An Overview of Sociology
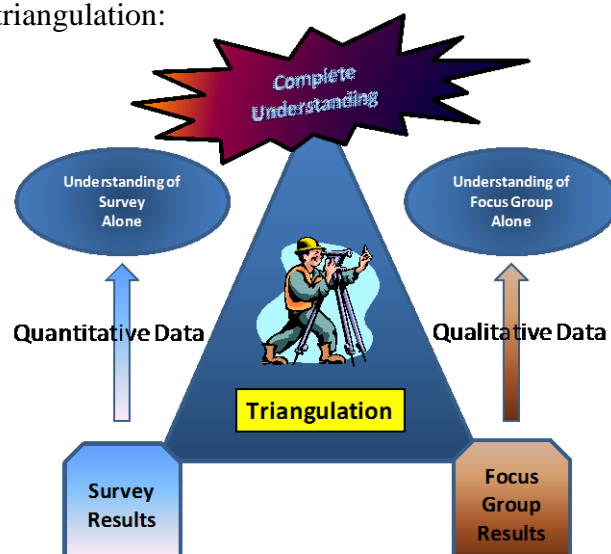
Sociology is the study of human beings living together. It seeks an "interpretive understanding of social behavior in order to gain an explanation of its causes, its course and its effects" (Weber , p. 29). As a field of Science it studies how societal rules are created, organized and perpetuated. Socialization is the process of internalizing those rules. Sociology also studies why rules are broken and why they change over time. It uses the tools of science (logical *makes sense*, empirical *facts*) and its methods to support critical thinking about the human condition.

Common research methods used in sociology include:

1. Ethnographic Research (Interviews and Participant Observations)
2. Survey Research
3. Laboratory Experiments
4. Data Analysis (Population Distributions, etc.)
5. Theory Construction and Verification
6. Attribute Variable Analysis
7. Paradigm Analysis

Sociology seeks to confirm its research findings through "triangulation" of data. The following graphic represents triangulation:

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Triangulation is the combining of statistical information with oral/observational information to create a holistic view of the social phenomenon being studied.

An example of social theory development and experimentation was the Zambardo (Dr. Philip) and [Stanford Prison Experiment](): Research designed to show the role socialization that occurs when conditions (prison) dictate behavior. The Critical Question asked was: Who am I? Sociologist would say that our perceptions of self were associated as a series of role perceptions linked by status. These roles are related by how we believe we must act within them (example: teacher/student). This study used both qualitative and quantitative data to inform its findings.

Status

Three paradigms inform our understanding of status. These are the Interactionist Paradigm (viewing our "self" based on the interaction with other people), the Social Systems Paradigm (viewing interaction in groups) and the Conflict Theory Paradigm (individuals and classes in society possess differing levels of resources and power usage dictates who controls what).

In all these paradigms status perception drives organizational interaction (example: bosses vs. employees etc). Positions are held by people who fill an organizational need. Status is associated to that position within the organization somewhat regardless of the person occupying it. Status is also driven by the opinions (and the value we hold of these opinions) we hold in regard to others.

Sociologists study status by identifying how we "mask" ourselves in order to interact within a social context. This masking behavior situates self worth by comparing it to the opinions of others as reference points. Understanding how we each view each other provides for a shared view of life. We take on roles that others expect thus become "labeled" into acting in a specific way.

Groups

Groups are seen in sociology as aggregations of people who have, over time, persistently exhibited:

1. Shared Interests
2. On-going Interaction
3. Structural Coherence
4. Group Identity

These relationships are characterized by Primary and Secondary Relationships. Primary are sustained by face-to-face (constantly recurring) interactions and Secondary are based on role interactions (short and shallow relationships). Role interaction is moderated by preconceptions. These preconceptions guide how we act towards a person of different social status.

People seek to identify reference groups to guide proper behavior and influence the kind of individual we wish to become. Groups are generally defined around perceptions of "in" and "out". Most importantly groups shape our perception of reality. Experiments have shown that a

person's perception of what is "real" (based on what they physically see, hear, etc.) can be manipulated by group consensus seeking. This "social construction" of reality forms the bases of organizational and institutional interaction.

Organizations

Organizations are the set(s) of agreements made between human beings that form a context within which people interact to achieve certain objectives. They provide a "social map" that describes how a particular collection of people are to work together. The epitome of a formal organization is the "bureaucracy" (Max Weber). This entity possesses:

1. A set of rules and assigned duties that govern interaction.
2. A structured hierarchy.
3. Written files to help govern actions over time.
4. Full time managers.
5. Formalized rules of governance.

Thus organizational persistence continues regardless of the individuals working within it. Significantly, individuals working in bureaucracies gain technical knowledge that is unique to the position they hold.

Parkinson's Law – work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.

Peter Principle – In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence.

Gall's Axioms of Organizational Survival

1. Systems develop goals of their own the moment they come into existence.
2. Intra-system goals exist first.
3. Systems behave as if each has a will to exist independent of the people in it.

Organizations prosper to the extent to which they bind self perception and worth to the organizational vision/mission. Ideally organizational growth is driven by the extent to which individual human benefit from their activities.

Institutions

Societies have needs of their own. Institutions provide belief systems that support societal goals. Traditional institutions governing social life are: the family, religion, government, economy and education. Institutions possess specific components. These include:

1. Norms – expected patterns of behavior
2. Values – views of what is better then what
3. Beliefs – views about what is true

The relationship between each is driven by how we justify and/or specify what we ought to do. Institutions seek to perpetuate themselves for their own sake and tend to create closed systems of

reinforcement. This process of self perpetuation for individuals can be seen as "socialization". As we internalize norms, values and beliefs we become invested in the success of the institution. Thus institutional identity and individual identity become interlinked. Threatening an institution threatens who we are and what we stand for. Changing institutions is therefore linked to changing one-self.

Culture and Society

The totality of institutional patterns in a society (beliefs, values, norms, symbols and physical artifacts) can be defined as its "culture". American society has been formed as an aggregate of our immigrant past and our present perceptions of what being an "American" means. Humans tend to prefer their own cultural norms over others. This is called ethnocentrism. Sociology promotes cultural relativism: the view that cultural differences are merely differences. Sociologists study them to understand their existence apart from judging the relative value of different normative behaviors.

Social structures are seen as the links we associate with status in the organization of human affairs. It includes norms, sanctions, values, beliefs, organizations, institutions and other areas of human interaction. As a system of interaction society creates feedback and communications mechanisms to guide activities. Positive feedback loops are reinforcements that push a system in the same direction. Negative feedback loops create stable systems that control change.

Sociological Insights

Social stratification leads to marginalization. How we see each other as different creates enduring potential for prejudicial behavior.

There is an inescapable conflict between freedom and an orderly society.

We are in a constant contest between deviance (breaking societal rules and norms) and social control. Deviance can also be a driving force for social change.

Social norms make it possible for people to live together in peace and security. But these norms can be unjust and provide the controllers of a society with the means to perpetuate a dysfunctional system.

Reference

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Weber, M. (1962). *Basic concepts in sociology*. Citadel (new English translation issued in 2000).