

The sociological imagination



Knowledge, understanding and science have ever since the Age of Enlightenment been extremely important to mankind. A crave for interpretation of the world around us describes a lot of the general human curiosity. But what about ourselves? Is it important, or even possible, to get a valid view of our own behaviour? Are we able to describe ourselves and our own culture – in the widened sense of the term?

In this essay, I will try to take a closer look at what sociological imagination means and why it is significant. I will start off by giving a brief definition of key terms, which I will try to explore and assess further in the main body. Then I will explain the main aims of sociology and expose possible sociological issues.

The sources I have used in this task are mainly books on the reading list, which are classic sociological works. I have also taken advantage of Anthony Giddens' book "Sociology". Besides the fact that he is one of the most famous British sociologists, I find his book easy to read and in general an excellent introduction to the science. To get short and concise definitions, I have also used Cambridge online dictionary, which I consider as "safe".

Main body

What does it mean to think sociologically?

Sociology is, as the well-known social scientist Anthony Giddens defines; "the study of human social life, groups and societies" (Giddens 2001: 2).

The discipline of sociology concerns issues such as types of societies, the concept of culture, cultural differences, socialisation and globalisation – for a start. One could keep on mentioning aspects, but a sociologist is, roughly

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said, basically interested in everything human beings do – consciously or sub-consciously (Giddens, 2001).

Giddens claims that it is a “dazzling” project, because it is so “close”; it is about our own social behaviour. And that expression may be spot on – as it is old news that seeing oneself from others perspective can be rather difficult.

The Cambridge online dictionary defines imagination as: “the ability to form pictures in the mind (...) and the ability to think of new ideas” (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org>).

The sociological imagination is about trying to define, interpret and examine the human life at different stages, different cultures, in different parts of the world – by looking at its individuals at daily life basis. We can then, hopefully, understand the larger historical context of human social life (Mills, 1959).

Research is a big part of sociological work, and sociologists use different methods to explore different matters. Relevant approaches may be comparative (one social context to another), developmental (present vs. the past), empirical (by asking how), theoretical (knowledge of theory) and factual (basic, proved issues) types of question (Giddens, 2001).

According to Mills, one of the most central points of the imagination is the ability to shift from one perspective to another, to see the complexity in all findings: from a microsociological view to an outlook of overall world history (Mills, 1959). Relating to that, Mills emphasize the link between what he calls “personal troubles” and “public issues”, and argues that this is a fundamental tool of all sociologists. Imagine a man loses his job. Even

though he may feel it's the end of the world, it is genuinely a non-existing problem for people in general. But what about when three million people in a country lose their job? That will without doubt cause a lot of problems in this society (Mills, 1959). A decreasing personal economy equals no shopping, no shopping means a falling market, a falling market leads to higher unemployment. Voilà – a vicious circle.

So what is the aim of sociologists? “ While the sociologist cannot solve any of these practical problems – at least not by himself – he may (...) have an important contribution to make their comprehension and solution” (Wirth 1938: 24). In other words: A sociologist can put focus on these elements and try to expose crucial links in our societies.

What kinds of troubles may a sociologist encounter?

Many sociologists have done different kinds of social analysis during the past centuries, and the receptions have been varying. Not surprisingly, a highly relevant element in all sociological work is the element of evidence. The common denominator of all science work is validity, as it also creates the main difference from fiction. But what is “ the truth”? How can we be sure a social analysis is trustworthy? Who has the right to define what is correct observation and what is a false one?

One well-known analysis is Michael Young and Peter Willmott's book “ Family and kinship in East London”, which concerns the urban working class and the government's housing policy in the post-war years. As the authors say themselves; “ we can only report what people say, which is not necessarily the same as what they actually do” (Young & Willmott 1957: 20).

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No doubt – sociology is a complex and sensitive area, as it touches our own way of living, ideas, values and choices. That is also maybe one of the reasons why so many people find it exceptionally interesting.

“ Serious differences among social scientists occur not between those who would observe without thinking and those who would think without observing; the differences have rather to do with what kinds of thinking, what kinds of observing, and what kinds of links, if any, there are between them” (Mills 1959: 42)

Conclusion

(In this essay I have exposed the meaning – and discussed the aims – of the sociological imagination. I have also exposed possible encountering troubles regarding the science of sociology.) Not necessarily?

The sociological imagination is about reflecting upon our own social behaviour and cultural habits. It is basically to put a question mark about all the things we do in our everyday life often without even noticing.

According to Charles Wright Mills, the ability to shift between different points of view is one of the significant proficiency about social scientist. In other words, it is valuable to see the link between personal problems and big issues of the society.

Sociology can be useful in due to make us aware of cultural differences, analyse and evaluate our political society and last but not least, increase the overall self-understanding.

Reference list

Literature

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