Social interaction and social structure: the nature and basis of social interaction

Social interaction is the process of reciprocal influence exercised by individuals over one another during social encounters. Usually it refers to face-to-face encounters in which people are physically present with one another for a specified duration. However, in contemporary society we can also think of social encounters that are technologically mediated like texting, skyping, or messaging. In terms of the different levels of analysis in sociology–micro, meso, macro, and global–social interaction is generally approached at the micro-level where the structures and **social scripts**, the pre-established patterns of behaviour that people are expected to follow in specific social situations, that govern the relationship between particular individuals can be examined. However, as the sociological study of emotions indicates, the micro-level processes of everyday life are also impacted by macro-level phenomena such as gender inequality and historical transformations.

In sociology, social interaction is a dynamic sequence of social actions between individuals (or groups) who modify their actions and reactions due to actions by their interaction partner(s). Social interactions can be differentiated into accidental, repeated, regular and regulated. A social interaction is a social exchange between two or more individuals. These interactions form the basis for social structure and therefore are a key object of basic social inquiry and analysis. Social interaction can be studied between groups of two (dyads), three (triads) or larger social groups. Social structures and cultures are founded upon social interactions. By interacting with one another, people design rules, institutions and systems within which they seek to live. Symbols are used to communicate the expectations of a given society to those new to it, either children or outsiders. Through this broad schema of social development, one sees how social interaction lies at its core.

The empirical study of social interaction is one of the subjects of microsociology, which concerns the nature of everyday human social interactions and agency on a small scale. Methods include symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, as well as later academic sub-divisions and studies like psychosocial studies, conversational analysis and human-computer interaction. With symbolic interactionism, reality is seen as social, developed interaction with others. It argues that both individuals and society cannot be separated far from each other for two reasons.

One being that they are both created through social interaction. The second reason is they cannot be understood in terms without the other. Ethnomethodology, an offshoot of symbolic interactionism, which questions how people's interactions can create the illusion of a shared social order despite not understanding each other fully and having differing perspectives.

Types of social interaction

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is the process of communicating by sending and receiving wordless messages.

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- Nonverbal communication also occurs through the non-content parts of speech, such as voice quality, pace, pitch, volume, rhythm, and intonation.

- Gestures and posture vary by cultural conte

- Nonverbal communication is the process of communicating by sending and receiving wordless messages. This type of communication includes gestures, touch, body language, posture, facial expressions, and eye contact. Nonverbal communication can also include messages communicated through material items. For example, clothing or hairstyle is a form of nonverbal exchange that communicates something about the individual. As a general rule, nonverbal communication can be studied based on the location or context of communication, the physical characteristics of the interlocutors, and the behaviors of the interlocutors in the course of the interaction.

Speech

- Ironically, nonverbal communication can also be found in speech. This type of nonverbal communication is called paralanguage and includes vocal elements, such as voice quality, pace, pitch, volume, rhythm, and intonation. Differences in paralanguage can impact the message that is communicated through words. For example, if someone smiles while

saying "Get out of town," that person likely is communicating that she doubts something you're saying or finds it unbelievable. Alternatively, if someone comes running at you and screams "Get out of town! " with a furious expression, it might be a literal threat. Paralanguage is a good example of nonverbal communication that is not visual.

Posture

Posture, or a person's bodily stance, communicates much about a person's perspectives. Various postures include slouching, towering, shoulders forward, and arm crossing. These nonverbal behaviors can indicate a person's feelings and attitudes. Posture can be used to determine an individual's degree of intention or involvement, the difference in status between interlocutors, and the level of fondness a person has for the other communicator, depending on body "openness."

Studies investigating the impact of posture on interpersonal relationships suggest that mirror-image congruent postures, where one person's left side is parallel to the other person's right side, lead communicators to think favorably about their exchange. Posture is socialized and geographical, meaning that an individual learns different ways to carry themselves in different contexts. A housewife from Kansas City will compose herself differently than a dock worker from Portland, who will compose himself differently than a teenager in Seattle. Generational differences demonstrate how posture is socialized; older generations were taught to carry themselves with their shoulders farther back, prompting parents to remind today's youth to stop slouching.

Gestures

Gestures are movements with one's hands, arms, or face that communicate a particular message. The most common gestures are emblem gestures or quotable gestures that are learned within a particular cultural to communicate a particular message. For example, in the Western world, waving one's hand back and forth communicates "hello" or "goodbye. " Emblem gestures can vary by cultural space so widely that a common gesture in one context is offensive in another. Facial gestures, or facial expressions, are a particularly communicative form of gesture. With all

of the various muscles that precisely control the mouth, lips, eyes, nose, forehead, and jaw, human faces can make more than ten thousand different expressions. Facial expressions are more difficult for the "speaker" to manipulate, given that so many micro-movements are involved in the creation of one expression. This makes facial gestures extremely efficient and honest, and are therefore heavily relied upon in by the "listener" in evaluating the "speaker's" assertions.

Clothing

Clothing is a means of communicating nonverbally that relies upon materials other than one's body. Further, it is a form of nonverbal communication that everyone engages in unless living on a nudist colony. The types of clothing an individual wears convey nonverbal clues about his or her personality, background, and financial status. Even if an individual does not put much thought into his attire, what he wears still communicates something to others, even unintentionally.

Consequences

Nonverbal communication can have serious consequences, even if the public understands the message they are receiving is being conveyed unintentionally. For example, individuals tend to trust and support taller people. Obviously, an individual has no control over his height but, nevertheless, others perceive height to communicate certain character traits. In American elections, the taller candidate usually wins.

Exchange

Social exchange theory argues that people form relationships because they determine that it is in their best interests to do so.Social exchange theory is a sociopsychological and sociological perspective that explains social change and stability as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties. The theory is fundamentally oriented around rational choice theory, or the idea that all human behavior is guided by an individual's interpretation of what is in his best interest. Social exchange theory advances the idea that relationships are essential for life in society and that it is in one's interest to form relationships with others. Of course, whether or not it is in an

individual's interest to form a relationship with a specific person is a calculation that both parties must perform. Nevertheless, social exchange theory argues that forming relationships is advantageous because of exchange. Each party to the relationship exchanges particular goods and perspectives, creating a richer life for both. Notably, while social exchange theory may reference the literal exchange of goods, it can also mean the exchange of more intangible elements. For example, it is in the interests of a dairy farmer and a vegetable farmer to form a relationship because they can exchange their material goods. The theory also applies to Jack and Jill who decide to get married for the emotional support they exchange with one another.

Cooperation

Cooperation is the process of two or more people working or acting in concert.Cooperation is the process of two or more people working or acting together. Cooperation enables social reality by laying the groundwork for social institutions, organizations, and the entire social system. Without cooperation, no institution beyond the individual would develop; any group behavior is an example of cooperation. Cooperation derives from an overlap in desires and is more likely if there is a relationship between the parties. This means that if two people know that they are going to encounter one another in the future or if they have memories of past cooperation, they are more likely to cooperate in the present. Communication plays an essential role in cooperation. Communication enables simple acts of cooperation by facilitating parties' recognition that they have mutual interests and large acts of cooperation by organizing the masses. Without communication, individuals would not be able to organize themselves to cooperate.

Conflict

Social conflict is the struggle for agency or power within a society to gain control of scarce resources.

- Conflict theory argues that conflict is a normal and necessary part of social interaction. In other words, conflict is seen as part of the social landscape rather than an anomaly.

- According to the theory, conflict is motivated by pursuit of personal interests. All individuals and groups are interested in gaining control over scarce resources, and this leads to conflict.

- Once one party gets control of resources, that party is unlikely to release them. The Matthew Effect is the idea that those in control will remain in control.

Social conflict is the struggle for agency or power within a society. It occurs when two or more people oppose one another in social interactions, reciprocally exerting social power in an effort to attain scarce or incompatible goals, and prevent the opponent from attaining them.

Conflict theory emphasizes interests deployed in conflict, rather than the norms and values. This perspective argues that the pursuit of interests is what motivates conflict. Resources are scarce and individuals naturally fight to gain control of them. Thus, the theory sees conflict as a normal part of social life, rather than an abnormal occurrence. The three tenets of conflict theory are as follows:

1. Society is composed of different groups that compete for resources.

2. While societies may portray a sense of cooperation, a continual power struggle exists between social groups as they pursue their own interests.

3. Social groups will use resources to their own advantage in the pursuit of their goals, frequently leading powerful groups to take advantage of less powerful groups.

Competition

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- People can compete over tangible resources, such as land, food, and mates, but also over intangible resources, such as social capital.

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- Many philosophers and psychologists have identified a trait in most living organisms that can drive the particular organism to compete.

- Competition is a contest between people or groups of people for control over resources. In this definition, resources can have both literal and symbolic meaning. People can compete over tangible resources like land, food, and mates, but also over intangible resources, such as social capital. Competition is the opposite of cooperation and arises whenever two parties strive for a goal that cannot be shared.

- Competition can have both beneficial and detrimental effects. Positively, competition may serve as a form of recreation or a challenge provided that it is non-hostile. On the negative side, competition can cause injury and loss to the organisms involved, and drain valuable resources and energy. Many evolutionary biologists view inter-species and intra-species competition as the driving force of adaptation, and, ultimately, of evolution. However, some biologists, most famously Richard Dawkins, prefer to think of evolution in terms of competition between single genes, which have the welfare of the organism "in mind" only insofar as that welfare furthers their own selfish drives for replication. Some Social Darwinists claim that competition also serves as a mechanism for determining the best-suited group–politically, economically, and ecologically.

Social structure

Social structure, in sociology, the distinctive, stable arrangement of institutions whereby human beings in a society interact and live together. Social structure is often treated together with the concept of social change, which deals with the forces that change the social structure and the organization of society.

Although it is generally agreed that the term *social structure* refers to regularities in social life, its application is inconsistent. For example, the term is sometimes wrongly applied when other concepts such as custom, tradition, role, or norm would be more accurate.

Studies of social structure attempt to explain such matters as integration and trends in inequality. In the study of these phenomena, sociologists analyze organizations, social categories (such as age groups), or rates (such as of crime or birth). This approach, sometimes called formal

sociology, does not refer directly to individual behaviour or interpersonal interaction. Therefore, the study of social structure is not considered a behavioral science; at this level, the analysis is too abstract. It is a step removed from the consideration of concrete human behaviour, even though the phenomena studied in social structure result from humans responding to each other and to their environments. Those who study social structure do, however, follow an empirical (observational) approach to research, methodology, and epistemology.

Social structure is sometimes defined simply as patterned social relations—those regular and repetitive aspects of the interactions between the members of a given social entity. Even on this descriptive level, the concept is highly abstract: it selects only certain elements from ongoing social activities. The larger the social entity considered, the more abstract the concept tends to be. For this reason, the social structure of a small group is generally more closely related to the daily activities of its individual members than is the social structure of a larger society. In the study of larger social groups, the problem of selection is acute: much depends on what is included as components of the social structure. Various theories offer different solutions to this problem of determining the primary characteristics of a social group.

Before these different theoretical views can be discussed, however, some remarks must be made on the general aspects of the social structure of any society. Social life is structured along the dimensions of time and space. Specific social activities take place at specific times, and time is divided into periods that are connected with the rhythms of social life—the routines of the day, the month, and the year. Specific social activities are also organized at specific places; particular places, for instance, are designated for such activities as working, worshiping, eating, and sleeping. Territorial boundaries delineate these places and are defined by rules of property that determine the use and possession of scarce goods. Additionally, in any society there is a more or less regular division of labour. Yet another universal structural characteristic of human societies is the regulation of violence. All violence is a potentially disruptive force; at the same time, it is a means of coercion and coordination of activities. Human beings have formed political units, such as nations, within which the use of violence is strictly regulated and which, at the same time, are organized for the use of violence against outside groups.

Furthermore, in any society there are arrangements within the structure for sexual reproduction and the care and education of the young. These arrangements take the form partly of kinship and marriage relations. Finally, systems of symbolic communication, particularly language, structure the interactions between the members of any society.

Structure And Social Organization

The term structure has been applied to human societies since the 19th century. Before that time, its use was more common in other fields such as construction or biology.

economic structure [*Struktur*] of society, the real basis on which is erected a legal and political superstructure [*Überbau*] and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond." Thus, according to Marx, the basic structure of society is economic, or material, and this structure influences the rest of social life, which is defined as nonmaterial, spiritual, or ideological.

The biological connotations of the term *structure* are evident in the work of British philosopher Herbert Spencer. He and other social theorists of the 19th and early 20th centuries conceived of society as an organism comprising interdependent parts that form a structure similar to the anatomy of a living body. Although social scientists since Spencer and Marx have disagreed on the concept of social structure, their definitions share common elements. In the most general way, social structure is identified by those features of a social entity (a society or a group within a society) that persist over time, are interrelated, and influence both the functioning of the entity as a whole and the activities of its individual members.

The origin of contemporary sociological references to social structure can be traced to Émile Durkheim, who argued that parts of society are interdependent and that this interdependency imposes structure on the behaviour of institutions and their members. In other words, Durkheim believed that individual human behaviour is shaped by external forces. Similarly, American anthropologist George P. Murdock, in his book *Social Structure* (1949), examined kinship systems in preliterate societies and used social structure as a taxonomic device for classifying, comparing, and correlating various aspects of kinship systems.

Several ideas are implicit in the notion of social structure. First, human beings form social relations that are not arbitrary and coincidental but exhibit some regularity and continuity. Second, social life is not chaotic and formless but is, in fact, differentiated into certain groups, positions, and institutions that are interdependent or functionally interrelated. Third, individual choices are shaped and circumscribed by the social environment, because social groups, although constituted by the social activities of individuals, are not a direct result of the wishes and intentions of the individual members. The notion of social structure implies, in other words, that human beings are not completely free and autonomous in their choices and actions but are instead constrained by the social world they inhabit and the social relations they form with one another.

Within the broad framework of these and other general features of human society, there is an enormous variety of social forms between and within societies. Some social scientists use the concept of social structure as a device for creating an order for the various aspects of social life. In other studies, the concept is of greater theoretical importance; it is regarded as an explanatory concept, a key to the understanding of human social life. Several theories have been developed to account for both the similarities and the varieties. In these theories, certain aspects of social life are regarded as basic and, therefore, central components of the social structure. Some of the more prominent of these theories are reviewed here.

Structural Functionalism

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, a British social anthropologist, gave the concept of social structure a central place in his approach and connected it to the concept of function. In his view, the components of the social structure have indispensable functions for one another—the continued existence of the one component is dependent on that of the others—and for the society as a whole, which is seen as an integrated, organic entity. His comparative studies of preliterate societies demonstrated that the interdependence of institutions regulated much of social and individual life. Radcliffe-Brown defined social structure empirically as patterned, or "normal," social relations (those aspects of social activities that conform to accepted social rules or norms). These rules bind society's members to socially useful activities.

American sociologist Talcott Parsons elaborated on the work of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown by using their insights on social structure to formulate a theory that was valid for large and complex societies. For Parsons, social structure was essentially normative—that is, consisting of "institutional patterns of normative culture." Put differently, social behaviour conforms to norms, values, and rules that direct behaviour in specific situations. These norms vary according to the positions of the individual actors: they define different roles, such as various occupational roles or the roles of husband-father and wife-mother. Moreover, these norms vary among different spheres of life and lead to the creation of social institutions—for example, property and marriage. Norms, roles, and institutions are all components of the social structure on different levels of complexity.