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# BASIC SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

1 - 6 pages



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

A theory is a set of ideas which provide an explanation for something. Haralambos and Heald (1980) "A sociological theory is a set of ideas which provides an explanation for human society". A theory is a clear general statement establishing some definite link between two or more phenomena but the statement remains open for further verification on empirical grounds.

Critics of sociology sometimes object to the emphasis which sociologists place on theory and suggest it might be better to let the facts speak for themselves. But there are no facts without theory... like all theory, sociological theory is selective. No amount of theory can hope to explain everything, account for the infinite amount of data that exist or encompass the endless ways of viewing reality. Theories are therefore selective in terms of their priorities and perspectives and the data they define as significant.

According to Wallace and Wolf (1982) "Theory is an idea or set of ideas that is intended to explain something about life or the world especially one that has not proved to be true. It is also the general principles or ideas of a subject, especially of a scientific subject.

Our whole way of looking at the world depends on theoretical perspective. Therefore, to read sociological theory is to understand a great deal more about what we and our

world are like and how unordinary and ambiguous the most taken-for-granted and every day aspects of our life may be".

Theory is a mental activity according to Turner (1982). It is a process of developing ideas that can allow us to explain why events should occur. Theory is constructed with several basic elements or building blocks (1) concepts (2) variables (3) statements and (4) formats. While there are many divergent claims about what theory is or should be, these four elements are common to all of them. An understanding of what each represents is thus the first step in the analysis of social theory. A theory must allow for understanding of events and hence it must be tested against the facts of the world. Theory is as dynamic a body of ideals today as it has ever been. For instance, Karl Marx's theory of conflict is directed mainly to the process of change in society.

According to Turner (1982) our analysis of sociological theory should begin with a blunt admission: From the perspective of ideal scientific theory, sociology has a long way to go. "This confession is not meant to imply that all theory in sociology is so lacking. Indeed, some of the specific theoretical perspectives of sociology can be converted rather easily into proper theoretical formats. Still, the most general theoretical orientation that have guided sociological theorizing and research are deficient".

The classical definition of a theory is essentially a deductive one. Much of sociological theory is of this nature while much is not of this nature. Wallace and Wolf (1982) "Because of these differences, modern sociological theory is

made up of a group of perspectives with very little in common except their general and formalizing approach and their concern for understanding human behaviour" However, through our analysis of the major perspectives in sociology we have demonstrated that theory in sociology has great potential.

In American sociology, functionalism was the most influential perspective in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s neo-Marxist and analytic conflict theory became more popular than functionalism. **Wallace and Wolf (1982):**

Functionalists were working in a period when there was a general political consensus, and many intellectuals believed in an "End of ideology". Functionalism's emphasis on common norms thus seemed an appropriate way to examine society. Younger sociologists' interests were formed during the era of the Vietnam War, a period of renewed political and ideological strife. Whatever their own political preference, they had their attention turned to the origins of conflict and importance of ideology. Meanwhile, the new left produced a group of young, left wing sociologists with a great interest in the Frankfurt school. Functionalism went out of fashion because other approaches became more relevant in answering societal questions.

Symbolic interactionists emphasize people's individual motives and interpretations of action. Consequently, they focus on the way particular groups interact. Exchange theorists insist that individuals make rational choices on the

basis of the costs and benefits of different actions. After 1945 phenomenology with its criticisms of mainline social science and its concern with the subjective aspects of reality influenced even non phenomenologists (**Wallace and Wolf, 1982**).

In his own contribution **Turner (1982)** noted that:

In sum, each of the major perspective of contemporarily sociological theory succeeds, in its different way, in helping us understand one of the major institutions of contemporary society – one in which each of us spends much of our life. In doing so, moreover, it complements rather than contradicts the major insights provided by others. A similar pattern could be found and traced in many other spheres – voting patterns for example, or the workings of a government bureaucracy or standing army. This is the reason, ultimately, that each perspective is recognized as an important part of modern theory and why so many practicing sociologists are eclectic in their approach, drawing on the insights of different perspectives in accordance with their interests and concerns.

**Blumer (1959)** has argued that sociological theorizing can at best consist of a body of sensitizing concepts which will allow for some degree of understanding of social events. The development of a conceptual and theoretical framework intended to give sociology truly scientific status and at the same time relate it logically to other social sciences.

Sociology is a way of studying social life, a way of interpreting information on aspects of the social world considered significant for the time and place. Sociological theory is therefore concerned with developing principles that will allow increased understanding of social events. The aim of this book is to analyze the historical roots and contemporary profile of sociology's dominant theoretical orientations.

### How Theories Grow

Merton and others thought that a more intense interplay between theory and research would provide the seedbed in which theory would grow. Recently, **Wagner and Berger (1985)** cited by **Abrahamson (1990)** pointed out three such ways in which theory can grow as follows:

- (1) By elaboration – as a result of research which examines an established theory, a new theory is developed that is more comprehensive or more precise than the older one. For example, tests of the functional theory of stratification indicated that the rewards of a position were more dependent upon the scarcity of qualified personnel than upon the position's functional contribution.
- (2) By proliferation – theories which were developed to apply in one realm or problem area are applied in research to different domains. For instance ... a population ecology perspective that was originally applied only to individuals was more recently utilized

to explain the rates with which new organizations were founded.

- (3) By competition – a new theory is presented which promises to explain some phenomena better than an established theory. The competing claims would ideally be examined by research which compares the accuracy of the predictions derived from each theory. For example, **Homans** has claimed that behavioural principles provide better explanations for change than do concepts linked to social structure.