

RESEARCH

The role of theory in sociological research

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Typically, theories are known to aim at explaining things. Similarly, theories, in social sciences, specifically sociology, make attempts at explaining the order in which the social world operates. There has been a belief that a theory has to make a claim to reason in order to be called a theory. In the context of sociology, as Jeffrey Alexander rightly puts it, a claim to reason essentially indicates that the theory takes a perspective on society that is extensive and general, as compared to the lifeworld of the theorist or their immediate social surroundings. Speaking of sociological theory, especially in the Indian context, it has been a loosely defined field of intellectual activity. To elaborate its role in research then, this article would start with plotting sociological theories in the larger map of social science theories, its application from its birth to the present times, and provide examples to back up the same. It would also touch upon the important aspect of how sociological theory, while speaking of the social world, is very different from the common-sensical knowledge that is held about the same. Having said this it, however, does not mean to imply that sociological theory has to prove itself to be something entirely esoteric. What needs to be remembered is that sociology, although different from the natural sciences and common-sensical knowledge, had its roots in the same. It just grew out of there and has been growing from there, on its own, ever since.

Keywords: common-sense, political ideology, reflexive sociology, empirical verifiability, classical theories

Introduction

Theories, in general, have been known for explaining things or some kind of phenomena [(1), p. 1]. In the same vein, theories applicable in sociological research are attempts to explain the social world. Theorizing is not a new thing. From the beginning of time, humans have sought to explain the behavior and interactions that take place around them in their respective social settings. Most researchers, especially sociologists, have been trying to explain the social world and look for answers as to why certain people interact in a certain way. Popular literature has called this kind of theory-building folk sociology, and those theorizing, “folk sociological theorists” [(1), p. 1]. Moreover, the belief about social scientific theories is such that a social universe that is composed of active humans has certain fundamental properties and processes which underly the ebb and flow of events in the same. Hence, these theories are supposed to rise above the primary

empirical event, at the level of an abstraction, looking for social forces that have fueled the event. For instance, if we were to study the economic conditions of a society, the specifics of the particular economy are never the primary focus. Underlying forces of production, distribution, and consumption are the points that are focused upon, since they rise above the specific economy in illustrating the condition and changes in the same.

Builders of modern sociological theory, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, to name a few, always aim at studying the entire human society in all its diverse forms and genres. It is said that theories applied to sociological research have created an optic which aptly describes as to how societies are made and the different parts of each society interrelate amongst one another [(2), p. 2]. As we move ahead, we would draw some examples as to how these authors have been trying to look at the subject matter that could be regarded as sociological theory.

- First, as per August Comte, who also coined the term sociology, society could have two ways of looking at it. One, he called social statics, which indicated the interrelations that existed between the different institutions of the same society. The other, social dynamics, referred to each society as a whole unit of analysis to try and compare it with other existing societies. Both of these attempted to reflect his belief that all societies moved through certain stages across time and developed their patterns.
- Second, Herbert Spencer's belief has been that each part of every society, although a discrete unit, bore some relation to the whole. This helped make sense of every society as a unit of analysis, on which scientific enquiry could be pursued. Studying each such unit could further help in comparisons with other such units.

Apart from these examples, Durkheim has also shown a similar line of thinking, where he lays stress on analyzing institutions and studying relationships between them and their respective settings. Weber, while defining sociology, has been more concerned with an interpretative understanding of actions in societies, which would help find out causal explanations helping to analyze their courses and effects. While their observations could be said to have been limited when studying other societies, which also means that the observations could well be one-sided, limited, and misleading. However, their approach has been to make comparisons between their own societies and others that they study in order to procure a deepened and broad understanding of the larger social fabric (3). It is thus safe to say that comparative sociology has always been the go-to form of sociology. Thus, to achieve a lucid summation of what is happening around the world and to simultaneously develop reason as to what exactly is happening to each individual, sociological imagination has been considered to be key. This helps us relate history with biography. This just does not let individuals understand their own position; it also lets them gauge theirs in relation to others in the same society and during the same time period. This is also the tool which helps individuals shift perspectives, for instance, from the most remote and impersonal of happenings to the most intimate features of a human's life experiences. It is believed these distinctions help men grasp not just what is happening in their own lives but also how to give it a social and historical meaning.

As a discipline, sociology has been one of those where reviewing existing literature is a part of routine activity. It happens to be a discipline where every work is believed to be an original contribution to the field [(4), pp. 453–455]. When it comes to theory in sociological research, these are not just random speculations; rather, the goal here is to articulate theories and then assess the same against facts in the empirical world to see if they hold true [(1), pp. 1–2].

Therefore, sociologists of social movements are supposed to articulate theories on social movements, sociology of family on family, and the like. Speaking at a more general level, Jeffrey Alexander [(5), p. 147] claims the most important point for any theory to hold true is its claim to reason. According to him, if there is no claim to reason, there is no theory, whether social, natural, or sociological. As much as we go on to speak of the importance of theory in sociological research, there has been a simultaneous realization that in mainstream sociology, the capacity to do research has more often been equated with the role of methodology, sidelining theory. The need of the hour, however, according to Swedburg (6), is to focus on theory not through its attribution to the big names, like Weber, Marx, Durkheim, and the like. Rather, the focus should be on the way these theories have been used by researchers in their process of doing empirical work, which has been popularly referred to as theory work. Focusing primarily on theory work, would also help researchers enrich their ways of analyzing empirical research. Both these processes together could then be collectively called by the term theorizing [(6), p. 190]. Ever since its inception, speaking of sociology as a discipline, it has had 2 central domains that have been spoken of, namely, theory and methods. Method here could be taken to refer to the study of statistics and of abstractions, somewhat like the mobility theory. Theory could either be defined as the mathematical treatment of oversimplified humans or an analysis of the historically important books that have been there ever since the development of the discipline [(7), p. 54]. Nevertheless, sociological studies on theoretical practices in empirical research have been far less in number, as compared to the methodological ones. A very important point for researchers to remember in this respect is that there always exists a gray area between theory and methods, where both prove to be indispensable to one another and need each other's assistance for a good research output [(6), p. 190].

Those were some examples of what are the kind of theories that make it to the subject matter of sociology, and how theory in general needs more recognition in empirical literature. We will now take a quick look at how this sociological theory came into existence, especially in the Indian context.

Literature review

Tracing the development of theories in social sciences, particularly sociology, takes us back to the time of the Industrial Revolution and the intellectual forces of Darwinism and Positivism in Europe. Slowly, given the economic, political, and intellectual forces at the time in Europe, started rendering man as an important part of nature, and the social order was taken to be worthy of serious study and criticism [(8), p. 180]. Since we are writing in the Indian context, it is very important to have a proper

understanding of the coming about of the social sciences in general, as well as theories around sociology, in particular. India's independence is believed to have been pivotal in the evolution of these theories in various social sciences. The idea that the relationship between people coming from different castes and classes and their relationship to their environment could be best captured by the social sciences was proven by the establishment of the Indian Council of Social Science Research. Becoming a free country and slowly taking steps towards planned development is known to have been the moment when different social science scholars thought sociology could bring in a breakthrough in popular understanding. Nationalism is taken to be a prime causal explanation for the evolution of sociology in India because it necessarily meant the interaction of alien forces with indigenous groups. This interaction in turn made way for a heightened self-awareness at the levels of caste, religion, language, sect, and the like. The first step into being born as a discipline saw sociology, not by its own name, rather under the umbrella term of Indology. Social anthropology was also one of the disciplines born out of this umbrella term. As the 19th century progressed, the term Indology came into being and this has thus been regarded as the first step in the birth of these disciplines. It was an administrative requirement of the British to collect religious, economic, and social information of India's population. As complex as this task was, it also led the masses to witness the harsh realities of Hinduism being criticized by European missionaries and the mass-scale conversions, especially among the lower castes. These incidents helped feed the nationalist sentiments of the masses, thereby creating grounds for Indology to be born. Followed by this, the early 20th century saw both these disciplines go a step ahead of Indology. While Indology was primarily based on early literary sources, which included ancient texts, scriptures, epics, and law books, sociology as a discipline took a step towards an early phase of professionalization by focusing on empirically investigated works. Although these works were mostly carried out by the British officials, based on census and other collected field reports, nevertheless, what this also led to was an inclination on the part of the British scholars to come and carry out work on the Indian society. These disciplines made their way into academics during the 1920s and the 1930s. Both disciplines reached a peak in their popularity in the year spanning between 1950s and the 1960s. This period of post-independence also witnessed an explosion in the job market of opportunities with an increased number of teaching posts. In those days, the rise in demand for sociology also came about because it did not require proficiency in the subjects of mathematics, statistics, and the like. Thus, also referred to as soft, it could be distinguished from other subjects in the social sciences, namely, economics. Sociology, as a subject, upgraded to a better status post the planned development of the country and organizations such as the Planning Commission of India. All this, helped in

the multiplication of research and training institutes across the country, centers primarily in and around Delhi. Thus, sociology began in India as a colonial enterprise to address problems of governance, to gain from the knowledge here and apply solutions in Britain, and also to collect social data that might soon vanish (8). Theory building was limited to enunciating some generalities that were often inaccurate, unable to capture the diversity of the Indian society.

Having discussed the birth of theories in sociological research, we will now move on to some of the larger debates that we come across when it comes to studying the role of theories applicable in sociological research. These debates mostly come out in the form of contrasting definitions that are put forward by various authors doing theory work in sociology. Every elaboration that we speak of would be followed with some critical reflections that yet other theorists might have stated.

The first and one of the major debates that we would be taking into consideration is how theories that are applied in sociological research are often confused with common sense and to what extent both of these are different. Moving on, greater clarity requires us to look into some of the ways that the founding scholars of these theories have defined both. To start with, Turner, while defining sociology, elaborated it as an encounter with the social world and sociological theory as a culminated outcome of all the moves, problems, and themes that grow out of this encounter. The critical reflection on this happened to be that, explaining sociology, as an encounter with the social world would effectively pose the problem of confusing it with the idea of common sense. Thus, following this, we have Mills and Beteille (3), who wrote extensively as to how sociology, although a theorizing of the operations of the social world, could be well differentiated from common sense. According to these two, the sociological theorists their points are that there is no deliberate attempt as such to differentiate itself as an extreme opposite to common sense. Rather, common sense is something that is highly variable, subject to constraints of time, place, and social circumstances as well [(3), p. 2361]. In this respect, Emile Durkheim has some extremely important work when it comes to laying down illusions in common sensical understanding as compared to sociology. Following Durkheim, for any person investigating any subject in the social world, whether their own or others, keeping their investigations free from their own presuppositions is the biggest precursor to the process. And, according to him, common sense is often the largest impediment that can shadow the investigation of the relevant facts, since they are more often than not wrong and are born out of limited and localized experience. Durkheim's contribution has been immense when it comes to showcasing the superiority of sociological knowledge over common sense, through his work on suicide. For him, it came as a surprise to find out as to how facts that common sense would refer to as supremely individual and private actually had social facts as driving reasons. Hence, at this point he

decided to prove superiority by coming together with a large data set, applying concepts and methods to the same, which could then be applied to a host of domains of the social world, elsewhere.

We would now move to the next set of commentaries, where there is a continuous tiff between those who want sociological theory to be sent back to the domain of the natural sciences versus those who are bent on pushing sociological theory into an antiscientific mode. Empiricists like Wallace bank upon the extremely discursive character and take its relativism to be proof of the fact that it should be sent back to the natural sciences. Conversely, post-structuralists like Seidman focus on its generality and abstraction, and thus, it is important to realize that none of these claims hold true [(5), p. 147]. In this context, how Talcott Parsons thinks of theory in sociology becomes important to mention. He states that unlike the other sciences, the social sciences do not seem to have a fundamental feeling of uncertainty about controversies that are being dealt with. While in the sciences, like physics, chemistry, these controversies appear to happen either at the periphery of the technical sciences or in the field of interpretation of the broad significance as a whole. Those in the social group, and particularly theories in sociology, have a controversy regarding what goes in the making of the elementary courses in the first place. The areas of controversy that these deal with seem to be at the very starting points and which need to be dealt with before researchers can do any other progress. According to this, what Parsons also point out that the division of labor, between the empirical-minded and the theoretical-minded. Parsons refuses to even call it a division of labor, as he points out it is a complete divorce, leading either of these groups to absolutely disapprove of each other's contributions to the discipline and their work interests.

Conclusion

Discussions on the role theories have in sociological research, the most important factor is an individual researcher's own knowledge of how and which theories would prove apt for their immediate problems at hand. By knowledge here we borrow Gilbert Ryle's analogy [(6), p. 191] of the same, where there is a clear-cut distinction between knowledge-that (the knowledge that something exists) and knowledge-how (the knowledge of how to accomplish something). Naming classical theories and knowing social phenomena coined and explained by various theorists do not prove as useful, as opposed to a proper understanding of their application of the same. For the longest time, sociology as a discipline has been referred to as a scholastic one, where empirical social interests have been referred to as pollutants that have threatened the discipline but also kept it as one of the most alive ones [(7), p. 60]. The debates that have been spoken

of have been proof of one of the most productive periods in the growth of theory in sociological research. It is not to indicate that these debates now cease to exist; however, there has been more borrowing and intertwining of rival traditions in recent empirical work. Thus, there has been a shift towards syntheses and a simultaneous abatement of hostility [(5), p. 152]. Keeping all debates and syntheses aside, as C.W. Mills rightly points out, sociological imagination has been the most fruitful way of doing sociology. This helps men grasp their lived experiences as minute intersections between the transformative power of history that has been proof of their society's life and their capacity to relate and re-evaluate values that they have been holding.

Wrapping up discussions on the role of theory with a quote by Parsons: "Let us take what we already have and both use it to the utmost and develop it as rapidly as we can." [(9), p. 20].

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as potential conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

This review article has been a combined effort and collaborative deliberation by both Anchita Sen (A.S.) and Prof. Munmun Jha (M.J.).

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