



PENGUIN ACADEMICS

# THE SPIRIT OF SOCIOLOGY

A READER

THIRD EDITION

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## Sociology as a Science

**A**LL SCIENCES FOLLOW SIMILAR METHODS AND BRING evidence to bear on important questions that are within the domain of each discipline. Physics and chemistry, biology and psychology, anthropology and sociology, all have more in common as sciences than might first appear. The questions posed by each discipline belong to a comprehensive world view, or paradigm, that houses all the theories which connect the important concepts and ideas used to explain each discipline's portion of the cosmos. These theories guide scientific investigations by pointing to important questions which must still be answered, or at least examined. Research applies scientific methods to collect and analyze information (data) that bring evidence to bear on the important theoretical questions. Science, with all its flaws and uncertainties, is the best set of ideas and practices known to understand the empirical (measurable, material) world.

Sociology has its place in the sciences and is one which has its own domain and its own theories and methods. Social life, for sociology, has come to be understood at the macro (large world view of social structures and institutions) and micro (small world view of face to face, interpersonal associations) levels. We need theories and research methods to aid in the discovery of each set of influences on human behavior. One theory, one set of data, and one approach to looking at the world will not suffice. Multiple theories, multiple research methods, and many applications of our discipline will be needed to comprehend the complexity of the social world. This topic of the text and, indeed,

each reading within the following topics, will speak to the diverse world of sociology.

Theories are explanations that tell us about the social world. They tell us why things occur, in what sequence they happen, etc. Theories are like maps, and just as we need different maps to get us from place to place (road maps, hiking trail maps), we need different theories to help us understand the different terrains of social life. Typically, for introductory students in sociology, three theoretical perspectives are presented. Functionalism and conflict theories aid in the understanding of the macro or structural world, such as, gender, social class. Symbolic interaction theory focuses on the interpersonal world and explains face-to-face interaction and, therefore, examines the micro-social world of peer groups, co-workers, and so on.

In this reader, you will see examples of quantitative, qualitative, and participant observation research. Much of sociological research depends on surveys which ask people to complete written questionnaires or answer interview questions. Sometimes large, national data sets are used to answer questions about educational attainment, social inequality, or health issues, and these approaches use quantitative data to look at the social world. An example of such large-scale survey is the U.S. Census, and many sociologists use these data to answer their research questions. Qualitative research might use informal interviews and observations for its data. The qualitative approach gives us an in-depth look at social processes among smaller samples of people. Sociology is a science that depends on different theories and multiple research methods to capture and understand social life.

The readings in this section will show how theories, styles of research, and the practice of sociology all come together to create the discipline we are now studying. Ritzer's discussion of sociological theory reminds us that we all create theories (explanations) regarding events in our lives. We are also given an insider's view of contemporary sociological theory and its shortcomings. Liebow's fine ethnography of homeless women illustrates how a master of this research tradition uses qualitative sociology to give a poignant view of life among homeless women. Finally, the reading by McKee and Porter brings to light the ethical issues tied to research done using the Internet. As case studies are presented, it is easy to see what risks we might run by posting information on social networking sites and participating in the virtual world.

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GEORGE RITZER

## Introduction to Sociological Theory

Everyone theorizes about the social world (and many other things—natural events, supernatural possibilities) virtually all of the time. Most generally this means that people think about, speculate on, some social issues. We might think about our parents' relationship to one another or speculate about the chances that our favorite team will win the league championship or whether China will go to war with Taiwan. On the basis of such speculation we are likely to develop theories about our parents (e.g., they get along so well because they have similar personalities), our team (they will not win the league championship because they lack teamwork), or the possibility of war (China will not go to war because war would threaten China's recent economic advances). These theories deal with social realities and social relationships—for example, the personalities of our parents and how those personalities affect the way they relate to one another; teamwork and the ability to win a championship; the nature of China, and its relationship to other nations, in an era in which the global economy is increasingly tightly intertwined.

### Creating Sociological Theory

Social theorists . . . do much the same kind of thing—they speculate, they develop theories, and their theories deal with social realities and social relationships. Of course, there are important differences between everyday theorizing and that of social theorists:

1. Social thinkers usually theorize in a more disciplined and self-conscious manner than do people on an everyday basis.
2. Social thinkers usually do their theorizing on the basis of the work of social thinkers who have come before them. Thus, virtually all social theorists have carefully studied the work of their forebears, while most laypeople operate largely, if not totally, on their own. To paraphrase Isaac Newton, and, more recently, the sociologist Robert Merton, if social theorists have developed better theories, it is because they have been able to build upon the ideas of those thinkers who came before them.
3. In addition, social theorists also often rely on data, either gathered by themselves or collected by others, on the social realities or relationship of interest to them. Laypeople may have some data at their disposal when they theorize, but these data are likely to be far less extensive and to be collected much less systematically.
4. Unlike laypeople, social theorists seek to publish their theories ... so that they can be critically analyzed, more widely disseminated, used as a basis for empirical research, and built upon by later theorists. The rigors of the review process help ensure that weak theories are weeded out before they are published or receive scant attention if they do manage to be published.
5. Most importantly, social theorists do not, at least professionally, think about specific relationships involving their parents, their favorite team, or even a particular nation. Social theorists generally think in a more inclusive manner about very broad social issues, whereas the layperson is much more likely to speculate about much narrower, even personal, issues. Thus, in terms of the three examples already mentioned, although a layperson is likely to speculate about the relationship between her parents, the social theorist thinks about the more general issue of, for example, the changing nature of spousal relations in the early 21st century. Similarly, the layperson who thinks about the chances of success of her favorite team contrasts with the social theorist who might be concerned with such issues as the unfairness of competition between sports teams in the era of large salaries and budgets. Finally, rather than theorizing about China, a social theorist might think about the contemporary nation-state in the era of global capitalism....

Although social theorists think in general terms, this is not to say that the issues of concern to them are only of academic interest. In fact, the issues that are chosen are often of great personal interest to the theorists (and many others) and are frequently derived from issues

of great import in their personal lives. Thus, the stresses and strains in their parents' marriage, or even in their own, might lead sociologists to theorize about the general issue of the modern family and the difficulties that abound within it. The best sociological theories often stem from deep personal interests of theorists.

However, this poses an immediate dilemma. If the best theory stems from powerful personal interests, isn't it likely that such theory is likely to be biased and distorted by those interests and personal experiences? The bad experiences that a theorist might have had as a child in her own home, or her own marital problems, might bias her against the nuclear family and give her a distorted view of it. This, in turn, might lead her in the direction of a theory critical of such a family. This is certainly possible, even likely, but theorists must and usually do manage to keep their personal biases in check. Yet bias is an ever-present danger that both theorists and those who read theory must keep in the forefront of their thinking.

Balancing this is the fact that feeling strongly about an issue is a powerful motivator. Sociologists with strong feelings about the family (or any other topic in sociology) are likely to do sustained work on it and to feel driven to come up with theoretical insights into the issue. As long as biases are kept in check, strong personal feelings often lead to the very best in social theory. . . . In many ways, Marx's theory of capitalism is one of the very best in the history of social theory, and it was motivated by Marx's strong feelings about it and the plight of the workers in it. It is true that these feelings may have blinded Marx to some of the strengths of the capitalist system, but that is counterbalanced by the fact that these feelings led to a powerful theory of the dynamics of capitalism.

One can theorize about any aspect of the social world with the result that social theorists have speculated about things we would expect them to think about (politics, the family), as well as others that we might find quite surprising (e.g., I've done work on things like fast-food restaurants, credit cards, and shopping malls). Every aspect of the social world, from the most exalted to the most mundane, can be the subject of social theory. Various social theorists find different aspects of the social world important and interesting, and it is in those areas that they are likely to devote their attention. Some might find the behavior of kings and presidents interesting, while others might be drawn to that of panhandlers and prostitutes. Furthermore, still

others, often some of the best social theorists, are drawn to the relationship between highly exalted and highly debased behavior. For example, Norbert Elias (1897–1990) was concerned with the relationship (in the period between the 13th and the 19th centuries) between such mundane behaviors as picking one's nose at the dinner table, blowing one's nose, expelling wind, and changes in the king's court. . . . In terms of mundane behaviors, he found that over time people grew less and less likely to pick their noses at the table, to stare at one's handkerchief and the results of blowing one's nose, and to noisily and publicly expel wind. This is linked to changes in the king's court that were eventually disseminated to the rest of society. Basically, the members of the king's court became dependent on a wider and wider circle of people, with the result that they became more sensitive about the impact of at least some of their behaviors (e.g., violence against others) and more circumspect about them. Eventually, these wider circles of dependence, this greater sensitivity and circumspection, made their way to the lower reaches of society, and the kinds of everyday behaviors discussed above were greatly affected by them. To put it baldly, people generally stopped (the exceptions are now quite notable) picking their noses at the dinner table or noisily expelling wind in public.

Social thinkers may focus on particular behaviors because they find them important and interesting, but they also may do so because it provides them with a point of entry into the social world. This idea is based on the perspective of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) that the social world is composed of an endless series of social relationships. . . . Each social act, in this view, is part of a social relationship and each of those relationships, in turn, is ultimately related to every other social relationship. Thus, any given act or relationship can serve as a way of gaining a sense of the entirety of the social world, even the essential aspects and meanings of that world. Thus, Simmel chose money and relationships based on money as a specific way of gaining insight into the entirety of modern society.

Although there is a great gap between the theories to be discussed . . . and the theories we all create every day, the point is that there is no essential difference between professional and lay theorizing. If . . . you study previous theorizing and then theorize in a more systematic and sustained manner about general social issues, you would be a social theorist. Of course, being a social theorist does not necessarily yield high-quality theories. . . .

## Defining Sociological Theory

Standing the test of time is one characteristic of theories. . . . Another is that they have a wide range of applicability. For example, they do not simply explain behavior in your family, but in a large number of similar families in the United States and perhaps even in other nations around the world. Still another is that the theories deal with centrally important social issues. Thus, the issue of globalization . . . and the global economy is defined by many as a key issue today and, as a result, has attracted the attention of many social theorists. Finally, the theories . . . were created either by sociologists or by those in other fields whose work has come to be defined as important by sociologists. For example, . . . although some feminist theorists are sociologists (e.g., Dorothy Smith, Patricia Hill Coffins), the vast majority are social thinkers from a wide variety of other fields. Whether or not theories were created by sociologists, the theories to be discussed here have been built upon by others who have refined them, expanded on them, or tested some of their basic premises in empirical research.

A more formal definition of sociological theory is a set of interrelated ideas that allow for the systematization of knowledge of the social world, the explanation of that world, and predictions about the future of the social world. While some of the theories . . . meet all of these criteria to a high degree, many others fall short on one or more of them. Nonetheless, they are all considered full-fledged sociological theories for purposes of this discussion. Whether or not they meet all the criteria, all the theories . . . are considered by large numbers of sociologists (as well as those in many other fields) to be important theories. Perhaps most importantly, all of these are big ideas about issues and topics of concern to everyone in the social world.

## Creating Sociological Theory: A More Realistic View

Up to this point in this chapter, we have offered an idealized picture of sociological theory and the way it is created. In recent years a number of sociological theorists have grown increasingly critical of this image and have sought to create a more accurate picture of theory and theory creation. They point out that at least some theorists are quite undisciplined (if not downright casual); they don't always study the work of



their predecessors in detail; they aren't always so careful about collecting data that bear on their theories; their work is not always reviewed rigorously prior to publication; they allow their personal experiences to distort their theories; and so on. Overall, the point is made that the creation of sociological theory is far from the perfect process described previously.

In addition to critiquing the work of individual theorists, the critics have also attacked the general state of sociological theory. They have made the point that the best theories are not necessarily the ones that survive, become influential, and are covered in books like this one. They contend that sociological theory is not unlike the rest of the social world—it is affected by a wide range of political factors. What does and does not come to be seen as important theory (as part of the canon) is the result of a series of political processes:

1. The work of those who studied with the acknowledged masters of sociological theory, people (historically, men) who came to occupy leadership positions within the discipline, is likely to be seen as more important than the work of those who lacked notable and powerful mentors.
2. Works reflecting some political orientations are more likely to become part of the canon than those done from other perspectives. Thus, in the not-too-distant past in sociology, politically conservative theories (e.g., structural functionalism) . . . were more likely to win acceptance than those that were radical from a political point of view (e.g., various theories done from a Marxian perspective). . . .
3. Theories that lead to clear hypotheses that can be tested empirically are more likely to be accepted, at least by mainstream sociologists, than those that produce grand, untestable points of view.
4. Theories produced by majority group members (i.e., white males) are more likely to become part of the canon than those created by minorities. Thus, the works of black theoreticians have been highly unlikely to become part of the canon. . . . The same is true, at least until recently, of the work of female theorists. . . . The theoretical ideas of those associated with cultural minorities (e.g., Chicanos, homosexuals) have encountered a similar fate.

Thus sociological theory has not, in fact, always operated in anything approaching the ideal manner that was described earlier in this chapter. However, in recent decades there has been growing awareness of the gap between the ideal and the real. As a result, a number of perspectives that were denied entry into the heart of sociological theory have come, in recent years, to attain a central position within the field.

is it old?

Thus, Marx's theory . . . and a variety of neo-Marxian theories . . . have become part of the canon. Similarly, feminist theory has become a powerful presence in sociological theory. . . . Thus, contemporary sociological theory is now characterized by a great mix of theories, some of which fit the ideal model and others that are the product of the less idealistic, more realistic model of the way theory works. That is, those who support previously excluded theories have flexed their muscles and used their power within sociological theory to enhance the position of their perspectives. These upstarts now share center stage in sociological theory with more mainstream theories that have long occupied that position. . . .

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the differences between lay and professional theories?
2. What is the definition of sociological theory?