

The nature of the disagreement between structural and interpretive perspectives e...



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The first thing to say here is that interpretive sociologists do not agree at all that sociology can be a science. In other words, they adopt an anti-positivist position. Now what does this mean?

Essentially, it boils down to this: a human being's conduct in the social world cannot be explained as natural scientists try to explain the occurrence of natural phenomena. That is to say, human beings in the social world (in "society"), and what they do therein, is not a matter of searching out the causes of behaviour.

For no such "causes" exist! Society is not a "thing", an objective phenomenon which causes us to conduct ourselves in a certain manner. On the contrary, society is made by us in our everyday interaction with our fellows. Since it is made by us everyday, society simply cannot be conceived (thought of by sociologists) as a "thing", a cause of our conduct. The idea that society is to behaviour as cause is to effect is a nonsense insists interpretive sociology. Indeed, such an idea fundamentally misunderstands the nature of what social life is all about.

Now for the second point. It can be introduced by consideration of this question: if our conduct in the social world cannot be explained as the natural scientist endeavours to account for the occurrence of natural phenomena, how is it to be accounted for?

In answer to this question, the interpretive sociologist says the following: we must, as sociologists, seek to understand our fellows as they go about the every day business of making sense of their social existence. Notice here that the talk of causes and effects has disappeared. Instead, we have an

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emphasis upon how human beings, social actors as interpretive sociology terms them, produce/construct social realism in interaction with others. This emphasis, as we shall see now, has a radical implication.

To say that we must understand our fellows' conduct in the social world, rather than seek to 'explain' it in terms of causes producing their effects, is to say this:

Social reality (society) is what social actors make it. It is not a "thing" which acts upon us as an external force causing us to behave in this way or that. On the contrary, social reality is the outcome of the sense we make of our everyday interactions with other.

From this it shows that we should have a certain view of human beings as social creatures. They are actors; they have reasons for what they do; they always define their social world in terms of "meanings" which are central to their lives.

What is to be explained?

Type of Sociological explanation

Positivist (Structural)

Anti-Positivist (Interpretive/Social Action)

The low educational attainment of W. C. children

Explanations differ; however, all explanations are in terms of cause and effect. E. g. W. C. sub-culture – over which neither students nor kids have any control – leads to low educational attainment.

Nell Keddie's work shows us how an interpretive/ interactionist sociologist sets about accounting for low educational attainment. The account is in terms of the interactions of teachers and students. In particular, teachers “label” W. C. pupils as not being expected to do well. Teacher expectations, then, are crucial.

The differential distribution of the occurrence of suicide by country and region

Durkheim's account: There exists “suicidogenic currents” in society; that is pressures to commit suicide exist. Such pressures are strong in regions where the Protestant religion is the majority one, and weaker where Catholicism is the majority religion. Note here that D's account posits an external force (suicidogenic currents) as the cause of suicide.

Why suicide occurs tends not to be the issue at all. Anyway, D's idea of suicidogenic currents – differential pressures to take one's life – is rejected.

What is of interest is how a “suicide” comes to be defined as such by the coroner's court. This interest alerts us to the problematic nature of D's reliance on the suicide statistics. For he takes those statistics as giving a ‘true’ picture of the incidence of suicide. But do they? Ultimately, what is at stake in interactionist/ interpretive work on suicide is that the suicide

statistics are a construction involving police, courts etc. Thus for a death to be counted as a suicide involves a complex social process.

Summary of Main Points

1. There are two major approaches – or orientations – in modern sociology; the structural sociologies (Marxism and Functionalism) and the interpretive/interactionist/social action sociologies (phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, the work of Weber).
2. Structural sociologies argue that a science of society is a possibility. The interpretive sociologies disagree. That is, the latter disagree with the claim that sociology can be a discipline which is modelled on the kinds of explanation of natural phenomena which the natural sciences employ.

Basically, explanations in the natural sciences are in terms of cause-and-effect. So the structural approach is claiming that human, social conduct can be explained by treating society itself

The claim that human behaviour is the effect of something else (society – with its norms, or class structure, and so on) is positivist. That is, it is being claimed that there is no difference between humans' action in the social world and the occurrence of natural phenomena (like storms, volcanoes, tides, nuclear fusion, and so on.)

It is also positivist in that it is being implicitly claimed that scientific method is the only means we have at our disposal of gaining knowledge of the social world.

4. Interpretivist sociologies, on the other hand, are anti-positivist. That is, they are completely against the idea that human conduct in the social world can be explained as the cause of something else (society itself). They are also anti-positivist in that they reject the idea that (natural) scientific method is the only means by which sociology can be granted a knowledge of social life.

Let us develop this latter point now. Interpretive sociologies reject the idea that there can be a science of society modelled on the forms of explanation that the natural sciences employ. But that does not mean to say that they thereby deny that we can have a knowledge of social life. Rather, the point here is that, since sociology deals with humans' social action, the methods of the natural sciences are simply inappropriate to the study of that action. In other words, sociology must have its own, unique methods of study since it has a unique object of study, that is, social action itself.

5. So what are these unique methods by which sociology can give us a knowledge of social life. Briefly (we will be returning to this later), we must, as sociologists, seek to understand (rather than explain in terms of cause-and-effect) the social action/conduct of our fellows in the social world.

Why this emphasis on understanding? Because, for the interpretive sociologies, human beings are unique kinds of creatures: they have reasons for what they do; they have beliefs about the world which affect their social action; they conduct themselves in the social world in the light of how they interpret what is going on and in view of others' responses to them, and so on. Thus, humans are social actors; they are active makers of social reality,

and not as the structural approaches asserts, merely the dumb, unthinking cogs in the giant machine of society.

Thus, if we want a knowledge of social life, we cannot explain social actors' action in terms of cause-and-effect. Rather, we must seek out what the social actors themselves say they are up to. For it is what they make of the social world, and how they interact with others, which makes social life (society) the unique kind of object of study it is.