Major Sociological Paradigms: Crash Course Sociology #2

Crash Course: Sociology
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===== Introduction (0:00) =====

What's up with society, exactly? I mean, is it a smoothly functioning whole, with different parts that fit together to keep it ticking? Or is it a jumble of different, competing groups, constantly at each other's throats, struggling for control? Or maybe it's, you know, a bunch of people who are just trying to get through their days.

The fact is, there isn't one answer to the question of what the nature of society really is. But all three of the models that I just described - society as a well-oiled machine, as a group of competing interests, and as bunch of people just interacting with each other - they're all worth considering. Because they each offer their own perspectives on the social world, and they're each crucial to understanding the practice of sociology, with histories that can be traced back to a founding figure in the discipline.

So, let's talk about paradigms.

[Theme music]

===== What are Paradigms? (0:50) =====

A paradigm is not some kind of high-tech parachute. And it doesn't equal twenty cents. Instead, a paradigm is basically a model for how you thing about things - a set of concepts and theories that frames your perspective on a certain topic, whether it's Russian literature or public art or the laws of physics. And in sociology, theoretical paradigms are key.

These paradigms are the fundamental assumptions that sociologists have about the social world, the ones that guide their thinking and research. And that might sound kind of prejudicial at first, like you're going into the study of society ith certain biases in mind. But you need the assumptions that these paradigms provide, because raw facts don't interpret themselves.

Raw facts are things like "the unemployment rate last year was 5%," or "Sam is six feet tall," or "today a group of people with signs blocked the highway." By raw, I mean that these facts are just simple descriptions of empirical reality. And they don't come pre-interpreted.

Is 5% an acceptable unemployment rate? Or should we be trying to lower it? Is six feet tall actually tall? And are protesters who are blocking a highway disrupting the order of society or are they struggling for their interests?

The answer to that last one is, of course, both. But the important thing to understand is that either answer requires you to make some assumptions about the social world. The other important things is that those two different answers will be useful in different situations, for answering different kinds of questions.

For instance, if you're trying to understand how and why society can hold together at all, then looking at protests as signs of strain or disruption might be more useful. But if you're trying to understand why people protest, then trying to understand how they're pursuing their interests might be better.

Now, all this might sound kind of unscientific: Physics doesn't need "interpretation" exactly. Math doesn't need multiple "perspectives." But actually, they do. All scientific disciplines make assumptions about the world, and all scientific disciplines use different perspectives, depending on the questions they're asking.

In physics, you can understanding a bouncing ball as a nearly uncountable multitude of fundamental particles, each with its own wave function, and all held together by different kinds of forces at the quantum scale. Or you can just understand it as simply X number of grams of rubber moving through space. The perspective you take will dramatically change what kinds of questions you want to ask. All sciences ask different kinds of questions and have different assumptions for answering them. And raw facts always need some kind of perspective in order to make them useful.

===== Scales in Sociology (2:57) =====

Now, if we want to talk about different kinds of questions and perspectives in sociology, a good place to start is with something we brought up last episode: the fact that sociology looks at society at all levels, at all scales, from the huge to the tiny. In other words, sociology is concerned with both the macro and the micro.

An orientation towards the macro means looking at the big. When sociologists ask questions at this level, they're taking a broad focus, looking at the large-scale structures that shape society. Macro questions are things like, "What caused the transition from feudalism to capitalism?" or "How does race impact educational achievement?"

An orientation toward the micro, of course, means looking at the small. These questions are concerned more narrowly with interactions between individuals, asking things like: "Do doctors talk to patients of different races differently?" or "How do the members of a certain group build a group identity?"

Now, it's worth noting that these orientations aren't completely separate. Because, again, the big and the small are always connected. Asking how doctors talk to patients of different races is a micro question, but it also helps us begin to understand the macro-level pattern of racial disparities in healthcare. Likewise, asking about how a group builds its identity could have macro impacts, because it could help explain how large social structures are reproduced and maintained.

Now that we understand a little more about the different scales that sociology works on, we can turn to its main theoretical paradigms, of which there are three. There's structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

===== Structural Functionalism (4:15) =====

Let's start with structural functionalism, which originated with a French sociologist named Emile Durkheim. Durkheim imagined society as a kind of organism, with different parts that all worked together to keep it alive and in good health. Of course, things could go wrong. But this was always imagined by Durkheim as a malfunction, an illness, or a deviation from the normal functioning of things.

So the structural functionalist perspective makes this same basic assumption: society is seen as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability and social order. And these different "parts" of society are social structures, relatively stable patterns of social behavior.

For example, Durkheim was extremely interested in religion, and also in the division of labor, or how tasks in a society are divided up. And these structures are seen as fulfilling certain social functions. For instance, the family, in most societies, fulfills the function of socializing children - teaching them how to live in that society.

And social functions come in two types: manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are intended or obvious consequences

of a particular structure, while latent functions are unintended or unrecognized. For example, we often think of the purpose of schools as providing children with knowledge - that's their manifest function. But schools can also help socialize children. They can have - and historically have had - the additional purpose of creating workers who listen to authority and hit deadlines. That's a latent function.

Now, along with functions, we also have social dysfunction, which is any social pattern that disrupts the smooth operation of society. Technological development is a powerful driver of economic improvement, for example, which is a useful function. But it's also a destabilizing force. New machines can put people out of work. Someday soon, we may see the social dysfunction of thousands of long distance truckers being displaced by self-driving vehicles.

And this brings us to one of the problems with structural functionalism. Since it sees society as fundamentally functional and stable, it can be really bad at dealing with change. It can be bad at providing good explanations for why change happens, and it can also interpret bad things in society as having positive functions, which should therefore not be changed.

To take an extreme example, a structural functionalist view might imagine that poverty, although harmful to people, is functional for society, because it ensures there are always people who want work. So this view might see any attempts at alleviating poverty as being potentially damaging to society.

===== Conflict Theories (6:20) =====

It's in areas like this, however, where conflict theories shine. In contrast to structural functionalist, conflict theories imagine society as being composed of different groups that struggle over scarce resources - like power, money, land, food, or status. This view takes change as being fundamental to society, constantly driven by these conflicts.

The first conflict theory in sociology was the theory of class conflict, advanced by Karl Marx. This theory imagines society as having different classes based on their relationships to the means of production - things like factories and raw materials. Under capitalism, two classes were the capitalists, or bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the workers, or proletariat, who must sell their labor to survive. Marx saw this conflict between classes as the central conflict in society and the source inequality in power and wealth.

But there are other conflict theories that focus on different kinds of groups. Race-Conflict theory, for example, was first stated sociologically by W.E.B. DuBois, another founder of sociology. It understands social inequality as the result of conflict between different racial and ethnic groups. Gender-Conflict theory, meanwhile, focuses on the social inequalities between women and men.

The perspective of all three kinds of conflict theory have been crucially important in American history and are still important today. But the paradigms we've looked at so far are essentially macro approaches. Structural functionalism focuses on how large structures fit together and conflict theory looks at how society defines sources of inequality and conflict.

===== Symbolic Interactionism (7:36) =====

But then there's symbolic interactionism, and it's built to deal with micro questions. Symbolic interactionism first appeared most clearly in the work of German sociologist Max Weber and his focus on *verstehen*, or "understanding." Weber believed that sociology needed to focus on people's individual social situations and the meaning that they attached to them. So, because it's more micro-focused, symbolic interactionism understands society as the product of everyday social interactions.

Specifically, this school of thought is interested in understanding the shared reality that people create through their interactions. It might seem weird to say that reality can be created, but think back to the idea of raw facts versus interpretation. Waving my hand back and forth is a raw fact, but it only means that I'm waving hello to you because we've agreed to give it that meaning.

For symbolic interactionism, then, there is no big-T truth. Instead, it looks at the world we create when we assign meaning to interactions and objects. A handshake is only a greeting because we agree that it is. A dog can be a friend or food, depending on what meaning we've given it.

===== Conclusion (8:30) =====

Obviously, these three different paradigms provide radically different ways of looking at the social world. But, this is because they all grasp at different parts of it. They each give us a different lens through which we can see our social lives, just like science sometimes needs a microscope and sometimes needs a telescope. All of these lenses are important and, yes, necessary for the investigation of sociological questions.

Today, we discussed what theoretical paradigms are, and talked more in depth about the macro/micro distinction. Then, we took a look at the three major paradigms in sociology and learned a bit about their advantages and disadvantages.

Next week, we're going to start learning how these paradigms can be used to do actual sociological research.

===== Credits (9:03) =====

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