

Theoretical orientations in sociological analysis



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The social world that we inhabit comprises of several peoples, groups, communities, relations, etc. Those who are interested in comprehending the social world around them and trying to make sense of the same, make use of reason and logic to clarify, label and develop ideas about who we are. These commonsensical notions about the world around us are different from ideas informed by logic and reason. Logical understanding of society finds expression in the ordering of ideas into concepts and the careful arrangement of concepts into hypotheses to be tested, validated and tested for reliability in order to arrive at universal generalisations of social phenomenon.

The central purpose of this essay is to understand two interrelated questions: What is theory? And why do we need theory? We will explore the aforementioned questions by examining two different models of conceptualising society: Naturalistic and humanistic. While examining this point, we would also seek to clarify the need of social theory to exist in a separate domain from commonsensical and lay knowledge. This would be followed by bringing to light the methodological premises on which theory building rests and its implications on the production of sociological knowledge. The argument would attempt to clarify the case for finding a middle ground between methodological individualism and methodological collectivism in methodological situationalism for production of social theory. But before moving to these arguments, we would begin by understanding the relation of theory and concept, as one the most widely used definitions of theory uses concept.

Social Theory and Concept

We begin with the proposition that theories can be described as sets of inter-related concepts and ideas that have been scientifically tested and combined to magnify, enlarge, clarify, and expand our understanding of people, their behaviours, and their societies. A theory is a unit of knowledge that comprises facts, assumptions and hypotheses. This unit shows how facts can be subordinated to general principles or laws and how they relate to them. Theories can be verified by experiments or by methodological observation. Usually theories focus on one selected aspect of a phenomenon under consideration. This means that several or even many theories can be constructed dealing with the same phenomenon. Blumer highlights the issues concerned with using concepts in social theory. ' In terms of both origin and use, social theory, seems in general not to be geared into the empirical world'. This is problematic because theoretical formulations rely heavily on concepts as means of capturing the empirical world. It is quite evident that the concepts in social theory are vague because the objects of study include social values, norms, institutions, etc which cannot be grasped in their entirety, but can only provide a rough identification of attributes that can be included in the study. There is thus, a need to have clear concepts which can be used for social theory. The difference that Blumer points out is that there is a distinction between definitive concept and sensitising concept. A definitive concept refers to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of fixed benchmarks of empirical science. A sensitising concept on the other hand gives a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Concepts used in social theory largely belong to the latter category. They lack the precise referent and benchmark which can be

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used to grasp the concept. The empirical world of our discipline is a social world of every day experience. Every object can be subjected to consideration for social theory. This distinctive character of the empirical world and its settings make our concepts sensitising in nature. This is not to say that these concepts are unscientific in any way. Sensitising concepts can be tested, improved and refined. Their validity can be analysed through careful study of empirical references that they seek to cover.

Dealing with questions of Agency through an exploration of the Naturalistic and Humanistic perspective

The next section of this essay we will begin with the naturalistic model of social theory. The naturalistic model with its focus on developing a true and valid science of society aimed to align social theory along the lines of empirical science. An empirical science of society analyses the world abstractly as composed of objects and attempts to establish relations among these classes of objects. It is this analytical scheme of empirical science which influences research and also methods of data collection, classification and its implications on formulation of new theories. Social theory finds its fundamental problem, in such a scheme of analysis, as the relation between the empirical referent and the concept used to denote the referent in theory as social theory is largely made of well defined concepts and the relational value attached to them. The concepts that are used in social theory can be vague in nature, in the sense that they may not be able to determine with exactitude the precise specification of attributes to be studied. (As mentioned before)

The domain of sociology has at its centre the analysis of society, and all its related components. The subject matter of sociology becomes problematic because we inhabit the world we seek to analyse. The most critical question that presents before us is to understand how does a member of society become an objective observer of social phenomenon, while being a part of the social model, and thus produce scientific sociological theory.

The task therefore is to delineate general phenomenon from sociological phenomenon. This brings us to the difference between common sense knowledge and sociological knowledge. There are different ways of approaching this question. We begin with the proposition that all the knowledge that we possess about the world may not have the element of truth in it. Human agents as concept bearing actors are aware of their actions and attribute certain meanings to them.

‘ To be a human agent is to know... what one is engaged in and why. There is a sense in which we cannot be wrong about what are actions are..’ Giddens (1987: 5). As actors, individuals operate out of their own understanding of what is true knowledge derived from social conventions and is contextual in nature. This knowledge at all times is contested knowledge. While there may be acceptance of different points of view, there could also the possibility of ideas being borne out of false premises or slanted beliefs. ‘ Our presumed knowledge about institutions (maybe)... inclined to error’ Giddens (1987: 4). The point is that knowledge can be false in the sense that it can be contextual, holding validity only for a particular cultural and social setting. Our actions are always oriented in a setting and a significant part of what a sociologist does is to uncover these premises and lay them bare for an

outsider to grasp in the same manner as the actor. This non-discursive side to our activities is of relevance to social theory and forms an important aspect of sociological analysis. This is where the role of social theory then begins to take shape.

Social theory has the task of clarifying the generally held beliefs about social institutions and society at large. In fact, as pointed out by Giddens, our understanding of the social world owes a lot to sociological studies and researches. One should not underestimate the contributions which social research and theory can make to identify false or slanted beliefs widely held about social phenomenon. For such beliefs may often take the form of prejudices and hence contribute to intolerance and discrimination or might inhibit social changes that would otherwise be seen as desirable. Thereby to assert the difference between sociologically true and valid concepts from commonsensical notions, social theory makes use of its own conceptual metalanguage in order to grasp aspects of social institutions which are not described in lay terms.

The study of the non-discursive aspect of social action reveals to us what we already know about the social world but also re-emphasises the need to know what we do and why we do. This also calls our attention to the category of unintended consequences of our action. Actors may perform certain actions being cognisant of only the intended results, while the unintended consequences may remain obscure. Social theory reveals these unintended consequences to help us understand the course of development of any sociological phenomenon as it takes into account what we know and intend to produce as well as the consequences that we are not aware of

since they are not intended. This analysis is critical since, there is interplay between society and agency and that although agency creates social life in individual and personal experience and biographies, and it also reproduces the larger social history which exists independent of an individual actor. In performing duties as a daughter, sister or mother, women in any society reproduce the social institutions of family and kinship which they did not bring into existence. ' The activities are thus embedded within, and are constitutive of, structured properties of institutions stretching well beyond... time and space' Giddens (1987: 11).

While Durkheim argued that the domain of social phenomenon is largely the ' ways of acting, thinking and feeling, which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual' Durkheim (1982: 51), he did not give enough recognition to individual freedom, volition and autonomy. This reduction of the individual as a mere reproduction of society makes the study of larger social institutions the object of analysis. This would not hold true in micro-sociological analyses, which give due importance to interaction between actors to understand basic features of larger social institutions.

Methodologically, the study of sociology can either be informed by the concerns of the naturalist model or can follow a humanistic approach. The 19th century sociologists were advocates of a science of sociology and therefore, adopted a natural science model for the study of society. The natural laws however could not suffice in their explanation of social phenomenon. The humanistic approach, with its focus on, Verstehen as propounded by Weber found its ground as a methodological tool to take into

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account the meaning of social action. This contrast between explanation and understanding represented by a choice of either model becomes problematic for social theory. The point is that social theory is bound in what Giddens called 'double hermeneutics'. Anthony Giddens (1982) argued that there is an important difference between the natural and social sciences. In the natural sciences, scientists try to understand and theorise about the way the natural world is structured. The understanding is one-way; that is, while we need to understand the actions of minerals or chemicals, chemicals and minerals don't seek to develop an understanding of us. He referred to the above as the 'single hermeneutic'. In contrast, the social sciences are engaged in the 'double hermeneutic'. Sciences like sociology study how people understand their world, and how that understanding shapes their practice. Because people can think, make choices, and use new information to revise their understandings (and hence their practice), they can use the knowledge and insights of social science to change their practice.

In outlining his notion of the 'double hermeneutic', Giddens (1987: 20) explained that while philosophers and social scientists have often considered the way "in which lay concepts obstinately intrude into the technical discourse of social science" that "Few have considered the matter the other way around." He explained that "the concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject-matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are.

Social theory studies human beings who are concept bearing individuals, engaged in social interaction which produce and reproduce larger social structures. The understanding of social actors and theorising about the

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same, is also appropriated by the same actors who reflexively reflect upon their actions. 'The ' findings' of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe' Giddens (1987: 20).

Social Theory and its Methodological Concerns.

The development of social theory cannot be understood completely without taking into account the methodological premises on which the production of social theory were built. We begin by categorising the theories as macro-sociological theories and micro-sociological theories. Macro-sociology can be understood as dealing with social phenomenon and institutions on an aggregate level. Such an approach entails the use of both theoretical concerns on a system level and the use of aggregate data to arrive at generalisations. Micro-sociology deals with smaller groups as the object of analysis focusing on cognitive order and social interaction between actors, significance of meanings, etc.

Theories which can be categorised as macro-sociological in approach have at their core, the study of normative order. This proposition can be further explored by looking at Durkheim's view of society. Durkheim was one of the chief proponents of a normative-functional integration model of society. For Durkheim, individual actors acted out of social norms which had been internalised by the individual through socialisation and education. These norms informed all the actions and contributed to the overall functioning of the society in perfect equilibrium. The social facts existed independent of the individual, were external and coercive in nature while being collective and general. For Durkheim, the pre-established harmony of society through individual agents was internally controlled and imposed. Micro-sociological

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approach has brought a remarkable shift in theorising where cognitive order has become the object of analysis. The methodological structure on which micro-sociological theorising is based takes into account cognitive processes that represent and interpret the relevance of values and obligations. It begins with the premise that the actor is a knowing, active subject. Micro-sociologists like symbolic interactionists view actors and meanings attributed by actors in social interaction as ways of understanding the larger macro issues of order. Mead's conception of the self has the underlying notion of the individual as a composite whole of selves and also the notion of interior audiences where men attribute motives to each other from the perspective of the generalised other which can also be seen as an internalised reference group for giving meaning to action. Such a social theory then recognises the significance of a knowing and acting agent, and the study of related phenomenon not as coerced human action, but as informed human action, to study the manner in then social phenomenon is produced, contested, repaired, organised and displayed in social situations.

Social theory then stands to reconcile both macro and micro approaches to the study of social phenomenon. Taking the above example, social order can be redefined by moving away from the traditional normative-functional-integration model to a cognitive model of micro social action which would take into account the actor not as a puppet in the hands of society but as an active agent in society.

The distinctive feature of micro sociological approaches is the fact that they accord a privileged status to small scale social situations. These social interactions also have their place in macro sociological theory where they

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may be considered as building blocks for larger systemic conceptions. The point to be made is that social theory must find its ground between methodological individualism and methodological collectivism.

Methodological individualism demands that all aspects of social theory be analysed in terms of the interests, activities, etc., of individual human beings. Methodological collectivism holds the view that the society is a whole which is more than just a sum of its parts and that society moulds individuals in socialisation so that they must be seen as dependent upon social institutions rather than their active constituents. An alternative to the dominant approaches of methodological individualism and methodological collectivism is methodological situationalism. Methodological situationalism replaces the model of the actor as the ultimate unit of analysis and leads to the production of knowledge that takes into account the practice through which members reproduce and acquire a sense of order while at the same time searching for order of rules and resources which presumably underlie and generate social conduct. We can summarise this section with the following remarks. Macro sociological theories have focused primarily on interrelations of social action. Micro sociological theories on the other hand, look at micro-social situations for theory building and theory formulations.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of sociological theory is not limited to understanding conceptual ambiguities but to reason systematically and scientifically about some of the major social problems that we face, to illuminate which values are relevant to the context and why, and to give some direction to what we should do. The general goal is to accomplish an understanding of reality. The

importance of studying theory can be discerned by understanding the possible functions of theory- descriptive, analytical or explanatory, and to a certain degree predictive as well, and inherently prescriptive. Theory enables the researcher to make sense of the world around him. They guide and give meaning to what we see and observe. Theory helps in orienting the researcher's mental framework to an established and accepted base from which the researcher can extract an understanding of the social reality around him, and proceed to develop his own hypothesis. Theories are often used to orient the mind of the reader to the purpose of the research study. A strong theoretical background helps in introducing and justifying the need for undertaking a certain research study. When a researcher investigates and collects information through observation, the investigator needs a clear idea of what information is important to collect, which could be solved by using a theoretical tool to dictate the research enquiry.

Theory and empirical research are intrinsically interrelated in the scheme of sociological enquiry. Following the scientific model of sociological enquiry, theory and research are linked in the both the inductive and deductive analysis of social reality. In the deductive model research is used to empirically test the validity and reliability of theory, while in the inductive model theories are developed on the basis of careful understanding and analysis of research data. If theory answers the question of what, why and how, research helps in indicating the purpose, object and end of what a particular theory is aiming to achieve. The significance of social theory can therefore, never be undermined.