Sociological Theory: An Introduction to Interpretivism

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The majority of theories that we have looked at so far have been structural theories (e.g. Functionalism, Structural Marxism, Marxist and Radical Feminism). This means that these theories argue that human behaviour is governed and constrained to a very large extent by the social system (of interconnecting institutions). However, the last 'founding father' of sociology, Max Weber (who was writing at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries), argued that far from being the products of a social system, human beings were creative 'agents' who shaped the society around them. His theory became known as 'Social Action Theory' and his followers 'Social Action Theorists' or 'Weberians'. In the 20th Century his views influenced the emergence of a number of other 'Interpretive' sociological perspectives shown below:

Max Weber

Theory	Originator(s)
Social Action Theory	Max Weber (1864-1920)
Symbolic Interactionism	George Herbert Mead (1863-1931)
Phenomenology	Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Alfred Schutz (1899-1959)
Ethnomethodology	Harold Garfinkel (1917-2011)

Interpretive sociology "is primarily concerned with how individuals and groups create, find meaning in, and experience society, rather than in how society affects them" (O'Donnell, 1997:6). Weber argued that to understand society, an analyst must look at the social actions of individuals that shape it. To understand these actions, the analyst must study the 'intentional meanings' behind them. The process or method of interpreting these meanings he called 'verstahen' (a German word that loosely translates as 'understanding'). The

interpretation of intended meanings behind the social actions that shape society is the focus of the above theories and why they are called 'Interpretivist'.

Intended Meanings ⟶ Social Actions ⟶ Consequences that shape society

As 'creative agents' people can choose how to act given their situation. For interpretivists people actively construct and negotiate social reality itself. In this theory, social meanings are not fixed but are created, developed and modified in the process of interaction between people.

Activity: The Institution of Marriage

Below are examples of how a Functionalist and an Interpretivist analyse the social institution of marriage. What are the differences in their approaches? Which type of analysis do you think is more accurate and why?

"A functionalist analysis looks at marriage in terms of the social system. The emphasis is on the roles of husband/father, wife/mother which are seen as largely given by the system and shaped to meet the requirements of the system. Thus these roles are structured, for example, to provide a unit for the production and socialisation of children." (Taylor et al, 1998:17).

"… when two people get married they have only a vague idea of how a husband and wife should behave. But, as a result of their day to day interaction, they gradually construct their own reality of married life. They give meanings to marriage, they define and redefine what it means to be a husband and wife and develop a shared view of the relationship. From a social action perspective marital roles are not prescribed by the social system, they develop from negotiated meanings during the process of interaction. This is a creative process with individuals directing their own actions rather than being constrained by the social system." (Taylor et al, 1998: 17).

The Work of Max Weber

Weber (unlike later interpretivists) attempted to span both structural and interpretive ideas. Weber believed that existing structural circumstances constrained human actions and behaviours, yet these circumstances were originally created by earlier social actions. In contrast, Marx believed that people had free will (yet were often indoctrinated with ruling class ideology), yet were highly constrained by structural circumstances. The working class to effect social change (revolution) had to band together in unison (solidarity). For functionalists, human behaviour is a product of being socialised by the system. In Weber's view an individual could potentially 'change the world'. Take for example a college; a functionalist would argue that it is an institution providing vital functions of training skills to the local community which will then benefit the local economy. The behaviour of students and teachers being structured roles that people enter in to. For Weber, a college as a social

reality is only possible due to the collection of individual meaningful actions of its participants. If it were not for these meaningful actions, there would be nothing but empty buildings!

Weber's idea of 'verstahen' consisted of trying to understand and 'walk in the shoes' of the social 'actor' being studied. To fully understand these motives and meanings however, Weber argued one must look beyond the individuals immediate circumstances and place their meanings in a wider cultural context. This approach can be seen to be also used in the academic disciplines of History and English Literature. For example, to analyse the individual meanings of an historical text or an author of fiction or poet, often consists of placing their individual motivations within the cultural context of their day. Weber used this approach to analyse Religion, and argued that changes in ways of religious thinking (and therefore acting) led to the development of Capitalism (unlike Marx who saw it as a reaction to material reality and the availability and competition over natural resources).

In his famous work 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' Weber analysed the development of Capitalism in Britain (the first country to go through an industrial revolution and become Capitalist). He argued that it developed from social actions of individuals being shaped by the religious doctrine of Calvinism. Calvinism was a type of protestant belief based on the work of the British theologian John Calvin. Calvin had a belief in predestination. This is the idea that if God is all omnipotent (all powerful) and omnipresent (all knowing) than God already knows the past, present and future and therefore whether or not an individual is going to be blessed or damned to hell. Weber argued that this cultural belief system created anxiety in its followers. Calvin believed that individuals had to work hard in their earthly calling in order to show God that they had faith that God had chosen them to be saved. It was a humble belief system that advocated the idea that profits made by a business should be reinvested back into that business. Weber argued that due to large numbers of people following this 'protestant work ethic' led to widespread social action that led to the development of Capitalism. Marxists of course criticised this approach, and argued that belief systems were invented to suit the material conditions of the day. Karl Kautsky (a contemporary of Weber) argued that historically, capitalist economic production could be traced back to before the belief system of John Calvin. This debate between Weberians and Marxists over whether culture or material/economic life are the most fundamental in shaping society, has raged ever since. Both groups of theorists accept that both aspects are important in sociological analysis, yet disagree over the level of significance of these factors.

Another major aspect of Weber's theories regarded the role of authority in society and how it worked. For Weber, authority was given to people by others due to ways of thinking and acting. He split authority as a concept into four types (based on the meanings and actions associated with them).

1. Traditional Authority

This type of authority was based on traditional meanings/values and acting upon that basis. This type of authority and power derives from ingrained cultural habits and associations. For example, The Royal Family hold traditional roles of authority within the British social system.

2. Charismatic Authority

This type of authority is governed by the charisma and personality of an individual. This usually comes in the form of a break from traditional values and a challenge to its authority. Charismatic leaders therefore often appear in leading new religious or political movements. This creates a number of problems however, for instance, the popularity of a movement based on a charismatic individual can often lead to failure. Also, the movement can lose focus once their leader dies, as replacing a charismatic leader can be difficult. Examples of charismatic leaders can include such diverse figures as Martin Luther King, Hitler and Robert Kilroy Silk (the TV presenter attempted to form a new political party 'Veritas', yet was unsuccessful in gaining popular support). The actions and meanings that lead to people following charismatic leaders, Weber argued could be due to either 'Affective actions' based on wider emotional sense of how we feel, and 'Value-oriented actions' based on strongly held values and beliefs. A charismatic leader can affect the way people feel about their lives which can then lead to actions based on these ideas. This theory is another departure from Marxist theory which suggests that an individual does not have a great deal of power to shape society. For Marxists, individual figureheads come to be due to wider social and economic factors. They would argue for example, that the material circumstances after the first World War, led to extreme politics and ideology in German politics which made it possible for Hitler to rise to power. If Hitler had never existed, according to Marxists something politically extreme would probably still have happened, led by someone similar (e.g. Himmler etc.).

Martin Luther King   Hitler   Robert Kilroy Silk

3. Rational / Legal Authority

This type of authority was based on scientific, legal, bureaucratic and rationalised meanings and actions. Weber argued that with the decline of religion and the rise of science and

rational 'decision making' that the older forms of authority would lose significance (although the examples shown above may prove otherwise). Yet Weber warned that an overuse of rational thinking, action and authority could lead to a soulless world, void of emotion, feeling and 'magic'. Weber predicted that in the 20th century, this would lead to an 'Iron Cage of Bureaucracy', where people would be spending most of their working lives meeting rationally devised rules, form filling and meeting targets (rationally derived goals based on current knowledge). A prediction many feel to be an accurate one!

Criticisms of Weberian Theory

Functionalists would argue that Weber overemphasises the role of free will in human behaviour. For functionalists, people are the product of the social system that they are born into. A Brazilian tribesman living in a secluded settlement in the Amazon will have very different cultural meanings and ways of acting than a westerner. This they would argue is not due to free will, but the culture that an individual is socialised into. For functionalists human behaviour is structured by the social system. Likewise, Marxists would argue that the material circumstance an individual finds themselves in shapes their consciousness and ideology. This is known as the structure vs. human agency debate within sociology.

A very different criticism however came from an interpretive (*phenomenological*) theorist called Alfred Schutz. Schutz argued that Weber's social action theory was 'too mechanical' in the sense it looked at single acts and specific motives. Schutz argued that social actors could be understood as engaged in a constant flow of action (*reminiscent of the Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus*), and as constructing common-sense knowledge of 'how things are done'. This is how, for Schutz, that individuals organise their everyday actions. Schutz also argued that people are not always consciously aware, nor do they always reflect on future goals. People only reflect on an act occasionally in order to give an account of their actions. For example, if you were to ask someone 'why did you do that?' the individual would probably be able to give an account of the reasons behind their actions, yet this may bear little relevance to original intention (if in fact there was any original intention in the first place). This suggests that the nature of social life is far more fragile and precarious than Weber would suggest. The ideas of Schutz (influenced by the philosophy of Husserl) formed the basis of the perspective of Phenomenology (see later) and were also highly influential on another perspective, that of Ethnomethodology.

Symbolic Interactionism

As has been mentioned earlier, Weber's social action theory is not the only type of interpretivist sociology.   During the 20th century three more interpretive perspectives emerged, the first being 'Symbolic Interactionism'.   This approach was influenced by Weber's theories, yet also moved beyond them. This perspective was first developed in the work of George Herbert Mead and his student Herbert Blumer.

- Interactionists retain the notion of a social context as having influence on identity and behaviour, however, they emphasise the ability of individuals as conscious beings to monitor their own behaviour and to negotiate social roles through interactions with others.
- Society is seen as consisting of: 'Interlocking interactions between individuals based on actors' perceptions and expectations of each other (Bilton et al, 1997: 625).
- Mead emphasised the importance of symbolic communication in this process of interaction, which is used by people to share cultural meanings. Including language, dress and gesture. A 'symbol' is something that represents the meaning of something else, it is 'symbolic'. For example, the word table symbolises the meaning of an actual table. This means individuals are able to conceive and communicate meanings about social phenomena, when the phenomena are not directly visible.
- It is in this 'richly symbolic universe' that human beings create their own sense of self. Mead suggests that people learn 'who they are' and 'what they should do' from the responses of others (both positive and negative).
- Mead argues that we are all self-conscious beings, as we are able to learn how to look at ourselves as if from the outside, thus seeing ourselves how others see us (*or do we...?*). According to Mead, when a child starts to use the word 'I' to what others call 'You' they are exhibiting self-consciousness.

The work of Mead became highly influential, particularly in America in the 1960's, influencing the work of Howard Becker and Erving Goffman. It also influenced more traditional theorists into creating new perspectives (taking more account of human agency), e.g. Pluralism (from Functionalism), Humanist Marxism and 3rd Wave Feminism.
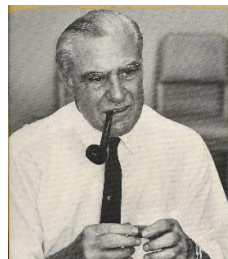
George Mead   Herbert Blumer   Howard Becker   Erving Goffman

Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology

- Phenomenology unlike structural perspectives rejects the notion that society is external to the individual. For Schutz social reality is created through the shared taken-for-granted or common-sense assumptions shared and produced by individuals.

- Phenomenologists argue that social actors live and interact in a world of precariously shared social meanings, known as the 'life-world'.
- Social order can only prevail if people collectively believe in it.
- Schutz argued that social actors are usually unable to recognise the fragility of the 'life-world', because they adopt the 'natural attitude'. This concept refers to the attitude that people have that everything is how they think it is and others see things in pretty much the same way.
- The phenomenologist must therefore find ways to suspend belief in common-sense assumptions of the world, in order to interpret the true nature of social life.
- Highly influenced by phenomenological theory, was the 'ethnomethodology' of Harold Garfinkel. 'Ethno' referring to a set of shared meanings (*e.g. understanding that a person wants to play noughts and crosses from a simple picture*). 'Methodology' referring to the methods used by people to make this sharing of meanings possible, e.g. leaving a gap in speech to show it is the other persons time to speak.
- Garfinkel researched what would happen if the 'natural attitude' (as outlined by Schutz) or belief in shared meanings became broken or 'breached'. To test this, Garfinkel devised a variety of breaching experiments, designed to temporarily disrupt the individual's reliance on taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world (*the noughts and crosses game from Autscape being an example of such an experiment*). He found that this breach can be a traumatic experience for an individual, and so they attempt to rebuild their 'natural attitude' as quickly as possible. These experiments show both the fragility of social reality, and how much human beings need a shared sense of a reality that works on common-sense (even sometimes when it doesn't!).
- Later writers in the field of ethnomethodology, Mehan and Wood (1975), argued that breaching experiments should be outlawed due to their harmful effects.

Revision Questions: What is meant by the following terms?

1. Verstahen
2. Social Action
3. Human Agency
4. Traditional Authority
5. A Symbol
6. The Life-World
7. The Natural Attitude
8. Breaching Experiments

Who originated the above terms (1-8)?