective that has any built-in assurance that serves as eternal and unshakable "truth" that will or can be provided by a single perspective. But instead, each perspective merely furnishes a body of data about the topic or subject-matter that corresponds to the "lead", "central", or the directing concept (Clark, 2014).

According to Igbo (2003), a theory can be explained as a set of systematically related propositions, which specify the causal relationship among some variables. It is a set of ideas which attempt to explain how a thing or something works. Human society, like any other reality (biological, environmental, physical, psychological etc), their explanation is required for us to have in-depth understanding of the way it works. When human beings understand how their society works, they can objectively predict its future patterns of social change and progress. Sociological theory performed this explanatory duty. It helped us to analyze how society as whole or different aspects of society functions. In academic sociology, there are many competing and contending theories which give various insights to the workings and nature of human society.

A sociological theory therefore connotes a body of organized ideas that is concerned with mapping, describing and providing a more plausible explanation of social relations, as they actually occurred, and not as they ought to be. The sociological point of departure is centred on social interactions and social relationship. Ritzer (1996:4), distinguished between “scientific sociological theory” and other “formal scientific theory”. He submitted that scientific sociological theory has a wide range of applications, stood the test of time and deals with centrally important issues, which formal scientific theory does not. In this study, we also add that sociological theory has other additional properties such as the ability to make prediction, being historical and comparative in scope, and can also be subjected to change.

However, the growth of sociological perspectives and theories may be viewed positively. Many are satisfied that the trend demonstrates a condition of intellectual maturity and progress. Expectedly, the competing claims would ideally be examined by research, which compares the accuracy of the predictions derived from each perspective and theory. The truth is that sociology is indeed what has been described as "a multiple paradigm science" (Masterman 1970, Ritzer 1980). Different texts reviews the main currents of thought in sociology analyzing how they diverge from each other, what the major controversies are, and how these controversies have developed. By the discussions, the predictive value of each perspective and theory would have being clearer to the readers. This study attempts a discourse on perspectives and theories in Sociology.

Discussion

Distinction between Macro, Middle-Range, and Micro Sociological Theories

Although, many authorities in sociology, such as Robert K. Merton (1957), C. Wright Mill (1958) and David Willer (1975) have classified the difference between these three categories of sociological theories. Also, the distinction between structural and social action theories is also tied to the distinction between macro, middle and micro sociological theories. Sociological theories are also sub –divided into structural and social action theories. Structural perspectives and social action perspectives differ in the way they approach the analysis of society. Structural theories analyzed the way society as a whole fit together and influence social institutions, social groups, and individuals. In contrast, social action theories refused to base their analysis of social issues upon an examination of the structure of society as a whole. Rather than seeing human behaviour as being largely determine by society, they see society as being the product of human action. Social action theories stress the meaningfulness of human action, denying that it is primarily determined by the structure of society. These types of theories are variously called social action, or interpretative, or micro-sociological theories.

What is apparent from the above discussion is that all sociological theories do not operate on the same premises and do not have the same agenda. Therefore, all sociological theories cannot and should not be lumped together under the same umbrella. Rather, it is better to examine sociological theories separately under the three categories of macro, middle-range and micro-sociological theories.

Macro Sociological theories

These are the theories that cover the entire or wide range of subject matter in sociological discipline. A macro sociological theory is an all-encompassing theory, a single unified theory, and a generalized body of explanation as to what cements a society together or destroys it, and how institutions fit or do not fit into a social framework. They are also called general or grand theories, and they include conflict and functionalist theories. Micro Sociology looks at large scale social

phenomena affecting whole populations, seeking patterns and analyzing social trends. It is generally believed that the central problem which all sociological theories focus upon and seek to address is the problem of social order. Macro Sociological theories can better be used to explain the menace of insecurity confronting contemporary Nigerian society.

Middle Range theories

Middle Range theories are those type of sociological theories that tend to cover middle-range subject matters in sociology, such as the structure and process of social and cultural activities involving social institutions, communities, formal and complex organizations, and social groups. Modern sociology identified middle-range theories to include; Emile Durkheim's theory of suicide, Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, Robert K. Merton's theory of anomie. Middle-Range theories in Sociology are generally theories that focus on a limited number of topics and provide a bridge between the micro level of individual interaction and the macro level of broad social structures. These theories are based on research data and aim to explain patterns of social behaviour. For instance Emile Durkheim applied Middle-Range theory to explain the link between Anomie and Suicide in the French society of his time. He also employed Middle-Range theories to demonstrate how the structure and culture of society exert pressure on the lower class in society as the blockage of opportunities makes them to be innovative and resort to deviant and illegal behaviours to reach their goals.

Micro Sociological theories

These are those types of theories that seek to cover micro social action, such as the interpersonal relationship/social interactions that involves mostly individual human beings in the micro social order of human societies. A micro theory is one which focuses on individuals and small groups and the interactions between them, rather than focusing on large structures, patterns and conflict across the whole of society. Micro level theories look at very specific relationships between individuals or small groups. Micro-range theories in modern sociology include; interpretive social action, symbolic interactionist, phenomenological and ethnomethodological theories (Clark, 2014). Some of these micro theories were elaborately discussed in this study.

Views on Competing Perspectives and Theories in Sociology

This section of the paper examines the major competing ways that practicing sociologists frequently use to analyze their subject matter in sociology. The focus here is on: sociological perspectives, sociological theories and sociological models. The medley of perspectives, theories and methods in sociology generate conceptual competitions on broad realms. On one realm is a bloc of differing ideas as regards the appropriate unit of analysis; the so called micro-macro controversy. On another realm are specific theories trailing one another but each possessing an outlook of a peculiar school or paradigm. Major among them are evolutionism, functionalism, structuralism and conflict theory with their emergent strains Okereke (2008).

There are also newer theories of ethnomethodology and phenomenology. Arising from the micro-macro controversy in sociology is the question of the degree of attention to be devoted explicitly to individuals. Macro sociological theories are the theories which focus upon and seek to account for widest range of social and cultural system, such as entire societies and cultures, a whole nation-states, countries and the entire world in general. Macro sociological theories in modern sociology are also called grand theories or general theories- they include; functionalism and conflict theories. Macro sociology's focal concerns are with an aggregate analysis of the

organization of society, its institutions and organizations, roles and norms. At a point, however, individuals usually enter the picture because it is the actions of individuals that ultimately provide substance to these sociological abstractions. Macro approaches entail aggregate analysis while micro approaches dissect aggregates into components.

Emile Durkheim, laid the foundational argument for macro sociology. He insists that society should be viewed as a separate external phenomenon, *Sui generis*. It is a fundamental reality of its own kind that could not be reduced to concrete individuals or to organic substances (Durkheim 1938:1953). This view had a domineering influence among the early sociologists. There were always some skeptics of course; but their voices began to grow louder in the 1960s and 1970s. George C. Homans appears to have articulated the most incisive position of the skeptics. His argument begins with "norms and roles". They are, he states, the minimum units of distinctive sociological analysis. People play roles and conform to norms because of rewards and punishments. They determine the form and content of interaction. To propose that people will select among the alternatives they perceive by choosing the one that seems most rewarding is not, Homans notes, a statement about society. Rather it is a statement "about the behaviour of individual men" (Homan 1964:814). Van de Berghe has even chipped in a new dimension to the controversy—the biological basis of social life. His message is that the super-organic quality of social life cannot be ignored, neither can the biological. The idea has introduced "sociobiology" theory (Barlow and Silverberg 1980), thus complicating the already charged debate over micro-macro sociology.

Attention now turns to specific theories. Sociological theories began with positivism. August Comte introduced it around 1830. The theory insists that social phenomena are subject to "invariable natural laws" (Comte 1854). Positivistic philosophy outlined the form and nature of sociology as a contemporary science and for long time remained influential among sociologists everywhere. The positivist method of sociology requires that human society or human behaviour be analyzed based on the principles, procedures, and methods of natural (positive) science such as physics, chemistry and biology. Comte wanted sociology to be an empirical discipline. He therefore created a positive science of society based on the application of the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences. Positivism is characterized by systematic dispassionate observation of phenomena, objective recording and measurement of data, verifiable evidence or fact. The positive approach is essentially a "system" approach. The positive stage of human mental development according to Auguste Comte, was a new era in human history that was characterized by belief in science. At this stage theological and metaphysical reasoning were abandoned and scientific methods were introduced for explaining both physical and natural phenomena in the world.

Many frequently echoed Comte's assumption that precise social laws could be discovered and that they must be usefully applied to the betterment of the society (Ward 1898). Along with positivism was the evolutionary theory. The evolutionist paradigm attempts to comprehend the whole historical development of societies from their earlier to their latest forms. The theorists reasoned that the world was evolving in a progressive direction, growing better and in the line of the natural law of society. This is what Herbert Spencer called "coherent homogeneity to incoherent heterogeneity". In the last decade of the 19th century however, there was general assault upon positivism (Hughes 1958). Almost at the same period, the "revisionist" controversy developed within Marxism. Between 1920 and 1930, some authors, notable among them Lauaterbach introduced what they claimed to be "a coherent exposition of sociological paradigms (Lauaterbach, 1933). In the 1950s, new sociological paradigms also developed in line with the sociological current of that time. Within the theoretical dimension was essentially functionalism.

Functionalism as a theoretical perspective in sociology holds a view of society as a social system that is made up of different parts that are interconnected and interdependent. These different parts of society such as; school, family, church, economy, government etc. have various roles to play towards the maintenance, survival and stability of the social system.

The Functionalist perspective equates society with the human organism that is the human body. They also stress that parts of the organism cannot be understood in isolation, that proper understanding of each component part of an organism requires knowing it in relation to the entire system. Functionalists sought to analyze the contributions of social elements as components of a specific social system. At its inception, functionalism was very popular but for only a few years. It was criticized for ignoring history and inevitable possibility of change and conflict in human society (Evan-Pritchard 1982). As functionalism was going out of fame, classical Marxism reemerged with a more intense portrayal of the sociological aspect of Marxian theory. As it is well known, the basic elements of conflict perspective in sociology are all clear in the works of Karl Marx. Marx argued that people have an essential element and predefined interest. He also analyzed both the historical and the then contemporary 19th century society in terms of conflict. Karl Marx carefully stressed the link between ideas or ideologies and the concrete interest of those who develop and propagate them; and insisted that the ideologies of an age reflect the interest of the "ruling class", as he and Hegel claimed in the Communist Manifesto that "the history of all hitherto existing society is that of class struggle".

The Marxian perspective criticized what it called "established sociology" in preference for a more radical or critical sociology. This has been a controversial view in sociological theory. Critical sociology was gaining ground when a new strain of functionalism developed by the American Sociologist, R.K Merton emerged. It was an attempt to cure classical functionalism of its shortcomings. Rather than emphasizing equilibrium in the society, Merton's new functionalism recognized that the degree of integration of a given society was an empirical question to be decided by investigation, noting that cultural items and social institutions might be dysfunctional as well as functional, and that there might be functional alternatives to any existing institution or cultural practices (Bottomore 1975). Yet within Merton's functionalism exists some skirmishes in the perspectives of analysis. Functionalist analysis was reduced to nothing more than a perspective in the wider gamut of sociological interpretation.

Functionalist analysis, it was thought could provide only a descriptive classification. It is a different task to discover the function of social fact, and another kettle of fish to search for its cause (Durkhiem 1938). A new controversy was thus introduced about the appropriate realm of analysis; or yet functionalist explanation" (Peter 1958, Hempel 1959, Dore 1961). These paradigms compete among themselves leading to further methodological arguments about explanation" and "interpretation" in sociology. Evolutionism came to the fore again in the 1960s. This time, diverse view emerged from the traditional belief in the gradual growth of society from simplicity to increasing complexity: there were debates on whether social development was a smooth process of continuously increasing differentiation or discontinuous stages showing distinct kinds of societies.

From the competition arose analyses of types of social structure distinguishing, for instance, industrial, postindustrial societies (Aaron 1967, Tourine 1971, Bell 1973) as well as pre-capitalist and capitalist societies among Marxists. In the main, it was a controversy between evolutionary and revolutionary ideas of change in society. From a more incisive dimension was the "episodic" view of Gellner who argued that social change was a function of single event occurring in social history. So social change is a matter of what existed before and after the event

occurred (Gellner, 1964). Though episodic theory is historical it is in conflict with classical evolutionary theory by proposing only one cause of social transformation. Episodic theory appears to have over simplified history. Yet its influence is apparent in the ideas of such great sociologists as Max Weber and Karl Marx both of which over-stressed the role of "the emergence of capitalism" in shaping western social history. Episodic theory inadvertently, revived interest in earlier Marxism but with a change in the traditional outlook: "voluntaristic" theory came to compete with "economic determinism". The modification bred differing schools too. On one lane was a view that saw Marxism as toeing structural analysis by looking at the "deep structure" of modern capitalist society.

On a parallel lane was the critical theory of the Frankfurt school. The school derived its stimulus from critical philosophy as a preferred view to the evolutionary- inspired-thought of economic determinism. The critical theorists focus upon scientific technological society rather than capitalism (Habermas 1970). It rejects the idea of a process of social and political liberation based mainly upon the transformation of the economic system and the preeminent role of the working class in the process (Wellmer 1971). In the main, critical theory seeks to interpret the structure and development of industrial or post- industrial societies. Like Marxism, however, it has an idea of a long-term process of human liberation with an aim to devise a new philosophy of history as a general framework for empirical investigations. Certainly, a more recent paradigm, "radical sociology" is the offshoot of critical theory.

Radical sociology tries to integrate traditional Marxism, critical theory and the varied ideas of the social movements of the 1960s. The attempt however, has not been profound within sociological theory. Another distinctive paradigm worthy of mention is structuralism. The outlook is ahistorical and concentrates on the analysis of basic structures of society rather than pursue an interpretation of a process of historical development. Further war against historical sociology is phenomenological sociology. Phenomenology rejects the assumptions and methods of positivism in sociology arguing that sociology deals with a different subject matter; human society and human behaviour. Since this subject matter differs entirely from that of the natural science, the methods of the natural sciences cannot be appropriated to the study of man and his society. The natural sciences study matter which have no consciousness but simply react unconsciously to external stimuli, hence, natural science phenomena can be observed exclusively from outside. But sociology deals with human beings with consciousness and whose behaviour is driven by feelings, meanings and purpose. Humans have thoughts, beliefs feelings, meanings, intentions and awareness of their being. Because of his consciousness his actions has meaning.

Phenomenology arose in the early 1960s with an emphasis on the understanding of meaning in the study of social life. This again is an assault on positivism and has an affinity with structuralism in terms of common interest in the search for meaning. However, the affinity does not go deep: structuralism looks at the formal structure of relations between meanings but phenomenology leans towards methodological clarifications rather than a formulation of general theory. Trailing phenomenology is a newer paradigm called ethnomethodology. The term ethnomethodology was coined by an American sociologist, Harold Garfunkel who is the founder of ethnomethodological system of thought. Ethnomethodology is a more recent theoretical development and owe much of it insights to the work of Alfred Scutz (1899-1959). Ethnomethodology refers to the study or examination of the methods and procedures used by members of society to construct, account for, or give meaning to their social world. Ethnomethodology takes the view that society exists only in so far as members perceives it or

describe it to exist. So, to the ethnomethodologists, nothing exists except members of society perceive, or account for it as such. It studies everyday life.

Ethnomethodology postulates that social behaviour is a conscious rule-following activity rather than an outcome of structural arrangements; and that rationality of everyday life lies in a theory of society and not necessarily sociological theory scholarly constructed. This calls for an inquiry upon the surface phenomena of social life and is therefore opposed to structuralism's quest for a deep structure. Indeed many paradigms exist in sociology. The much evaluated here are only a few but consist of the major trends in sociological theory at present. The paradigms put together draw from diverse aspects of social, political, economic, psychological, philosophical, cultural and historical ideas to represent general social theory. By this, the sociology discipline is better equipped with perhaps better and broader framework on the basis of which to raise and discuss all the general problems of the age.

The theories may appear to be at sixes and sevens and seemingly offer numerous incompatible and competing schemes of interpretations, but theoretical debates are necessary as a mark of intellectual growth in the discipline of Sociology provided that all paradigms are products of research. Sound theories and perspectives form the foundations for in-depth sociological understanding and analysis. Therefore, newer theories and perspectives are welcome at all times in sociological studies as they help guide researchers on how different social issues are conceived and perceived in human society.

Conclusion

Studies in Sociology are built and embedded on two great pillars; facts and theories. We must understand what the facts are, and also theories must be advanced to explain those facts. But, in the real world, neither facts nor theories reveal themselves to us in prefabricated ways. Theories are in a way nets cast to catch what we call the world: to rationalize, to explain, and to master the world, to help make it ever finer and finer. Sociological perspectives and theories help us to answers questions in the social world; they also explain the relationships between events and provide causal explanation among social variables. Theories confirm and relate to us why or how it is, the facts objectively observed are as they appears. Perspectives and theories constitute the oils with which the yam of knowledge is eaten. Hence, there is a need to interrogate the place of perspectives and theories in the Sociological enterprise. This study on "An Overview of Perspectives and Theories in Sociology" is a clear reminder of the different competing perspectives and theories in academic Sociology.

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