Basic Explanatory Frameworks of Sociological Theory in Contemporary Context: A Memoir

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Abstract: *Sociological theories provide foundational frameworks for analysing, interpreting, and understanding the complexities of social phenomena and their dynamics.*

The question: How powerful, relevant, and adaptable is sociological theory in explaining the changing social world, especially in the context of the digital age and globalisation? Join me to explore how to identify and effectively apply sociological theories to the study of specific social issues.

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving society, sociological theories provide essential frameworks for understanding complex social dynamics. This memoir delves into foundational explanatory frameworks, exploring their continued relevance in a contemporary context marked by globalisation, technological advancements, and shifting cultural landscapes. Through a blend of personal reflections and academic insights, this work offers a unique perspective on key sociological concepts and their application to current issues. By bridging traditional theoretical foundations with present-day realities, this narrative underscores the enduring power of sociological perspectives in illuminating the complexities of the modern social world. Five issues are addressed in this write-up: what is sociological theory, the building blocks of sociological theory, the social, political and economic contexts of sociological theories, how sociological theories influence the explanation of social phenomena and how relevant are sociological theories in explaining social phenomena in the digital age. The paper will end with a conclusion.

2. What is a Sociological Theory

A sociological theory is a framework or set of ideas that explains how societies operate and how individuals interact within social structures. These theories aim to understand social behaviour, institutions, and relationships by providing explanations for patterns and dynamics observed in human societies (Turner, 2010; Ritzer, 2020). Sociological theories address questions about the causes and consequences of social phenomena, including inequality, power, identity, deviance, social change, and social order (Giddens & Sutton, 2017).

Key features of sociological theories include:

Conceptualisation: Theories provide key concepts to analyse and interpret social life (e.g., class, power, norms, roles) (Mills, 1959).

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Explanation: They offer explanations for why certain social patterns or events occur, such as the persistence of inequality or the maintenance of social order (Parsons, 1951).

Prediction: Certain theories allow for predictions about future social trends or behaviours based on current social conditions (Merton, 1968).

Evaluation: Theories serve as tools for evaluating social policies, institutions, and practices, offering critiques or support based on specific theoretical perspectives (Giddens, 1984).

Sociological theories are typically divided into *macro* and *micro* levels:

> **Macro theories** focus on large-scale social processes like institutions or structures. Examples include:
>
> > **Functionalism**: It views society as a complex system where each part works to promote stability and order (Durkheim, 1893).
> >
> > **Conflict Theory**: It centres on power struggles and inequality between social groups or classes (Marx & Engels, 1848).
>
> **Micro theories** focus on small-scale interactions between individuals, such as:
>
> > **Symbolic Interactionism**: This examines how individuals create and interpret meanings through social interactions (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969).

These theories evolve over time and adapt to changes in society, enabling sociologists to analyse everything from personal behaviour to global social trends (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). They remain foundational to understanding the complexities of social life and human interaction in an ever-changing world.

3. **The Building Blocks of Sociological Theory**

The building blocks of sociological theory are fundamental components that shape how a theory is constructed and used to explain social phenomena (Ritzer, 2020; Smah, 2023). These elements provide a framework for understanding, interpreting, and analysing social behaviour, institutions, and relationships, guiding sociologists in their exploration of the social world. Key building blocks include:

1. **Concepts**
   Concepts are the foundational units of any sociological theory, representing abstract ideas used to describe and categorise society. Examples include social class, norms, power, identity, institutions, and roles (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). Concepts form the theoretical vocabulary, enabling scholars to focus on specific dimensions of social life (Turner, 2010).

2. **Assumptions**
   Theories rest on assumptions about social life and human nature, such as whether individuals act out of self-interest or communal obligations. These assumptions shape a theory's interpretation of the relationship between individuals and social structures (Mills, 1959). For example, structural-functionalism assumes society's parts work together harmoniously, while conflict theory assumes inherent power struggles within social groups (Parsons, 1951; Marx & Engels, 1848).

3. **Propositions and/or Hypotheses**
   Propositions are claims within a theory that explain relationships between concepts, serving as hypotheses about social behaviour (Blumer, 1969). For instance, conflict theory proposes that "social inequality leads to class conflict," linking inequality with social unrest (Dahrendorf, 1959).

4. **Variables**
   Variables are measurable aspects of concepts, such as income or education level in studies of inequality (Merton, 1968). They allow researchers to test relationships between concepts across different populations or contexts, creating empirical evidence for theoretical insights (Bryman, 2016).

5. **Theoretical Statements/Frameworks**
   Theoretical statements combine multiple propositions to explain complex social systems or processes. For example, structural functionalism theorises that society's parts contribute to stability and order, suggesting that social institutions (e.g., family, education) work to sustain equilibrium (Durkheim, 1893).

6. **Scope**
   The scope of a theory defines the boundaries of the social phenomena it aims to explain. While symbolic interactionism focuses on small-scale individual interactions, theories like functionalism and conflict theory address large-scale structures and power dynamics (Mead, 1934; Giddens, 1984).

7. **Methods of Inquiry**
   Sociological theories often suggest specific research methods to gather data. Qualitative methods, like ethnography, may explore symbolic interactionism concepts, while quantitative methods, like surveys or statistical analyses, apply well to functionalism or conflict theory studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

8. **Models**
   Some theories use models to simplify complex social processes, as seen in social network theory, where diagrams of relationships illustrate how social ties influence behaviour (Smah, 2003; Granovetter, 1973). Models help visualise theoretical concepts and how they manifest in social dynamics (Scott, 2017).

9. **Level of Analysis**

   Sociological theories operate at different levels, such as:

   Micro-level: This focuses on individual or small group interactions (e.g., symbolic interactionism).

   Macro-level: It examines large-scale social structures, such as institutions or class hierarchies (e.g., functionalism, conflict theory).

   Meso-level: This bridges micro and macro levels by studying organisations, communities, or social networks (e.g., organisational theory) (Merton, 1968; Bourdieu, 1986).

Together, these building blocks form a comprehensive system for understanding, analysing, and predicting social phenomena, supporting the development of robust sociological research and discourse.

4. **The Social, Political, and Economic Contexts of Sociological Theories**

The social, political, and economic contexts of sociological theories are critical in shaping the development, focus, and relevance of these theories. They define the environment in which sociological ideas emerge, influencing interpretations of social phenomena (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017). Each context contributes to the theoretical perspectives scholars use to understand society, as follows:

1. Social Context

The social context encompasses societal values, norms, and demographic trends, including class structures, race and ethnic relations, and gender roles (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). This context sets the stage for theories addressing inequality, power, and identity. Key elements include:

Social Stratification: The allocation of resources among social classes, races, and genders influences theories like Marxism, which emerged in response to industrial-era class struggles (Marx & Engels, 1848). Stratification remains central to analysing inequality in contemporary society (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cultural Norms and Beliefs: Symbolic interactionism, for example, examines how norms and values are created and maintained in social interactions (Blumer, 1969).

Demographic Changes: Shifts in urbanisation, migration, and family structures provide a backdrop for urban sociology and theories exploring how these changes impact social order (Burgess, 1925).

Examples:

Feminist Theory: This developed in response to societal structures perpetuating gender inequality, addressing patriarchy's impact on women's rights (Connell, 1987).

Critical Race Theory: It emerged within the U.S. civil rights context, analysing systemic racism and racial inequality (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

2. Political Context

The political context includes governance structures, ideologies, policies, and power relations that shape social order. It also encompasses political movements that inspire theories about power, activism, and resistance (Weber, 1947).

State Power and Authority: Weber's theory of bureaucracy analyses authority within political regimes, exploring legitimacy and power (Weber, 1922). Foucault's concept of power highlights how institutions exercise control over individuals (Foucault, 1975).

Political Movements: Social movement theories examine collective actions like the labour and civil rights movements, exploring their impact on social change and resistance (Touraine, 1981).

Ideological Conflicts: Conflicting ideologies like socialism and conservatism shape theories such as conflict theory, which critiques class-based power dynamics (Dahrendorf, 1959).

Examples:

Conflict Theory: It emerged from critiques of capitalist power structures, highlighting inequality and elite control (Mills, 1956).

Governmentality: Foucault's theory of governmentality analyses governance's influence on individual behaviour and identity (Foucault, 1978).

3. Economic Context

The economic context relates to wealth distribution, resource allocation, and labour dynamics. Economic structures like capitalism and globalisation significantly influence sociological theory (Harvey, 2005).

> **Capitalism and Industrialisation**: Marx's historical materialism critiques capitalism, analysing worker exploitation and the economic basis of class conflict (Marx, 1867).
>
> **Globalisation and Economic Interdependence**: Wallerstein's world-systems theory examines global inequalities perpetuated by capitalism (Wallerstein, 1974).
>
> **Inequality and Class Conflict**: Theories addressing poverty and wealth disparities, such as Piketty's analyses of wealth concentration, critique how economic systems shape social stratification (Piketty, 2014).

Examples:

> **World-Systems Theory**: This was developed to understand how global capitalism affects both rich and poor countries, perpetuating economic dependency (Wallerstein, 2004).
>
> **Treadmill of Production Theory**: It critiques the capitalist drive for continuous growth, highlighting its environmental and social impacts (Schnaiberg, 1980).

Interrelationship of Social, Political, and Economic Contexts

These contexts are interconnected, with political decisions influencing economic policies that, in turn, shape social conditions (Polanyi, 1944). For example:

> **The Great Depression**: Combined economic and political factors catalysed theories on social welfare, labour relations, and the state's role in capitalist economies (Mills, 1959).
>
> **Postcolonial Theory**: It responds to the legacies of colonialism, examining economic exploitation and social inequality linked to historical and political structures (Said, 1978).

Understanding these contexts highlights the dynamic nature of sociological theories, showing how they evolve to address contemporary issues. Their social, political, and economic foundations provide insight into why specific theories develop and how they continue to offer relevant analysis in today's world.

5. **How Sociological Theories Influence the Analysis of Social Phenomena**

Sociological theories play a crucial role in shaping how social phenomena are analysed and understood. These theories provide frameworks and lenses through which sociologists interpret the complexities of human behaviour, institutions, and relationships within society. By offering explanations for why social phenomena occur and how different elements of society interact, sociological theories influence the way researchers and policymakers approach social issues, guiding the analysis and formulation of solutions. Here is how sociological theories influence the analysis of social phenomena:

1. Providing Conceptual Frameworks

Sociological theories offer structured ways to think about social phenomena by providing key concepts and categories that shape our understanding of society. Concepts such as social structure, power, agency, socialisation, inequality, and norms are central to many sociological theories and help analysts focus on specific aspects of social life.

Example:

(i) Conflict theory emphasises concepts like power, dominance, and exploitation, directing analysts to examine how inequalities and struggles for resources shape social phenomena such as class conflict, discrimination, or gender inequality (Dahrendorf, 1959; Collins, 1975).

(ii) Functionalism emphasises social cohesion, institutions, and social roles, leading analysts to focus on how different parts of society work together to maintain stability and order (Durkheim, 1893).

2. Explaining Causes and Relationships

Theories help explain the causal factors behind social phenomena and the relationships between different social factors. They provide models for understanding the dynamics of social interactions, institutions, and structures. By highlighting causal mechanisms, sociological theories enable researchers to explore why certain social behaviours or outcomes occur.

Example:

Symbolic interactionism explains how individuals construct meaning through their interactions with others, which can be applied to analyse phenomena such as identity formation, communication patterns, or the role of symbols in everyday life (Blumer, 1969).

Rational choice theory assumes individuals act based on a rational evaluation of costs and benefits, useful for analysing social phenomena like voting behaviour, crime, or market interactions (Coleman, 1990).

3. Guiding Research Methodology

Theoretical perspectives influence the choice of research methods used to study social phenomena. Different sociological theories lend themselves to particular methodologies, guiding how data is collected, analysed, and interpreted.

Quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, statistical analysis) are often employed within the framework of theories like functionalism and structuralism, which focus on large-scale social structures, patterns, and trends (Babbie, 2016). Researchers may use these methods to test hypotheses about relationships between social variables like education and income or class and health.

Qualitative methods (e.g., ethnography, interviews) are commonly used in theories like symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, where the focus is on understanding individual experiences, meanings, and interactions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002).

4. Fostering Critical Analysis

Sociological theories encourage a critical examination of existing social structures and institutions. Theories such as Marxism, feminist theory, and critical race theory emphasise how social inequality and power relations shape social phenomena, encouraging analysts to question taken-for-granted assumptions and focus on social justice.

Example:

Marxist theory offers a critical lens for analysing capitalism's role in perpetuating class inequality, labour exploitation, and economic power disparities, influencing the analysis of phenomena like poverty and corporate control (Marx, 1867).

Feminist theory critiques patriarchal structures, focusing on how gender inequality shapes social experiences and guiding the analysis of social phenomena such as gender wage gaps and domestic violence (Tong, 2009).

5. Framing Social Change and Policy Recommendations

Sociological theories not only explain social phenomena but also provide insights into how societies can change. By identifying the forces that maintain or disrupt social order, theories influence the development of policies and interventions aimed at addressing social problems. Recommendations have to be developed to address three audiences: academia, policy reform and practical purposes for individuals who stand to benefit from the study and its findings and implications (Smah, 2024b).

Example:

Conflict theory highlights the role of social struggle in bringing about change, suggesting that policies should focus on redistributing resources and reducing inequality to address social conflicts (Tilly, 2004).

Functionalist theory emphasises the importance of maintaining social stability and integrating individuals into society, guiding policy recommendations aimed at improving social institutions like education and healthcare (Parsons, 1951).

6. Connecting Micro and Macro Levels of Analysis

Sociological theories provide a way to connect micro-level (individual or small group) interactions with macro-level (societal or institutional) structures. This integration helps analysts understand how personal experiences are shaped by broader social forces and how societal structures are maintained or changed through everyday interactions.

Example:

Symbolic interactionism focuses on micro-level social interactions, analysing how individuals communicate and construct their social realities (Goffman, 1959).

Structural functionalism and systems theory, on the other hand, emphasise how large social systems (e.g., education, government) work together to maintain societal stability (Luhmann, 1995). Analysts using these theories might explore how changes in one institution affect others, such as how economic shifts influence family structures.

7. Influencing Ethical and Value-Oriented Analysis

Sociological theories often include normative dimensions, offering ethical guidance on how society should function. They help analysts consider the moral and ethical implications of social arrangements and policies.

Example:

Feminist theory and critical race theory emphasise dismantling oppressive social systems and promoting equity, advocating for policies that prioritise social justice (Crenshaw, 1991).

Durkheim's moral sociology suggests that societies need to cultivate shared values and social solidarity to function effectively, influencing the analysis of phenomena such as social integration and the impact of moral education on societal cohesion (Durkheim, 1897).

8. Adapting to Emerging Social Phenomena

As new social issues arise, sociological theories evolve to address them. Theories guide how researchers analyse contemporary social phenomena, such as the impact of digital technology, globalisation, or climate change.

Example:

> **Sociological theories like network theory and media theory** are applied to analyse the impacts of social media on identity formation, communication, and social movements (Castells, 2010).
>
> **The rise of environmental sociology** has brought about theories like ecological modernisation and treadmill of production, used to analyse social phenomena related to environmental degradation and sustainability (Gould et al., 2008).

In view of the foregoing, sociological theories are powerful tools for understanding and analysing social phenomena. They provide the conceptual frameworks, explanations, and methodologies needed to explore how societies function, why social problems emerge, and how individuals navigate their social worlds. By influencing the way social phenomena are studied and interpreted, sociological theories guide research, inform policy, and foster critical thinking about the complexities of human behaviour and social structures.

6. **How Relevant Are Sociological Theories in Explaining Social Phenomena in the Digital Age**

Sociological theories remain highly relevant in explaining social phenomena in the digital age, but they must adapt to account for the profound transformations brought about by digital technologies. The internet, social media, artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and big data have reshaped social interactions, economic structures, and political dynamics, creating new challenges and opportunities for sociological analysis. Here is how sociological theories continue to be relevant, and how they are being extended or reinterpreted in light of digital transformations:

1. Social Interaction and Identity Construction

Symbolic Interactionism: Much of our social interaction occurs online, and symbolic interactionism remains vital in analysing how people create and manage their identities through digital platforms. Individuals present themselves on social media through profiles, status updates, and selfies, which aligns with Goffman's theory of dramaturgy that emphasises "front stage" and "back stage" behaviour (Goffman, 1959). Online spaces provide new "stages" for performing identity, where individuals curate how they are perceived by others.

Relevance: Sociological theories help explain phenomena such as self-presentation, online identity management, and the construction of digital communities. The digital realm also raises questions about authenticity, surveillance, and anonymity in interactions (Turkle, 2011; Boyd, 2014).

2. Power, Surveillance, and Control

Foucault's Theory of Power and Surveillance: In the digital age, surveillance has taken on new forms with the rise of data collection by governments, corporations, and individuals. Foucault's concepts of panopticism and governmentality provide tools to analyse how digital technologies enable new forms of control and regulation (Foucault, 1977). Algorithms and big data monitor, predict, and influence human behaviour, creating a digital panopticon where individuals are constantly observed.

Relevance: These theories explain modern forms of digital surveillance, such as data mining through social media, government surveillance programmes, and AI's role in controlling populations. Concerns about privacy, freedom, and social control are critical in sociological inquiry today (Zuboff, 2019; Lyon, 2018).

3. Economic Inequality and Labor Relations

Marxist Theory: Digital capitalism has intensified many dynamics Marx described, particularly the exploitation of labour and the concentration of wealth. The rise of the gig economy (e.g., Uber, Fiverr) and automation reshape the workforce, leading to new forms of precarious employment (Schor, 2020). Sociological theories focusing on class struggle, labour exploitation, and the commodification of social life remain relevant as digital economies amplify income inequality and labour instability.

Relevance: Marxist and neo-Marxist theories help analyse the implications of platform capitalism, the role of digital monopolies like Amazon, and the growing divide between those who control digital infrastructure and those who depend on it for work (Piketty, 2014; Dyer-Witheford, 2015).

4. Globalisation and Digital Networks

World-Systems Theory: In a digitally interconnected world, the economic and social dynamics described by Immanuel Wallerstein are even more visible. Digital technologies accelerate globalisation, enabling rapid communication and trade while reinforcing economic inequalities between core and peripheral nations (Wallerstein, 2004). Access to digital infrastructure often mirrors global inequalities, where richer nations dominate digital production and innovation.

Relevance: These theories explain how the digital divide exacerbates global inequalities, reinforcing economic and geopolitical power imbalances in the digital age (Castells, 2010; Graham, 2011).

5. Cultural Change and Media

Cultural Studies and Media Theory: The digital age is characterised by participatory culture through platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, where individuals actively create and share content. Theories from cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, help explain how digital media shapes culture and public discourse (Hall, 1980). While social media enables democratised media production, it also poses challenges related to misinformation and the attention economy.

Relevance: These theories are crucial in understanding the role of digital media in shaping cultural identity, political polarisation, and social movements (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo) and analysing the impact of algorithmic filtering on media consumption (Sunstein, 2017).

6. Social Networks and Community Formation

Network Theory: Digital technologies have redefined how social networks are formed and maintained. Online social networks function as new arenas for interaction, community building, and political mobilisation. Granovetter's theory of weak ties explains how individuals maintain broad networks that facilitate access to information and resources (Granovetter, 1973).

Relevance: These theories are essential in understanding the structure and influence of digital networks, the role of influencers, and how online communities form and evolve (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011).

7. Social Movements and Digital Activism

Resource Mobilisation Theory and Social Movement Theory: The digital age has revolutionised how social movements are organised and sustained. Digital platforms provide powerful tools for mobilising resources

and amplifying voices. Social movement theory helps explain the rise of digital activism, from *Occupy Wall Street* to the *Arab Spring*.

Relevance: Sociological theories explore how digital platforms facilitate collective action and the impact of surveillance and censorship on social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

8. Emotional Life in the Digital Age

Theories of Affect and Emotion: The digital age has transformed how emotions are expressed and experienced. Platforms allow rapid emotional expression, creating phenomena like online empathy and outrage. Sociological theories on affect provide insights into how digital interactions shape emotional life and group dynamics (Clough, 2007; Ahmed, 2004).

Relevance: These theories help explain emotional labour in digital spaces and how moral panics spread through social media (Wong, 2018).

9. Deviance, Crime and Insecurity

Sociological theories are crucial in explaining crimes in the digital age as they provide frameworks to understand the interplay between social structures, online interactions, and criminal behaviour, particularly through the lens of concepts such as social learning and routine activities (Sutherland, 1947; Cohen & Felson, 1979). By adapting traditional theories like strain theory and subcultural theory, researchers can analyse how digital environments foster new forms of crime, including cyberbullying, identity theft, terrorism, and online harassment (Smah & Smah, 2023; Agnew, 1992; Klein, 2012).

Relevance: These theories help explain the cross border nature of social interactions in digital spaces and how recruitment spread through social media platforms (Smah & Smah, 2023).

Sociological theories are powerful tools for understanding and analysing social phenomena in the digital age. They provide conceptual frameworks, explanations, and methodologies needed to explore how societies function, why social problems emerge, and how individuals navigate their social worlds. By influencing the way social phenomena are studied and interpreted, sociological theories guide research, inform policy, and foster critical thinking about the complexities of human behaviour and social structures.

Conclusion: Adapting Sociological Theories for the Digital Age

Sociological theories remain relevant in the digital age, but they must be adapted to account for the new dynamics introduced by digital technology. Foundational theories offer critical insights into issues like power, inequality, identity, and social interaction. However, digital sociology has emerged as a distinct field that integrates these classical perspectives while focusing on the unique features of digital life, such as online interactions, digital identities, and the implications of surveillance and data collection.

For instance, the rise of digital platforms has transformed how individuals form communities and express their identities, prompting scholars to expand upon traditional concepts like Goffman's dramaturgical analysis to include online self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Turkle, 2011). Furthermore, the pervasive nature of surveillance in the digital age requires a re-examination of Foucault's theories of power and control, as individuals navigate a landscape where their online activities are constantly monitored and commodified (Foucault, 1977; Zuboff, 2019).

Sociological theories also provide a lens through which to examine the growing economic inequalities exacerbated by digital capitalism, aligning with Marxist perspectives on labour exploitation and class struggle (Marx, 1867; Piketty, 2014). Additionally, concepts from cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall's

encoding/decoding model, remain relevant in analysing the ways digital media shapes public discourse and cultural identity (Hall, 1980; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Ultimately, sociological theories help explain not only the continuity of social structures but also the novel forms of interaction, control, and inequality emerging in the digital world. As digital life continues to evolve, adapting and extending sociological frameworks will be essential for understanding the complexities of contemporary society (Castells, 2010; Graham, 2011).

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