

Importance of sociological theory



Why is theory important in the area of sociology?

A theory is a proposed relationship between two or more concepts. In sociology, theories are statements of reason why particular facts about the social world are related (Marcionis & Geber, 2010, p14). The scope of the social issues in question may range from exact descriptions of a single process to examples or models for analysis and interpretation. Some theories attempt to tell us about the possible outcome of future events in the social world, while others function as broad perspective which guides further sociological analyses (Calhoun, 2002, p1). The importance of theory in the area of sociology cannot be overemphasized. Theories such as the social conflict theory, structural functionalism theory, positivism theory, field theory, rational choice theory, and so on, were developed to explain social phenomena.

In sociology, a theory states the hypothesis of a set of entities or relevant system, and permits statements on the possible or envisaged outcomes on their future states. As captured in Little (2010), a theory may also specify probabilistic relations among entities, giving rise to statements about the distribution of possible future states of the system. Little (2010) also noted that a theory provides a set of “bridge” statement that permits the theorist to connect the consequences of the theory with predictions about observable state of affairs.

Sociology is an examination of human beings in social contexts. It entails observing how people in specific communities interact, and surveying and conducting experiments to yield new data on which to build sociological

knowledge. Interconnectivity or interdependence is the main characteristic of a society. Sociological theories are frameworks explaining how certain aspects or elements of society are interconnected to the larger processes or environment. Application of theories helps determine the interdependent aspects of the co-existence of individuals or groups. Theories in the area of sociology will help people understand how society works and how they can be a useful part in it.

Furthermore, theories help in decision making with regards to factors affecting a certain community as wrong decisions often result from inadequate knowledge of the structure and other peculiarities of the society. These wrong decisions may have a far-reaching impact on people's lives. In addition, addressing societal problems such as alcoholism, high criminal rate, requires decision makers to have a fair knowledge of the problems and their root causes. Vassos, while contributing to the subject, stated that sociological theories provide insights on social issues, thereby enabling appropriate relevant authority to adequately and effectively tackle the problems. Sociologists focus on how a society is structured, how each and every individual works as part of the whole, how society has changed over the years and predictions of future changes. In essence, sociological theories help people understand society and knowledge of the world as it grows.

In conclusion, Ritzer (2003) defined sociological theory as a set of interrelated ideas that allow for the systematization of knowledge of the social world. This knowledge, he noted, can then be used to explain the social world and make predictions about the future of the world.

Discuss any sociology theory of your choice

The Social Conflict Theory is one of the theories in sociology. The conflict theory was originated by Karl Marx in the mid – 1800's. The theory states that human behaviour results in conflicts between competing groups. According to Karl Marx, the two competing social groups comprised of the ruling class on one hand and the subject class on the other have unequal access to power and resources (Anderson & Taylor, 2009). The ruling class enjoys being the owner, having control over the forces of production thereby exploiting the subject class which results in a conflict of interest between both parties. Conflict theories generally focus attention on key areas of substantial social differences particularly with regards to class, gender and race.

Conflict theory is mostly associated with Marxism, and may also be associated with other major perspectives including critical theory, feminist theory, post-modern theory and post structural theory (Adegbolagun, 2012). Macionis & Geber (2011) however noted that other important sociologists like Harriet Martineau, Hannah Addams and Dubois argue that this sociological approach does not adequately consider how social structures help society to function; rather it dwells on how inherent social differences can cause some people in the society to be dominant and others to be oppressed.

The social conflict theory opines that different social classes of individuals and groups within society with varying amounts of material and non-material resources use their relative strength in power or wealth to exploit groups with lesser advantage. Two major means of this exploitation are through

cohesion or force usually done by police, the army and economics. Perhaps this explains the reason why money is perceived as the substance of social disorder and oppression. It can also be deduced from their beliefs that the society is characterized by an on-going social struggle or competition between various groups. The social conflict theory believes social relationships are about power and exploitation; the rich exploiting the poor. Citing an example of this oppression is a renter for instance, living in a rented apartment for as long as fifty years and having no right or economic interest within the property.

In sociology, conflict theory opines that the society functions so that everyone or group involved can make the best use of benefits which in the long run brings about social changes. Most times, the theory is used to explain conflict between social classes in ideas such as socialism and communism. Competition plays a vital role in understanding conflict theory. Accordingly, there are three primary assumptions of modern conflict theory (Vanithamohanakumar, 2011). The first is competition over scarce resources such as money and leisure which is characteristic of human relationship. Second is structural inequality which has to do with inequalities in power and reward. Thirdly, it is believed that rather than adapting to the situation, rapid and forceful turnaround or revolution is eminent as a result of the conflict between competing interests. According to McCafferty (2006), conflict theory emphasizes the social political or material inequality of a social group. It also contrast dominant ideologies and make open differences in power.

Conflict theory posits that social groups or classes compete with each other in order to obtain control of the scarce resources. A realistic social conflict

theory is an understanding of the positive role of social conflict in serving the common good. It is actually expected to put change in perspective since all substantial social change involves social conflict. Understanding social conflict theory can assist groups to function in finding common grounds, developing alliances, defining core values, identifying and indeed eliminating differences in viewpoints where necessary, setting group boundaries, and strategizing to achieve the expected change.

Harper postulated that in Social Conflict Theory, no one group should dominate all other groups particularly in a democratic society. He noted further that the power of all groups, especially of large institutions, is limited by the rule of law and by social impact, custom and social tradition. Within these confines of interest, various groups and institutions compete, negotiate and work out changes in socio-economic arrangements, generating social conflict in the process.

Wright Mills opined that social structures are created through conflict between people with differing interests and resources. Individuals and resources in turn, are influential by these structures and by the unequal distribution of power and resources in the society (Knapp, 1994, pp228-246).

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