

Sociological theories of love



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Sociology of love?

Sociology is the study of social structures and institutions, often divided into topics. The basis of the essay is the topic of love; however this topic is too broad to investigate sociologically, therefore the social institution focused upon is 'love and relationships'.

"A good scientific theory should accord with the evidence" (Bruce, 1999) therefore, by evaluating contrasting sociological perspectives and critically assessing particular perspectives on the subject, along with analysing the social institution using sociological concepts and perspectives, it is possible to answer whether there can be a sociology of love.

"The study of many forms of social encounter is of major importance in sociology" (Giddens and Sutton, 2014); this was originally developed as the central concept in symbolic interactionism, which is a micro analysis theory, unlike Marxism and Functionalism which fall under the macro category according to Alan Dawe's traditional 'two sociologies' model.

According to Interactionism, "Everyday routines provide structure to form our lives" (Giddens and Sutton, 2014), this theory pairs nicely with Gabb and Fink's 2015 'Enduring Love?' study, in which they use a moments approach to "provide a lens through which to focus on couple's everyday experiences, meanings and cross cutting analytical themes whilst ensuring that feelings and emotionality remain firmly attached" (Gabb and Fink, 2015)

Gabb and Fink "Focus on the incidental, unnoticed, and the ephemeral" which they claim creates the texture of relationships and "through which the tensile strength is constituted" (Gabb and Fink, 2015, p971), they realised

that there was a gap in sociologically informed research on long term relationships “ with regards to the influence of culture, biography and socio-economic factors on the way people experience relationships” (Gabb and Fink, 2015 (p971) which again pairs nicely with interactionism, as the theory suggests that people are constantly socially constructed and made by others’ expectations of us. It’s important to acknowledge that often interactionism is criticised for stressing the importance of the individual’s experience, because sociology is more often interested in groups in society, and unlike the macro theories such as Marxism and Functionalism, it doesn’t advance any general theory of society.

When collecting research data under interactionism theory, according to Alan Dawe’s ‘ two sociologies’ model, it’s common to use Qualitative methods, to gage a sense of the meanings held by social actors, this is the opposite of the macro approach of Marxism and functionalism, which commonly use quantitative methods. What’s interesting about Gabb and Fink’s study is that they use both quantitative and qualitative methods, in a multi-method approach. The use of both types of method have proven beneficial to the outcome of their study, because in the deployment of methods such as quantitative survey, and qualitative methods such as emotion maps, diaries, photo elicitation interviews and individual interviews, they have been able to really drill into couple’s relationships in many ways, break down barriers of methods which tend to leave out personal detail and analyse why everyday moments, and the meanings people place on them create the basis for loving, long term relationships.

“ Marxist forms of analysis tend to begin with the assumption that the most fundamental- and hence most socially significant- forms of relationship are those which involve the production of the basic means of people’s existence” (Livesey, n. d) things such as food, clothing and shelter. This could arguably be the basis for a lasting marriage, especially if we look at the sample couples’ diary entries in the ‘ enduring love?’ Study. In one account, Sumaira describes “ I made dinner tonight and (partner) came home... then we ate at the table and I loved it so much” (Gabb and Fink 2015, p979). She is placing emphasis on their shared home and their mealtime together. However, when we link this back to interactionism, and Gabb and Fink’s moments approach, its more evident that she is placing meaning on the social interaction of the moment, which is an everyday moment, but yet so important to her.

When analysing the diary extract, Gabb and Fink unpick it to determine that the couple are behaving in a way which they think is socially normal for a their situation (starting out married life, first home together, both working etc) however, in both Sumaira and Hayley’s diary extracts, it is clear that both have feelings of anxiety towards acknowledgement of the need to work hard to maintain a ‘ successful’ relationship; this is more evident in Hayley’s account of the ambivalence she feels about being intimate with her partner despite her own want for more sleep. Hayley puts the wishes of her partner before her own, to maintain the ‘ successful’ relationship she holds so dearly. In these analysed moments, Bauman, (2003) would agree that “ in a liquid modern setting of life, relationships are perhaps the most common, acute deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence”, which is clear in the analysis of dataset in Gabb and Fink’s study, in that love and

relationships change all the time, based upon the needs and ideals of the participants, however Gabb and Fink claim that the emphasis the participants place on the everyday moments within the relationship are what stays constant, and what makes the relationship stable. It is the hard work put into the moments, which play the biggest role in keeping the anxieties of change and ‘failure’ of the relationship at bay.

It is clear that participants within relationships have expectations which they conform to. Their idea of what is socially ‘normal’ is influenced by their situations, in terms of gender – Hayley’s account of intimacy is a good example of that, as are roles defined in Sumaira’s account of her being the ‘homemaker’ and her partner being ‘the breadwinner’, as well as in terms of culture etc.

The findings from this research depict that within the social institution of love and relationships, it is a fluid entity so to speak, however the framework holding it together in sociological terms is the meanings placed upon the everyday moments which participants hold so dearly, and in this respect, a sociology of love is therefore very much possible.

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