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The Fascination of Sociology

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Abstract

This article is an overview of the behavioral science of sociology, stressing its weaknesses in terms of lack of preciseness and limitations on some occasions as well as its strengths in other circumstances, which could be so “lucrative” that they may even arouse abusing intentions. On the other hand, sociology shares such interesting traits with other close social sciences and even has something common with art and even natural sciences. Nevertheless it is a formal discipline unattainable for the layman and is indeed a fascinating field to explore and its study contributes societies on the way to improvements.

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1. Introduction

Even though it is a relatively young social science, the scope of sociology is immense as well as fantastically interesting. This is because it deals with society (Aronson, 1992); that abstract, indispensable-for-life, bewildering human environment surrounding us all.

All phenomena concerning human beings take on a significance within the medium of society. For a lone individual, all values as well as all defects would crumble, disintegrate. Neither heroism nor abjectness would acquire a meaning. Would beauty matter for a woman who is not admired? How would a novelist feel if he couldn't convey his ideas to a single reader? Who would ever blame a solitary “coward”?

It is sociology which probes into the relationship between the individual and his / her fellow-beings. Astronomy may not appeal to every one; however sociology refers to the vested interest of virtually everybody.

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The way Stewart and Glynn (1985) put it, “*on a more personal level [sociologists] examine the interaction between group members and outsiders and the special experiences of types of individuals. They want to know what it means for Henry to have been beaten by brutal, abusive parents; for Carlos to have crossed the border from Mexico to compete for farm labor jobs; or for Ernestine to have been reared in an urban slum*”.

2. Overlapping of Science and Art

Sociology can indeed be considered as a science, despite the fact that it is somewhat too different from natural sciences.

“Like other scientific disciplines, sociology engages in organized, systematic study of phenomena (in this case human behavior). All scientists, whether studying mushrooms or murderers, attempt to collect precise information” (Schaefer, 1983).

Nevertheless some intervention (or maybe “contamination”) of art elements are by no means lacking there. Art, which involves “human creativity, skill and a sense of beauty”, does not pertain to purely behavioral sciences alone. There are numerous books with titles like “The Art of Politics”, “the Art of Teaching”, “The Art of War” etc. Art even mingles with the physical sciences! This occurs because of the impossibility of isolation of ideal physical situations. A pendulum, thanks to the force of gravity, would go on swinging for ever, ideally. The air friction and the mechanical friction of attachment at its upper end damper the amplitudes and eventually stop the swing.

In my undergraduate days, while visiting a caustic soda plant, a chief chemical engineer once said that engineering unfortunately involves some art as well as science. Now, in this quotation using the word “unfortunately” was unfortunate by itself. Why knock down the value of art? Why should mixing with art be demeaning after all?

In all complicated technologies there exist fine points and “tricks” that would be ridiculous to note down on paper. Experience, ingenuity and even intuition make up for many operational gaps and all that constitute what came to be known as “know-how”. In this respect, a successful surgeon may measure the appropriate length of intestine to be cut off in term of spans rather than centimeters (or inches), for the sake of urgency and efficiency.

The new inclusion of the concept of emotional intelligence into social science appears to follow a similar course of action in its essence, too. Here more of art seems to intervene than in many other cases.

Similarly, today in primitive societies there are many complicated poisons whose developments were realized in accordance with mysticism and superstitions. Yet their components and formulas mostly “refuse” to yield to modern analytical methods. Some of them are from time to time standardized and put into the service of modern medicine. A substance resembling the arrow poison curare in the Amazon forests is one example and is used as a muscle loosening drug (Çaya, 1981).

3. A Subtle Discipline with Own Difficulties

Behavior is intricate by its very nature, so when it comes to studying behavior, many difficulties and ambiguities also come into play.

“Certainly a social science such as sociology is much less certain than a natural science. One deals with a subject matter — man— with an almost indefinite number of variables” (O’Donnel, 1988).

Positive sciences get their accuracy from the fact that matter does not ‘learn’ from experience. No matter how many times you heat a piece of iron, the thermal expansion coefficient remains the same. The arms of a clock do not go faster after many drills, thus rendering the clock useful for us (Weber, 1964).

On the other hand, people’s behavior constantly change in accordance with the “lessons” “gleaned” on the way to further *Erlebnis* / experiences, which renders their behavior patterns even more complicated as time passes by.

4. Hard-to-Grasp Behavior Changes

“*The social sciences rarely produce the clear-cut findings that are possible in the physical sciences. Sociological findings are not as readily transformed into practical applications. There are no laws of human behavior*” (Bassis, 1982).

An interesting situation could occur in the following manner: Now; Social Psychology relatively firmly establishes the inhibiting effect of bystanders in helping behavior / altruism. The more people there are, the less reluctant is each one of them to help a person in distress (Baron & Byrne, 1987). [The social loafing concept is in parallel, too. “*In a coordinated effort* [like a rope pulling game between two teams], *individual members decide to take it easy and let others do the work*” (Baron & Byrne, 1987)].

Here it is appropriate to provide some very special information before going on with the proposed situation: In Islamic creed, participating in a sinful act increases the horror ⁽⁵⁾ of the sin in a multi-fold manner, as compared to sinning alone. The parallel holds true for virtuous acts. Solidarity in view of a good, helpful act for any needful being is supposed to increase the “degree” of the gained virtue, tremendously.

Let us now suppose that a person in distress happens to be near a mosque (on a Friday, the sacred day of the week, when a *hutbe* / religious advice speech is provided besides the routine prayers), where the preacher / *vaiz* had just conveyed a sermon about the bliss and blessings of pooling together the efforts of the pious believers for a good cause. (As a matter of fact, this is how I had across this theological knowledge at the time). Faithful Muslims leaving the mosque may rush together to help out that person-in-distress. Let us further suppose that a social psychologist witnesses the last scene, unaware of the just previous incentives and inciting. Wouldn't he / she be bewildered and have difficulty in explaining what he / she sees?

5. Ethical, Legal and Other Constrictions

“There are many ethical issues that may be raised in the context of a [social] research enterprise. There is, first, the issue of privacy, which is likely to become problematic. The second issue is informed consent from participating subjects” (Webb, 1981).

Legal concerns are also there to reckon with. For example if a researcher were to investigate the flow of expert power and competitions of institutions over expertise; how could he achieve this attempt?

Wilhelm Reich's life represents a tragic lesson of legal opposition to social research. A former assistant of Freud, this eccentric psychiatrist escaped the Nazi-Germany and ended up in America; but his chances did not improve.

Reich developed the theory that sexual energy is nothing but the universal energy (which he named ‘orgone’) peculiar to the living. He established a gigantic laboratory in order to capture, store and use that energy. But McCarthyism movement put him into trouble.

6. Temptation for Abuse

Political movements and other interest-seeking tendencies may fall into / stoop to a temptation / *Versuchung* to abuse the power of sociology (or other social sciences for that matter). This is what Hitler resorted to at the time, for instance.

Hitler conceived from the first day that propaganda in Germany can not attain its goal unless accompanied by a deployment of forces and a submission to command. In consequence, the collective propaganda of Hitler consisted of limitless obedience to the Führer as well as an absolute enslavement and crushing of the enemy (Reiwald 1949).

Many profit-seeking people, too, (knowingly or not) employ techniques which are of interest for social sciences. Using face-in-the-door (asking for a big favor and settling for a smaller one) or foot-in-the-door (asking for a small favor and incrementally obtaining much bigger ones) techniques are only two such examples.

The former is more rarely resorted to but it could be very effective at the right place. A child who demands to borrow his friend's bicycle may very easily obtain his lollipop candy instead. Giving away the lollipop will appear like an insurance document for the bicycle in the eyes of the other kid.

As for the latter, it seems to be used more often because it mostly works. “*When individuals commit themselves*

in a small way, the likelihood they will commit themselves further in that direction is increased” (Aronson, 1992). I became a victim of the latter method myself once in my high school days.

Returning from my (Thracian) home, I was on the verge of transferring to another municipal bus in Eminönü district of Istanbul to get to school (Robert College Lycée Division). I was a boarding scholarship student and I had only one lira (Turkish money unit) left over that Sunday afternoon. Near the bus station, at the courtyard of the Ottoman mosque dominating the square; all of a sudden; a smiling, dark complexioned youngish woman held a small tin vessel full of corn grains before me and requested me to spread it on the ground for the pigeons to pick up. The price was written on the can: One fourth of a lira, the same amount as the student bus fare. I took the vessel (the cap of a glass jar) and offered its content to the pigeons. But the woman hastily threw up three more measures (or to be more precise, half-measures) of grains to the pigeons without my consent and obviously “for my sake” and thus, in a sense, she came to “deserve” a whole lira (all of my money) with that fait accompli. The shy student I was, I had to walk all the way to my school, in two hours.

Many confidence artists also make much of similar elaborated methods. *For instance, a seller first spends some time and some goods to gain confidence of the audience (distributing cheap fruit knives freely on behalf of a phony company). He then sells so-called higher quality knives at high prices and comes up with a substantial profit* (Smith, 1991).

7. It is no Layman’s Business

Anybody might consider himself / herself some of a sociologist at some point, whereas he / she may actually be far from the necessary qualifications. This is after all, a formal discipline, which is to be gained solely through scholarly efforts and sweat.

In sociology even careful choice of words count a lot, the field having its own indispensable jargon. The words “person” and “individual” may be interchangeable in every day language. They are wide apart in sociology. Many other meaning shades also exist among at first sight very similar concepts.

As Mauss (1969) emphasizes, *the words like family, tribe, village and clan do not designate the one and the same thing as many authors suppose.*

Moreover, an every day word may acquire an entirely different meaning in the context of sociology.

Still, laymen can claim to interfere in some social science fields. For instance, a history professor once complained that many intellectuals with different backgrounds take themselves as authorities in history.

Similarly; some other functions in society appear to compete with and irritate counsel providing educated job holders. In ignorant, backward societies so-called sorcerers are prone to this. In highly developed but more and more spiritually frustrated and burnt out western societies, new religion figures outside the mainstream churches seem to replace them. *“General therapeutic and ‘helping’ professionals such as psychiatrist, psychologists and social workers are predisposed to be hostile to cults. The conflict between mental health professionals and cult leaders is heightened by the hegemonic desire on the part of both groups. In a sense, spiritual masters have become competitors of licensed therapists”* (Robbins, 1985).

8. The Utilitarian Nature of Sociology

It is thanks to sociology that many mistakes are avoided and many right decisions are taken on big issues concerning people. Even that good old common sense is not much of a use in many situations (though it is not to be underestimated in daily life). Common sense is “contaminated” with ethically and factually wrong factors like discrimination based on gender, race, creed, status. It is “shaped” by prejudices and stereotypes. Common senses coming together are apt to fall into groupthink (a collective, often mistaken reasoning where nobody dares to disturb the ambiance and speak out a different view).

“The sociological perspective provides a view of human behavior that enables us to see situations —and ourselves— in a special light. As a result, the familiar looks new to us, as if we were outsiders. The unequal and unjust treatment of blacks [in America] was seen in a new light when an outsider (Swedish Gunnar Myrdal) was assigned to study the situation.[Besides] sociology helps us to understand ‘strange’ behaviors and unfamiliar situations. For example, many high-ranking positions in the classical Eastern empires were held by eunuchs.

Without roots (9) or kin, eunuchs owed allegiance only to their rulers” (Cosser & Menton, 1987).

Sociologists have responsibilities. In order to fulfill them there are tools at their disposal. One is the sum of all research methods. Such methods consist of *cross-sectional study, (prospective or retrospective) longitudinal study, and observational studies (impressionistic, statistical-comparative, questionnaire and interview, participant-observer)* (Horton & Hunt, 1976).

Another tool is the sum of various sociological theories. *“There is really no alternative to theorizing. If we did away with it, we would be left with a jumble of data and impressions. Facts and impressions gain meaning (and therefore sometimes imply the need for action) by their relatedness, their ‘theoretical’ nature. Finding relationships among facts brings them into some coherent conceptual order. Thinking through such order, and explaining it, is the process of theorizing”* (Skidmore, 1979).

9. Conclusion

Sociology is a wonderful field of study. Its undeniable uses left aside, it is an intrinsic pleasure by itself merely to deal with sociology. It is like a privilege to be a scholar of sociology.

10. Notes

1) *In its larger sense society is a cluster, or system, of patterned interactions among organized groups of human beings [like the western society]. More specifically, a society is organized groups of people who have distinctive social patterns, occupy a territory and have a sense of common identity [thus, for instance the Swiss society differing from the French one, though both are western]* (Cosser et al., 1987).

2) I remember an episode from a European movie, that I watched in late 1980s: A young girl falls in love with her gray-haired music tutor, a Hungarian immigrant. The man first resists the affair. But the young girl is daring and claimful. One evening, after the piano session, she sits at the stairs and simply stays there. The tutor can't coax her to leave. Finally she screams: “listen to me, you old gypsy! I will not go before settling this issue!”. Her challenging attitude wins the man and he gives in. Still, the girl is content with their secret meetings, societal considerations are after all embedded in her consciousness. One day the man offers to go out together! The girl is amazed. The elderly man replies: “Lovers do want to be seen together!”.

An anonymous Turkish anecdote is also illuminating in explaining the perception of society: They asked a hunchback which choice he would prefer. Getting rid of his defect or else seeing everybody else defected like himself. He immediately chose the latter.

3) A flour plant technician in *Edirne (Adrinople)* once narrated that an expert called from Italy had detected the worn out machinery pieces merely by listening to the emitted sounds. Whatever he said proved to be true and such pieces were accordingly replaced.

4) In an elective law course at Bosphorous University, our professor once said that plagiarizing know-how was a very controversial copyright issue in jurisdiction, the claims being too difficult to prove or disprove (Vakur Versan, 1976).

5) Interestingly enough, the Turkish Penal Code (and I have a feeling that it may be true for other penal codes as well) foresees heavier penalties if a given crime / felony (murder, wounding, sexual assault, burglary) is committed with culprits. Turkey, though a “derivative” of the former Ottoman Empire, is a secular state established through a revolutionary movement under the leadership of Atatürk and the idea beyond a secular juridical item overlaps with the religious idea at this specific point.

6) *“Expert power, based on the authority of knowledge, can wield a great deal of influence”* (Huse & Bowditch, 1977). The owner of expert power is accordingly jealous to share it with others. For example, even the police authorities and secret services are sometimes reciprocally reluctant to provide information for one another. This matter, on occasion, makes surface and appears as a piece of news on the press. Similarly, having cooperated previously, they may not share a certain resulting success without a fuss.

7) Female British novelist Maurier deals with that topic in a science fiction short story: At a remote, dubious research center, a scientist, MacLean, gets engaged in secret research. His collaborating assistant, Ken, is bound to die of cancer very soon. MacLean “stores” Ken’s life energy (or soul) in a device and through the mediation of a little girl, Nik, he establishes communication with the “fresh” dead person. The girl visibly suffers and implores MacLean to let Ken’s soul go!

8) At a pedagogical seminar arranged for teachers and various faculty members the instructor, once just before the break, said “as we grow older we assume many more roles like a parent role, a boss role, a commander role etc. The participants were of various majors. At the break some had puzzled facial expressions. Finally a mathematician exploded:”So, he insulted us implicitly. Are we all hypocrites now?”. A physicist was smiling at him approvingly. The two were interpreting the word “role” in the sense of *mise en scène* (staging) instead of “the expected behavior associated with a social position” as Mitchell (1979) would define it. I and a few others stepped in and explained the concept, cooling down their indignant sullenness!

9) The Ottoman society also established a system whereby children from the Balkans were recruited, converted to Islam and reared to high offices. The Janissary corps were comprised entirely of such soldiers. With no roots and relations behind, only through merit, one could ascend all the way to the ranks of pashas and eventually the post of Grand vizier, just below the Sultan himself. The *kizlar aghai*, chief black eunuch and his helpers the other eunuchs— *some were whites*— in charge of protecting the concubines and other womenfolk (sultan’s mother, daughters), all confined to the Harem section of the palace, were in possession of immense political power.

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