



1 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Introduction

Humans are social beings. Whether we like it or not, nearly everything we do in our lives takes place in the company of others. Few of our activities are truly solitary and scarce are the times when we are really alone. Thus the study of how we are able to interact with one another, and what happens when we do, would seem to be one of the most fundamental concerns of anyone interested in human life. Yet strangely enough, it was not until relatively recently – from about the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards – that a specialist interest in this intrinsically social aspect of human existence was treated with any seriousness. Before that time, and even since, other kinds of interests have dominated the analysis of human life. Two of the most resilient, non-social approaches to human behaviour have been **'naturalistic'** and **'individualistic'** explanations.

Rather than seeing social behaviour as the product of interaction, these theories have concentrated on the presumed qualities inherent in individuals. On the one hand, naturalistic explanations suppose that all human behaviour – social interaction included – is a product of the inherited dispositions we possess as animals. We are, like animals, biologically programmed by nature. On the other hand, individualistic explanations baulk at such grand generalizations about the inevitability of behaviour. From this point of view we are all 'individual' and 'different'. Explanations of human behaviour must therefore always rest ultimately on the particular and unique psychological qualities of individuals. Sociological theories are in direct contrast to these



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‘non-social’ approaches. Looking a little closer at them, and discovering what is wrong or incomplete about them, makes it easier to understand why sociological theories exist.

Naturalistic theories

Naturalistic explanations of human activity are common enough. For example, in our society it is often argued that it is only natural for a man and a woman to fall in love, get married and have children. It is equally natural for this nuclear family to live as a unit on their own, with the husband going out to work to earn resources for his dependants, while his wife, at least for the early years of her children’s lives, devotes herself to looking after them – to being a mother. As they grow up and acquire more independence, it is still only ‘natural’ for the children to live at home with their parents, who are responsible for them, at least until their late teens. By then it is only natural for them to want to ‘leave the nest’, to start to ‘make their own way in the world’ and, in particular, to look for marriage partners. Thus they, too, can start families of their own.

The corollary of these ‘natural’ practices is that it is somehow *unnatural* not to want to get married, or to marry for reasons other than love. It is equally unnatural for a couple not to want to have children, or for wives not to want to be mothers, or for mothers not to want to devote the whole of their lives to child-rearing. Though it is not right or natural for children to leave home much younger than eighteen, it is certainly not natural for them not to want to leave home at all in order to start a family of their own. However, these ‘unnatural’ desires and practices are common enough in our society. There are plenty of people who prefer to stay single, or ‘marry with an eye on the main chance’. There are plenty of women who do not like the idea of motherhood, and there is certainly any number of women who do not want to spend their lives solely being wives and mothers. There are plenty of children who want to leave home long before they are eighteen while there are many who are quite happy to stay as members of their parents’ households until long after that age.

Why is this? If human behaviour is, in fact, the product of a disposition inherent in the nature of the human being then why are such deviations from what is ‘natural’ so common? We can hardly put down the widespread existence of such ‘unnatural’ patterns of behaviour to some kind of large-scale, faulty genetic programming.

In any case, why are there so many variations from these notions of ‘normal’ family practices in other kinds of human societies? Both



history and anthropology provide us with stark contrasts in family life. In his book on family life in Medieval Europe, *Centuries of Childhood* (1973), Philippe Ariès paints a picture of marriage, the family and child-rearing which sharply contradicts our notions of normality. Families were not then, as they are for us today, private and isolated units, cut off socially, and physically separated from the world at large. Families were deeply embedded in the community, with people living essentially public, rather than private, lives. They lived in households whose composition was constantly shifting: relatives, friends, children, visitors, passers-by and animals all slept under the same roof. Marriage was primarily a means of forging alliances rather than simply the outcome of 'love', while women certainly did not look upon mothering as their sole destiny. Indeed, child-rearing was a far less demanding and onerous task than it is in our world. Children were not cosseted and coddled to anywhere near the extent we consider 'right'. Many more people – both other relatives and the community at large – were involved in child-rearing, and childhood lasted a far shorter time than it does today. As Ariès (1973) puts it, 'as soon as he had been weaned, or soon after, the child became the natural companion of the adult'.

In contemporary non-industrial societies, too, there is a wide range of variations in family practices. Here again, marriage is essentially a means of establishing alliances between groups, rather than simply a relationship between individuals. Monogamy – one husband and one wife – is only one form of marriage. Polygyny, marriage between a husband and more than one wife, and polyandry, between a wife and more than one husband, are found in many societies. Domestic life is also far more public and communal than it is in industrial societies. Each family unit is just a part of a much wider, cooperating group of mainly blood relatives associated with a local territory, usually a village. As in Medieval Europe, therefore, child-rearing is not considered the principal responsibility of parents alone, but involves a far greater number of people, relatives and non-relatives.

Clearly, then, to hope to explain human life simply by reference to natural impulses common to all is to ignore the one crucial fact that sociology directs attention to: human behaviour varies according to the social settings in which people find themselves.

Individualistic theories

What of individualistic explanations? How useful is the argument that behaviour is the product of the psychological make-up of individuals? The employment of this kind of theory is extremely common. For





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example, success or failure in education is often assumed to be merely a reflection of intelligence: bright children succeed and dim children fail. Criminals are often taken to be people with certain kinds of personality: they are usually seen as morally deficient individuals, lacking any real sense of right or wrong. Unemployed people are equally often condemned as 'work-shy', 'lazy' or 'scroungers' – inadequates who would rather 'get something for nothing' than work for it. Suicide is seen as the act of an unstable person – an act undertaken when, as coroners put it, 'the balance of the mind was disturbed'. This kind of explanation is attractive for many people and has proved particularly resilient to sociological critique. But a closer look shows it to be seriously flawed.

If educational achievement is simply a reflection of intelligence then why do children from manual workers' homes do so badly compared with children from middle-class homes? It is clearly nonsensical to suggest that doing one kind of job rather than another is likely to determine the intelligence of your child. Achievement in education must in some way be influenced by the characteristics of a child's background.

Equally, the fact that the majority of people convicted of a crime come from certain social categories must cast serious doubt on the 'deficient personality' theory. The conviction rate is highest for young males, especially blacks, who come from manual, working-class or unemployed backgrounds. Can we seriously believe that criminal personalities are likely to be concentrated in such *social* categories? As in the case of educational achievement, it is clear that the conviction of criminals must somehow be influenced by social factors.

Again, is it likely that the million or so people presently unemployed are typically uninterested in working when the vast majority of them have been forced out of their jobs, either by 'downsizing' or by the failure of the companies they worked for – as a result of social forces quite outside their control?

Suicide would seem to have the strongest case for being explained as a purely psychological act. But if it is simply a question of 'an unsound mind', then why does the rate of suicide vary between societies? Why does it vary between different groups within the same society? Also, why do the rates within groups and societies remain remarkably constant over time? As in other examples, social factors must be exerting some kind of influence; explanations at the level of the personality are clearly not enough.

Variations such as these demonstrate the inadequacy of theories of human behaviour which exclusively emphasize innate natural drives,





or the unique psychological make-up of individuals. If nature is at the root of behaviour, why does it vary according to social settings? If we are all different individuals acting according to the dictates of unique psychological influences, why do different people in the same social circumstances behave similarly and in ways others can understand? Clearly there is a social dimension to human existence, which requires sociological theorizing to explain it.

All sociological theories thus have in common an emphasis on the way human belief and **action** is the product of social influences. They differ as to what these influences are, and how they should be investigated and explained. This book is about these differences.

We shall now examine three distinct kinds of theory – *consensus*, *conflict* and *action* theories – each of which highlights specific social sources of human behaviour. Though none of the sociologists whose work we will spend the rest of the book examining falls neatly into any one of these three categories of theory, discussing them now will produce two benefits:

- it will serve as an accessible introduction to theoretical debates in sociology; and
- it will act as useful reference points against which to judge and compare the work of the subject's major theorists.