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SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION: ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEMS OF VALUE IN THEORY CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The core aspects of how sociological Explanation and Interpretation characteristically operate are especially visible in what may be called “traditions of inquiry”. Such traditions form around substantive debates such as why capitalism emerged in Europe, or how social background affects individual performances on IQ tests. In debates like these, both differing approaches and contending paradigms account come into confrontation. There are three types of Paradigms in sociology; Social fact paradigms, social definition and social behavioural paradigms. These paradigms have their various methods or an approach through which social reality is constructed. Constructing social reality or giving sociological explanation of any social situation does not present much difficulty, but the question of which explanation is scientific, or which paradigm(s) will represent a true knowledge or adequate analyses of social phenomena is the major problem of sociology. The study examines the different sociological paradigms (positivism and phenomenology) and the various explanations that emerge from them. It will also examine other sociological explanations that either belongs to the above two paradigms or does not fit into any of the paradigms. Also, attempt is made to identify some of the problems or limitations of sociological explanation-mostly the problems of conceptualization of social facts, problems of values or ideologies, subjectivity of action, measurement and relativism.

Keywords: Sociological Explanation, Phenomenology, Positivism, Symbolic Interactionism, Functionalist Explanation

Introduction

Different paradigms carry with them different theories, which also present different values, concepts, and generalizations. As a result of this, different explanation arises for the same social events. Lawrence (1992) rejected Scientific Methodology as ultimate source of valid explanation, the disagreement on what is deemed a proper regimen of explanation is centred on the controversies derived in part from different value –interest. Under a given paradigm or regimen of explanation, multiple criteria for adjudicating among account co-exist, leaving the validity of any single account open to external challenge even when it is sustained internally, thus, positivist(s) explanation(s), but it is still left for phenomenologist(s) external to challenge the validity of such explanation and vice-Versa. Anthony (1995) assures us that a situation in

which different explanation frame works are in a paradigm or different paradigms, attributing contrary explanations to the same phenomenon, is no crisis. For accepting a theory, approach or explanation only requires beliefs in its adequacy to cope with the phenomena explained. Therefore, it is not unusual that sociological explanation(s) have confliction preference for one kind of explanation over the other, because the subject matter of sociology is one that is always changing and in which the sociologist is also part of. The subjective nature of man gives way for co-existence of alternative explanations which is based on the heterogeneity of values.

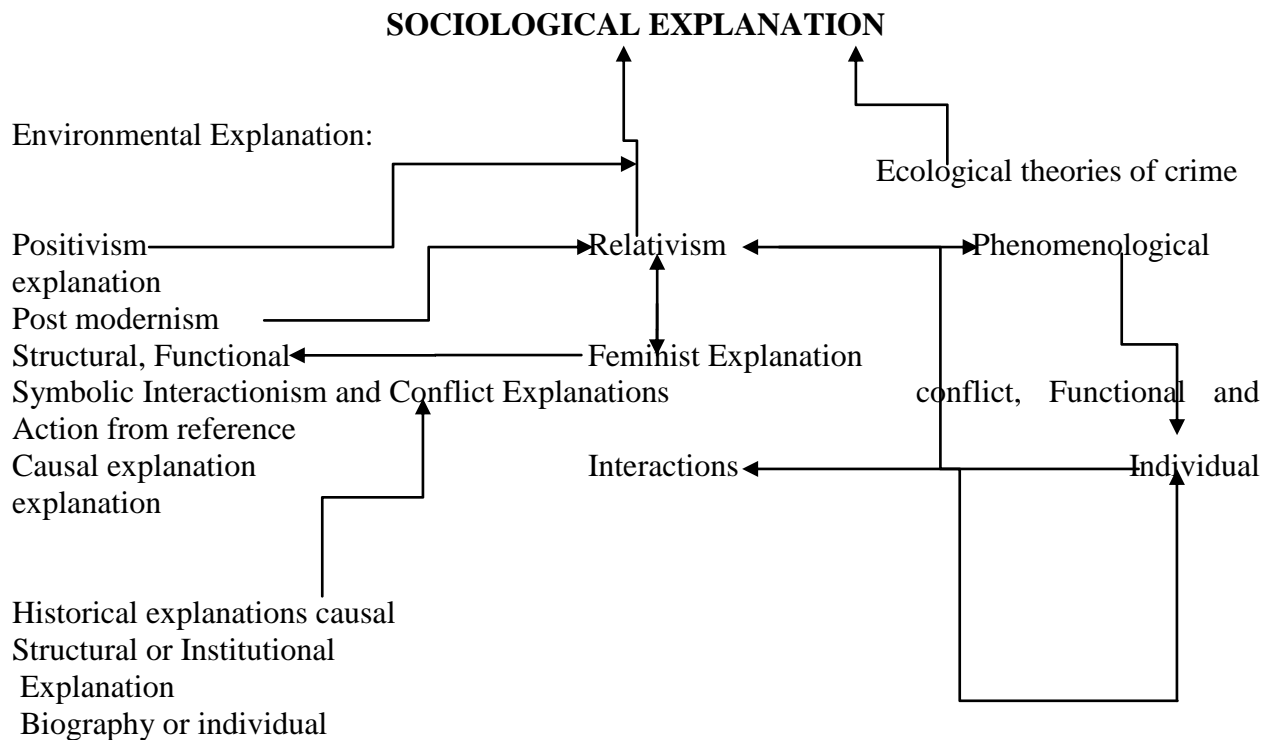
What is Sociological Explanation?

Sociological explanation usually employs theories that relate ideas with observations that are made. When a sociologist demonstrates that a series of logically interrelated assumptions lead to a conclusion; it is said that a social event has been explained. Explanation according to Allen (1990) “is primarily a set of reasons why events occurred the way that it did”, also, scientific or sociological explanation has one or more generalizations, one or more specific observations and a conclusion. In generalization, sociologists use concepts which represent characteristics (or properties) of social phenomenon that is to be explained.

For instance, Karl Marx in explaining conflict in society used the concepts of class and mode of production. Also, sociologists derive their explanations by re-defining concepts used by others, thereby generating alternative explanation for the same social situation or phenomena. Marx Weber in explaining the inequality in society re-defined class as not only based on the ownership of means of production, but class includes status group. Such re-definition produced a different sociological explanation, quite different from Karl Marx’s. Therefore, concepts play important role in sociological explanations, but the way they are used in explanations depend on the paradigms or theories from which they are derived or the way the sociologist used them. For instance, positivist or macro-sociologist does not give explanation without making reference to institutions or structures.

Andy and Terry (1996) were of the opinion that relations between causal factor (including models that indicate how causal factor are related), and the mechanism purporting to describe the process by which one causal factor influences the other. But social mechanisms are unobservable-like natural mechanisms, they cannot be derived from empirical observations; instead, they often are derived from general theories whose roots are in the various paradigms.

Below is conceptual frame work of sociological explanation based on the two paradigms with few explanations belonging to more than one paradigm.



Source: Andy and Terry (1996)

Positivism

Is a term first brought into use by Auguste Comte (1798-1857), it holds that all knowledge can be based on science and scientific thought and that all behaviour whether of objects or of people, is subject to general laws. The possibility of identifying these laws inspired a generation of mid-to late nineteenth century theorists in many area of knowledge, although the extent of its influence on writers such as Marx and Durkheim remains under-dispute. According to John (1999), “the three major models of scientific investigation which sociologists have taken over from natural sciences are, firstly, that which sees science as primarily as classificatory, second that which sees science as the search for laws, and that finally which sees it as concerned with the establishment of causal relations and sequence. For positivists, “Social Facts” exist as definite realities and are external to the individual and coercive of the actor(s).

Andrew (1993) grouped Durkheim’s social facts into two major levels which are the material social facts which include structural components like church and state, the society,

morphological components of society, population distribution, channels of communication and housing arrangement. The non-material social facts are Morality, collective conscience, collective representations and social current. The positivist believe that since social facts are external to the individual and coercive to the actor, it will be possible or even ideal to apply scientific model in explaining the effect of the social structures on the individual. How effective this model (scientific) and its application is, a subject of debate. The point worth mentioning is that positivists focus on the macro level and sees individuals as being compelled by social facts like, structure and institutions. Sociological explanations that are derived from the positivist or scientific model include Institutional, Structural, Functional, Group, Conflicts and Collective explanation.

Group and Institutional Explanation

In a way social institution can be seen as a sort of “super-customs”, a set of mores folkways and patterns of behaviour that deals with major social interest-law, church and the family for example. Thus, social institution consists of structural components of a society through which the main concerns and activities are organized, and social needs (such as those for order, belief and reproduction) are met (Andy and Terry, 1996). Explanations of the conditions and mechanism of social order in terms of some aspects of social groups and institutions (social explanation) have been even more variegated in details and specifications than explanations in terms of individual.

Explanations can be divided into two or more types. One of such types emphasizes the content of social interaction, its goals or its rootedness in basic needs of social group and the analyses of institutional spheres, their internal organizational and structural characteristics or dynamic and possibly, their inter-relations. It is this type of sociological explanation that has produced probably the greatest number of sociological works both descriptive and analytical. For instance Talcott Parson's (AGIL) used some of the functions of the institutions-religions to analyze the society social order.

The second major type of sociological explanation has been in terms of what have often been called the formal aspects of social life, a conception very close to, but not fully identical with the structure of inter-individual interaction. Three principle variants of this second major type can be discerned. One of them distinguishes between different types of social interaction according to the “quality” of the mutual or common social commitment which binds the

members together. It is best represented by Tonnies classic distinction between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, which was later taken up by students of primary group. The second variant deals mainly with the types and vicissitudes of interaction between individuals within different group structures, ranging from two-person group or “dyad” up to the greater complexities of interaction in larger group-group in formal organizations. Here we may cite the work of Simmel and many subsequent studies of inter personal relations and perceptions from small group-learning theory. In the study of groups whether large or small, tension always found it way of being expressed-conflict result.

Conflict Explanation

Conflict explanation (theory) can be seen as a development that took place, at least in part, in reaction to structural functionalism. Conflict theory has various roots, such as Marxism theory and Simmel’s work on social conflict. At first sights, Marxism seemed difficult to understand. It seems to use more new words and phrases than any other explanations in sociology. This is not because Marx was being awkward, but because of the richly creative nature of his thought. Marx did not want to simply analyse the world; he wanted to play a part in changing it. His work was devoted to understand the way in which modern industrial societies change. Marx’s theory is sometimes described as ‘historical materialism’. The term materialism is often used to describe the acquisition of consumer goods (consumerism) but in Marx’s time materialism meant the opposite of idealism, the belief that physical world is created by ideas, particularly religious ideas. Marx argued instead that ideas themselves are products of the material struggle for existence in the economic base of society. Historical materialism sees change in society emerging from this struggle. There are according to Marx three main periods of change that have occurred in the way human societies are organized. These periods he calls Epochs, which are characterized by the way in which production happens i.e. the mode of production. The three main Epochs are the classical societies of ancient Rome and Greece, the feudal societies of the Middle Ages, and the -capitalist society.

Functionalist Explanation

No one has ever seen a society. All they can ever see is small parts at work at different times in different places. The nearest anyone could come would be to observe a small community, preferably with what seems to be a simple way of going about their everyday life. It should then be possible to work out what the importance of the things these people do and the

way their community works. Some Anthropologists, who themselves come from industrial societies; have undertaken studies of preindustrial societies still in existence. Among the best known is Radcliff-Brown (1881-1955).

A central part of the way he observed these pre-industrial societies was his belief that social activity, if it was recurrent, must be functional to the working of that community. In other words, an observable pattern of group activity must help maintain the life of that community. It must have a function. If, for example a group of people are regularly observed sitting around smoking pipes communally, this activity may function to bind together or integrate the group as a community and reinforce the value of friendliness and co-operation. If the men taking part in the activity are elderly, then it may be one way of maintaining the social power, and a respect for age. Applying the functional model in explaining the ASUU and NASU Strike in the 1990s, it makes sense, that those strikes were functional for survival of the educational institutions in the country. ASUU-NASU Strike was functional because they were indications of the decaying state of the educational system in the nations.

The Organic Analogy

The idea behind the organic analogy is that societies can be compared to the way a biological organism's works. Someone who had no idea how the body works might find, from slicing a human part that there were various organs inside that make human work. The heart functions to pump blood around the veins and arteries, the kidneys clean the blood and the intestines are involved in digestion and so on. Each organ has a function which contributes to the working of the greater whole. So too with society, where the organs might be the family, Education, the system of religion, works, etc.

Homeostasis is the term applied to the way in which an organism regulates itself to cope with changes in internal and external conditions. For example, after exercise, the heated-up body sweats to help the body temperature to stay stable. When this concept is used to understand how equilibrium is maintained in society, then the organic analogy becomes more effective.

Historical Explanation

Social sciences deal with the problems of biography, of history and their interactions with social structures. That these three-biography, history, society, are coordinate points of the proper study of man cannot be disputed. The problems of our time, which includes the problem of man's very nature, cannot be stated adequately without consistent practice of the view that

history is the shank of social study. Without the use of history and without a historical sense of psychological matters, the social scientist-sociologist cannot adequately state the kinds of problems that ought not to be the orienting points of his studies (Wright, 1977). Adequate explanation of what changes have taken place must not fail to examine the past-history.

To understand the dynamic changes in a contemporary social institutions or structures, we must try to discern its long-run developments, and in terms of ten questions often asked, such as what are the mechanisms by which these trends have occurred, which of the structures in the society is changing. It is in questions such as these that our concern and understanding with trends come to a climax. That climax has to do with the historical transition from one epoch to another and with what we call the structures of an epoch (Allen, 1990). When an epoch is properly studied and explained, it becomes an intelligible field of study that reveals mechanism of history, making it peculiar. Historical explanation even assists us in understanding the nature of sociology as discipline, its growth and trend. For instance, many sociological concepts most commonly used- in social science, sociology especially have to do with historical transition from rural community to urban or modern society, for instance, Maine's "status" and "contract", Tonnies' "community" and "society", Weber's "status and "class", St. Simon's "three stage", Spencer's "Military" and "Industrial", Pareto's circulation of Elites, Cooley's "primary and secondary groups", Durkheim "Mechanical and Organic solidarity", Redfield's "folk and urban", Baker's "Sacred" and "Secular", Lasswell's "bargaining society and gains on state"- these, no matter how used, are all historically rooted concepts.

Even those who believe they do not work historically generally reveal by their use of such terms, some notion of historical trends and even a sense of period and change. Historical explanation helps us to understand a slow-moving society, trapped for decades in a cycle of poverty, tradition, diseases and ignorance. It is only historical studies that persistently study the mechanisms of the entrapment, which can give adequate explanation of the cycle of poverty. For example, the explanation of how and why Nigerians' politics is being dominated by ex-military rulers, will not fail to examine the past military administration- how they loot the economy and now they use money to buy power.

Furthermore, in building sociological theories, historical explanations are very vital elements. Theorists (Sociological) recognized that extant theories of many important dimensions of modern societies are based on implicit historical premises that needed to be reconsidered.

Modernization theory, for instance, had incorporated an account of early modern European and Africa history- Talcott parson's pattern's variables- which he used to generate propositions for the study of social change in the rest of the world. The same apply to dependency theory. Karl Marx in building theory of conflict did not fail to examine the history of past Epoch. He had to examine this to enable him explain the origin of capitalism and to note the trend that have taken place. It was based on this knowledge of the trends of capitalism that he made his predictions, from capitalism, to communism-though his predictions did not come to pass.

Individual in Historical Explanation

Having examined the role of social structures in history and contemporary society, it will be unfair not to assign individual members of the society a place in historical explanations. This is because many historical explanations pivot around the life of an individual cannot be adequately explained and understood without reference to the institution within which his/her biography is enacted. For the individual biography records the acquiring, modifying and in a very intimate ways the moving from one role to another is of essence in explanations. One is a child in a certain group, a student, a workman, a foreman, a general or a mother. Much of human life consists of playing such roles within specific institutions. To explain and understand the significant and meaning of the role an individual played and does play, to understand these roles we must understand the history or biography of the individual.

As we try to understand an individual's biography (Wright, 1977) warn that we should remember that man is a social creature-this will enable us to go deeper than merely the external biography as a sequence of social role but to find out values that are associated with the various roles. Also, biography and the character of the individual cannot be understood without proper understanding of the milieu, which individuals find themselves. Adequate explanation requires the understanding of the interplay of the social structures that makes up the milieu the individual live in, nor explained (theoretically) without proper understanding of their biography-mostly the milieu under which they build their theories. Only when we understand the milieu can we explain why they differ in their theoretical reasoning. Historical explanations have attracted much criticism. For instance, most biography are said to be "larger than life" and, most predictions which are based on historical explanation do not come to pass.

Phenomenology

The term phenomenology is most closely associated with Edmund Husserl (1899 – 1938) and in sociology with Alfred Schultz (1899–1959). In this tradition the belief is that positivism's search for social causes is illusory, falling into the trap of determinism. Phenomenology denies that social behaviour, like the movement of atoms and molecules, is determined by external forces which are beyond human control. All that can realistically be achieved is an understanding of how people, individually and collectively, interpret, understand and place meaning on their social reality. Phenomenologists assert that people possess a greater degree of free will than positivist sociologists are willing to admit. The phenomenological approach lays emphasis on the micro level by examining the action of individuals in the society through their subjective meanings and symbols of interaction. Explanations that belong to this approach include: Individual, symbolic interactionism and verstehen Explanation.

Structure and Action Explanation

The debate between the two camps of sociology as regard explanation of social realities can also be seen as one between the concept of structure and action. For the Structuralist sociology should be the study of the effects of the structure of society on social life-the macro or large scale view.

Patterns created by structures such as religion, the family, and organizations or for Marxists, capitalist relations of production are seen to be the starting point in explaining anything in society. The analysis begins at a structural level, hence, some may argue that an increase in unemployment can lead to an increase in the crime rate, or that social disintegration is the cause of suicide, i.e. Social facts' exist as definite realities. Other sociologists, taking the micro or small scale view, doubt the validity of this position. The idea of a social structure is an abstract one, assuming a world 'out there' for us to investigate. The truth is that we are already in that world, with each of us having very different assumptions of what it looks like. They argue that the search for structural clues to social causes and effects should be abandoned in favour of piecing together the way individuals and groups make sense of the world they live in. This involves the analysis of social actions not the intangible structures they are thought to inhabit. Social facts do not exist but are created and constructed in the process of social interaction.

Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interactionism is presented as an explanation emphasizing small scale understanding of how groups and individuals structure their perceptions of action and meaning in

society. Somewhere in-between is the tradition emanating from Max Weber, which explores the possibility of uniting theories of structure and action in society. In attempts to 'pigeon hole' him, no one quite knows where to put him. He was aware that social structures exist and are important, but he was also aware that these structures are, at the same time, made up of individuals, with their own understanding of the meaning of their actions.

The founder of symbolic interactionism, George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), was more interested in psychology than sociology and some critics say his theory reflects this. Symbolic interactionism is essentially a theory of socialization. Becoming a human is not just a matter of being born. It's all about becoming social being, which happens through interactions between the child and those around it. According to Mead the inner 'I' has to be converted into the social 'Me' – an individual with social identity and understanding of the world based upon the shared experience of interacting with others. Mead goes into great detail on how this comes about, comparing the evolution of the species with the creation of the social self. Humans have evolved beyond other animals, due to the complexity of human consciousness linked to the intricate system of symbols which we use to communicate with each other.

This symbolic system is called language, and it is through using these shared meanings to communicate that humans come to be aware of themselves. Self-consciousness beings learn to understand that if they wish to take part in social interactions, they will have to recognize that they have a role to play, and the way they play this role will affect other people. They must learn to try and gauge the effect they are having on other people to see themselves as others see them. Mead calls this 'taking on the attitude of other'.

Ethnomethodology

The theory which stands at the opposite end of sociology to the most extreme forms of positivist, so-called scientific research, is ethnomethodology. This is about the way all people try to make sense of what other people do and say. It is usually associated with Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel's explanation could be seen as a reaction to Parson's middle class, right wing theories. The essence of Garfinkel's approach is that there is no such thing as society, so there is no point in arguing about which theory you use to investigate or explain social behaviour. We all attempt to make sense of social experiences by formulating theories in our everyday lives to interpret and explain what is happening to us. Sociological explanation may be more precisely stated but that does not make them any better than individual theories of social behaviour.

Feminism

In the past few decades, a new approach has emerged which challenges the way that sociologists have looked at the society they study. Feminism criticizes sociology for uncritically adopting a male perspective and marginalizing the roles of females in society. Feminists believe that this failure both reflects and contributes to the under valuing of women. Prior to the 1960s, there was undoubtedly a strong case for arguing that sociology could be seen as male ideology. Women did not feature in studies of social mobility; little was written about women and deviance; their 'natural' domestic role went largely unquestioned; studies of work were largely about men. Feminists argue that the consequence of this 'male stream' research is that women have been ignored, distorted and marginalised in sociology. Following the realization that sociology has looked at society only from male perspective, feminists have responded by trying to create a sociology that explores and attempts to explain women's subordination and places women at the centre of sociological study.

It has not been a unified response, but one which has taken three directions: integrationalist, separatist and reconceptualist. The integrationalist approach argues that sexism in sociology can be overcome by making every attempt to take the roles of women into account when looking at work, leisure, crime, education and so on, grafting them in to the existing body of knowledge. The separatist approach argues that women's experience is qualitatively different from men's.

The reconceptualist approach argues that it is not possible to make up for the imbalance in sociology by simply including women in existing research, or by constructing sociology of women only. Instead, sociology and sociological priorities must be reconceptualised. Sociological theory must be rethought and rewritten, and the basic assumptions of male stream sociology fundamentally challenged. This third view applies a revolution in the way sociology is practiced breaking down the traditional categories of sociology and emphasizing new priorities, especially the private sphere of the home and domestic relationships. Feminist sociologists may embrace other perspectives, what they have in common is a commitment to looking at the world through the female prism.

Causal-Effect Relationship (Causation)

An altogether different view of science has emerged from what has been termed the 'realist' school. This argues that it is misleading to typify science as being based on experiment and

that, outside the laboratory, scientist are faced with as many uncontrollable variable as social scientists. Although men have landed on the moon with great scientific precision, meteorologist with banks of technical equipment cannot tell you with certainty whether it will rain or not in a month or even a day's time, or for how long. Nor is it the case that Scientists works solely on the basis of observation. They cannot see viruses spreading from human or continents drifting apart, but they are able to summarize these facts from the evidence of epidemics striking people down, or from earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The real causes are often knowable only by the effects. This, the realist claims, allows social scientists to claims that they too, are enraged in the same scientific project where many and complex variable are at work.

Conclusion

Sociological explanations seem to have different answers or interpretation for not only different situations but even the same social problem could generate different explanations. Andy and Terry (1995) ask which explanation should be regarded as the right explanation. Some have taken the psychological view that suggest that an explanation to the extent that it performs an explanation functions for the recipient, that is, it satisfies the receiver by reducing the unfamiliar and increases comprehension of the novel event though the novel event be wrong. Allor some of these explanations may be right or wrong, some more right than others. They may be or may not be contradictory e.g. individual against geo-political or group explanations. What this example brings out is that what count an explanation will depend upon the universe of discourse with in which it is proffered, which means; by extension, that all explanation is explanation from the point of view of facts and value. This means in sociology we cannot have sociological explanation but sociological explanations.

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