

MODULE 1: COMMON SENSE & THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Social Location, Worldview, and Your Bias

Social Location

- Your social location is where you are situated in relation to others around you.
 - It's your gender, race, class, education level, religion, etc. and their relation to the rest of the people around you.
- Your social location affects how those around you treat you, what they expect of you, and how they will interpret your actions.

Worldview

- The perspective you have on the world around you. It's the biases and assumptions that give us our unique perspective. Each of us has a worldview and it is almost always invisible to us.
- Our worldview is shaped by our social, cultural, and personal experiences all of which are profoundly affected by our social location.
- "I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't believed it".

Confirmation bias

- We are all biased to favor information that confirms what we already believe
- We tend to accept with out skepticism or critical thought that which agrees with our worldview
- We tend to be overly harsh or hypercritical of information that disagrees with our worldview

Fundamental Attribution error

- The tendency to favor personal explanations for an individual's behavior over situational explanations.
 - "That guy drives like that because he is a jerk. I only speed because I can't be late to work."
- "People" vs. Me
 - Many of us are willing to acknowledge that "people" are affected by social factors, but unwilling to acknowledge how they themselves are affected by social factors
 - "Racism is a problem for people in the U.S., but I don't have a problem with racism".

Social Inequality 101

- Social inequality is the advantaging and disadvantaging of certain groups of people in society. Our social institutions (e.g. schools, the government) privilege some groups over others in society.
- If there is inequality in society, then some people benefit while others suffer from the inequality.
- Social problems affect everyone in a community. So if you believe that social problem is real, then you either suffer from it, benefit from it, or are standing by being complicit to the social problem.
- We are going to talk a lot about inequality in this course.

Common Reactions to Discussions of Inequality

Resistance

- Students are unwilling to accept evidence that challenges their worldview even when they have no reason to doubt the legitimacy or accuracy of the evidence.
- Skepticism or being a critical consumer of information is crucial, but resistance is denying what appears to be true because you don't want it to be true.
- Resistance is most likely to affect students who are privileged by inequality. Privileged students who are uncomfortable with the idea that they receive unearned advantages will often fight to discredit any evidence suggesting they are the benefactor of inequality.

Paralysis

- Students often feel paralyzed or helpless to do anything about the social inequality that surrounds them.
- Students feel like victims of a world they have little or no control over.

Rage

- Students who are exploited by or suffer because of social inequality may feel enraged at the injustice of it all.
- Enraged students stop learning because they can not take in any new information.
- Enraged classes become hostile toward privileged students and create a high risk classroom environment where students walk on egg shells or remain silent.

Non-Scientific Sociology: The perils of common sense
All Quotes From Everything is Obvious by Watts

- How Common Sense is Different From Knowledge like S.T.E.M. or Sociology
 - One does not need to know why some piece of common sense is true for it to be beneficial. They need only know that it is true, not why it is true.
 - The power of common sense lies in its ability to deal with every concrete situation on its own terms.
 - Formal knowledge tries to form general rules or laws, but common sense treats each situation as unique and unrelated.
 - Common sense just knows when to be used (somehow). You “just know” to talk to your boss differently than your best friend. There is no rule or law for how to communicate with all people in all situations.

- Common Sense Only Makes Sense Individually
 - Even our own common sense beliefs seem to disagree with one another.
 - “...we have the impression that our particular beliefs are all derived from some overarching philosophy, but the reality is that we arrive at them quite independently, and often haphazardly.” p.16
 - Aphorisms clearly show us how common sense only makes sense on a case by case basis and not when we think about things more broadly.
 - Birds of a feather flock together BUT opposites attract, Absence makes the heart grow fonder BUT out of sight, out of mind.
 - TAKE HOME POINT -- “The fragmented, inconsistent, and even self-contradictory nature of common sense does not generally present a problem in our everyday lives. The reason is that everyday life is effectively broken up into small problems, grounded in very specific contexts that we can solve more or less independently of one another.” p.17

- When Common Sense is Dangerous
 - The problems of common sense show themselves when, “we use common sense to solve problems that are not grounded in the immediate here and now of everyday life- problems that involve anticipating or managing the behavior of larger numbers of people, in situations that are distant from us either in time or space.
 - So what? Well when politicians and other policy makers want to stop X behavior, or encourage Y behavior they create public policies based on their common sense. They use the common sense they’ve gained from their lives and try to apply it to, say, poor people who’s lives are radically different from their own. And then they are perplexed why it doesn’t work out.

- Errors in thinking about human behavior
 1. We focus too much on factors like incentives, motivation, and beliefs, of which we are consciously aware.
 - This sounds sensible, but mountains of social science research suggest this is only the tip of the iceberg.
 - Music playing in a store influences purchasing decisions.
 - The font a statement is written in affects whether or not people believe it.
 - A person's physical attractiveness affects how trustworthy we think they are.
 - We IGNORE what we think is trivial
 2. We think about groups as groups of individuals OVERSIMPLIFICATION
 - Individuals in groups work together to create reality. Choices are made in an emergent process not individually one after another.
 3. We learn less from history than we think we do
 - We only focus on the events that "mattered" and ignore the infinite possibilities that could have unfolded.
 - We use our knowledge of the outcome to inform what happened in history.

Seeing Sociologically

“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”

-Marcel Proust

“Seeing the familiar as strange”

- Sociologists must work to bring new eyes to the social world they live in.
- It is inside what we take for granted, what we assume is natural, & what we think is inevitable that sociology has the most power to teach us how society operates & change our lives.
- We must look at the familiar as though it is strange. We must ask why and why not.
- Sociology is for students who want to look behind the curtain and see what is really going on. Sociology is inherently subversive.

The Sociological Imagination

- “...The idea that the individual can understand her own experience and gauge her own fate only by locating herself within her period, that she can know her own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in her circumstances.” - C. Wright Mills *The Sociological Imagination* 1959.
- We can only understand an individual’s biography when we understand it’s place within history.
- Individuals are products of their time, their community, and their understanding of the world around them.
- We experience our lives as one of a kind, but in fact your life is remarkably similar to others in your community. You are “unique just like all your friends”

Your life is more than just your choices

- Personal responsibility (i.e. the choices you make) is always a factor in how your life turns out, but choices alone can’t explain your circumstances.
 - The US unemployment rate in 2006 was 4.6% by 2009 it had more than doubled (9.6%).
Can this all be explained by bad choices or laziness?
- Each of us has to play the hand we are dealt (i.e. personal choices), but society is dealing the cards (the social circumstances you are born into).

Social Theory

- A social theory is a way of looking at how society operates.
- Social theory allows us to look at a single situation and take away multiple meanings.
- If everyone has a worldview, then social theory is a worldview that researchers put on like a pair of glasses to see the world in new ways.

Macro Theories {think telescope}

- Focuses on how society works at the institutional, national, and global level.
- Looks for trends or patterns in the big picture

Micro Theories {think microscope}

- Focuses on how everyday person to person interactions allow us to create and understand society
- Looks for the trends and patterns on a small scale

Grand Theory

- Attempts to explain how everything works in society
- Seeks “social laws” much like Newton’s laws of motion

Are we robots? Why aren’t there grand theories in sociology?

- Human behavior is more complex than the behavior of atoms and therefore sociology is harder than rocket science
- Sociologists can’t “prove” anything, we can only find evidence to suggest that under certain circumstances people are more or less likely to do _____
- Sociology is about trends, patterns, and probabilities not about laws that govern all human behavior at all times.

Mid Range Theory

- Focuses on how social institutions function between macrosociology & microsociology
- Focuses on theories of human behavior that can be empirically tested.

The Big Three Sociological Theories

1. Functionalism {a Macro, Grand Theory}

- Text Definition: The theory that various social institutions and processes in society exist to serve some important (or necessary) function to keep society running.
- Focuses on how things overwhelmingly function in day to day life.
- Some functions of society are manifest (i.e. obvious or intended) and others are latent (i.e. hidden or covert).
- Functionalists ask “How does this create stability and security?”
- Functionalism is a grand theory. It tries to explain how everything functions in society.

2. Conflict Theory {a Macro Theory}

- The driving force of all social change is the conflict over scarce resources and the conflict created by competing interests.
- Where functionalism sees inequality as a necessary function of society, conflict theory believes that inequality is unfair and that the less powerful people in society suffer.
- Conflict theorists ask, “who benefits from this?”
- Hegemony
 - The powerful actors in society use their power and influence to manipulate social institutions to create social conditions which give them the highest likelihood of maintaining their position of power in society. *Simply put: Those in power use it to ensure they stay in power*
 - Those in power are adept at getting the less powerful in society to believe that it is in their best interest to do what is in fact in the most powerful’s best interest.
 - Ex. many low income people oppose the “Death Tax” despite it only affecting less than 1 in 100 Americans.
- Those in power are able to define social problems and they frequently define a social problem as being the fault of the least powerful actors in society.
 - Ex. Undocumented immigrants are defined as “the problem”, but the large businesses that employ them are not.

3. Symbolic Interaction {a Micro Theory}

- Focuses on how we use symbols (e.g. language, images, etc.) to interact with others and create an understanding of reality.
- Social constructions are ideas and symbols that are meaningful in a culture and help people understand the world around them.
 - Ex. Gender, shaking hands, the stock market
- “All the world’s a stage” - We are constantly communicating with one another to create reality.
- I’m only a teacher because you think I am.
- This room is only a classroom, because we behave as though it is.
- We are very adept at receiving and transmitting innumerable little symbols that tell us, “what’s going on” and who we are?

Doing Sociology

If we can't trust common sense & intuition how can we know anything?

- Sociology uses the scientific method to discover how the world works
 - Research must make verifiable claims
 - Research must be reproducible
 - Research must be evaluated by other experts in the field before & after it's published

Research Methods

- Quantitative Methods
 - Quantitative Research focuses on describing events in numbers
 - Seeks to quantify reality
 - Surveys are the most common form of sociological quantitative research
- Qualitative methods
 - Qualitative research seeks to observe that which can not be quantified
 - Qualitative research often involves long form interviews, or observation (participant and non-participant observation)
 - Qualitative researchers argue that if you try to numerically measure reality you will not necessarily measure the best indicators of reality, but you will measure that which lends itself most readily to being measured

Correlation {think co - relation}

- Correlation is the shared relationship that one variable has with another.
- As the temperature outside rises (variable 1) ice cream sales (variable 2) increase as well.
- Correlation does not equal causality.
 - Ex. As ice cream sales go up, so does the rate of murder

Causality

- For something to cause something else 3 things must be present
 1. Correlation (i.e. a 3,000 calorie/day diet is correlated to weight gain)
 2. Time order (i.e. you must eat a 3,000 calorie/day diet before you gain weight)
 3. Ruling out alternative explanations (i.e. you don't have a genetic disorder)

Hypothesis

- A scientific statement about why a certain outcome is observed
- I hypothesize that if I eat a 3,000 calorie diet (IV) I will gain weight (DV)

Independent Variable (IV)

- The variable that influences, modifies, or changes the dependent variable
- This variable is independent because no other variable is impacting it in the hypothesis.
- In my hypothesis the 3,000 calorie each day isn't being influenced by any other variable

Dependent Variable (DV)

- The outcome of your hypothesis
- It is dependent on the IV to change it
- Weight gain is dependent on the 3,000 calorie/day diet

Generalizability

- A population
 - is the entire group of people a researcher wants to study
- A sample
 - is drawn from the population and this is the group researchers collect data on.
- Research is said to be generalizable if the findings of the study can be expanded to the entire population
- If you want to survey the levels of religiosity among college students in the U.S., all college students in the US would be your population, but you would only need to survey a much smaller subgroup (or sample) of college students. Then based on your findings within the smaller sample you would use statistics to generalize or expand your findings to the entire population.

Research Ethics:

1. Do no harm
 1. You can't physically or psychologically harm participants
2. Informed Consent
 1. Participants have to be fully aware of the risks they will be exposed to during the research and they must consent to it.
3. Voluntary Participation
 1. Participants must be aware that they are being researched if there is an assumption of privacy (i.e. people watching in a public place is fine).