

Preface

This volume is designed as a basic text for upper level and graduate courses in contemporary sociological theory. Most sociology programs require their majors to take at least one course in sociological theory, sometimes two. A typical breakdown is between classical and contemporary theory. Theory is perhaps one of the broadest areas of sociological inquiry and serves as a foundation or framework for more specialized study in specific substantive areas of the field. In addition, the study of sociological theory can readily be related to various aspects of other social science disciplines as well.

From the very beginning sociology has been characterized by alternative theoretical perspectives. Classical theory includes the European founding figures of the discipline whose works were produced during the later half of the nineteenth century and the first couple of decades of the twentieth century plus early American theorists. For most of the second half of the twentieth century, a fairly high consensus has developed among American sociologists regarding these major founders, particularly with regard to the works of Durkheim and Weber in analyzing the overall society and of Simmel in analyzing social interaction processes. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s the influence of Marx has also been recognized. Recent decades have also witnessed an increased emphasis on the important contributions of several pioneering feminist perspectives in the early years of sociology.

With the establishment of sociology as an academic discipline, the era of dominant individuals has been largely replaced by dominant theoretical schools. During the middle part of the century, Talcott Parsons' version of functional theory dominated the field—although other perspectives were also advanced as alternatives during that period. These competing theories included conflict theory, critical theory, symbolic interaction theory, and social exchange theory. In more recent decades, several additional theoretical perspective have been elaborated, including, for example, rational choice theory, which is closely related to exchange theory, the sociology of emotions, neofunctionalism, general systems theory, structuration theory, sociobiology, and various postmodern perspectives. The continued development of various forms of feminist theory has also been influential in the field.

The overall organizing framework employed in this book is based primarily on the distinctions among different levels of social reality. Theorists routinely distinguish

between micro and macro levels of analysis, even though the distinction is arbitrary in some ways. The micro level involves a focus on human agency and choice and the dynamics of personal relationships and small-scale social systems of various types, particularly those involving face-to-face encounters. The macro level, in contrast, is concerned with larger-scale social systems, typically at the level of total societies.

The specific details of intentional human agency may appear to be submerged in macro-level theories, along with the dynamics of face-to-face relations—despite the fact that the structures of large-scale systems are actually made up of patterns of human action and interaction. Many of the major theoretical perspectives making up the field differ from one another in terms of whether they begin with a micro or a macro level focus, or emphasize one or the other of these levels as primary. In addition, a great deal of recent work in theory has involved explicit efforts to link micro and macro levels.

In addition to micro and macro levels, various intermediate or “meso” levels of analysis may also be identified. The meso-level focus is manifested primarily in the various substantive areas of sociology, many of which have their own somewhat specialized theoretical perspectives. Micro-, meso-, and macro levels certainly do not exist independently of one another, however. Instead, the distinctions have to do with primary focus of attention and the specific concepts and social processes that are most heavily emphasized. This volume will highlight organizations, communities, markets, and socioeconomic classes as meso-level social formations that can be identified between the micro level of face-to-face relations and the macro-level institutional structures of the overall society.

The micro/macro distinction may be compared and contrasted with the more contemporary distinction between agency and structure. The concept of agency may seem initially to be related to the micro level and structure to the macro level. However, both agency and structure are manifested at all levels. Thus, for example, micro-level social relations, such as those among family members or close friends, exhibit definite structural patterns which may either be maintained or transformed through their members’ actions. At the same time, meso and macro level systems are also reproduced or transformed through the actions and social relations of the specific individuals involved in them. The influence of different participants as agents in all types of structures may be expected to vary according to their position and the power and resources they control.

In evaluating all of the various contemporary theories to be discussed in this volume, the interdependence of agency and structure at all levels is important to keep in mind. Within the various levels of the social world described above, alternative or competing theoretical perspectives will be highlighted, but not in a way that suggests it is necessary to choose one or the other. Instead, given the complexity of the social world and the variety of ways it can be analyzed, the different perspectives can be regarded as alternative frameworks, or lenses, through which different aspects or features of the social world may be highlighted. All of the theoretical perspectives to be emphasized in this volume are to be seen as providing important insights into the nature of the social world, but all are limited in the specific features of the social world on which they focus.

The four chapters in Part I set the stage. Chapter 1 moves from the implicit common sense theories of everyday life to explicit theories that are developed through intellectual reflection, research, and study. The next two chapters deal with the historical development of sociological theory. Chapter 2 reviews the early European sources, while Chap. 3 deals with the development of American sociology. Chapter 4 describes the strategy of formal theory construction for formulating theoretical ideas as an essential part of the process of scientific inquiry.

The eleven chapters in Part II present the major core perspectives that have long been considered basic in contemporary sociological theory. The presentation moves from the micro to the macro level, with the meso level in the middle. Chapters 5–8 focus on the micro level. The specific theories in these chapters include symbolic interaction theory and the dramaturgic approach (Chap. 5), phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology (Chap. 6), and social exchange and rational choice theories (Chap. 7). Chapter 8 then relates rational choice theory to variations in the opportunities individuals have to form social ties with different types of people, and how micro-level relationships and social networks develop. Ideas from the sociology of emotions perspective will be incorporated to emphasize that social relationships and networks ties involve emotional exchanges of various types as well as individual rational choice calculations. This applies in personal relationships as well as in more structured institutional settings.

Chapter 9 makes the transition from the micro to the meso and macro levels. The foundation provided by the social exchange and rational choice perspectives will help us understand how larger scale structures are developed to link individuals' own personal interests with conformity to norms that are intended, ideally, to ensure the general welfare. Chapter 10 will then focus on communities and organizations as meso-level social formations. Communities will be viewed as based on subjective emotional bonds and feelings of belonging, though such bonds may involve abstract ideals of solidarity as well as actual social relations. Formal organizations will be analyzed through the social exchange and rational choice perspective as involving the coordination of people's activities to achieve various collective or overlapping goals. However, the process of bringing people together in an organizational context may lead to the emergence of socioemotional ties and feelings of solidarity.

Chapter 11 will be devoted to markets and socioeconomic classes as meso-level social formations. The highly individualistic utilitarian assumptions of the social exchange and rational choice perspectives are manifested more fully in market transactions than in any other kind of social formation. Socioeconomic classes emerge from inequalities in the resources, both material and nonmaterial, that individuals have at their disposal as they seek to satisfy their various interests through market transactions. The emergence and persistence of socioeconomic classes appear to be an inevitable outcome of the competitive struggle whereby individuals seek to satisfy their needs and interests in an environment of scarce resources. These conflicting interests are basic in the conflict theory perspective—one of the major macro theories to be previewed shortly.

The next five chapters focus explicitly on the macro level. Chapters 12 and 13 are devoted to functional theory, emphasizing how individuals' actions are structured in various social institutions to contribute to larger social outcomes that may go beyond their intentions. Within this framework, human behavior is seen as reflecting shared values and contributing to the maintenance of the overall society.

In contrast to the functional perspective, Chap. 14 will focus on conflict theory. The potential for conflict is seen as pervasive at all levels of the social world because of the differences in the interests of different individuals and groups. The effects of conflict in stimulating social change are heavily emphasized in conflict theory, as well as the way the disruptive effects of conflict can often be minimized through the development of procedures to regulate it. Chapter 15 will then deal with critical theory. This theory also emphasizes conflicting interests among different segments of society, with stability and social order explained by the way the dominant culture shapes people's consciousness to support the system. Raising people's consciousness regarding this process is seen as a necessary first step in moving toward the liberation of people from oppressive social structures.

The five chapters in Part III will cover some contemporary perspectives that reflect multiple levels of analysis. Chapter 16 will include important examples of feminist theory. The focus in feminist theory on patriarchal forms of male domination and female subordination shares many features of both conflict theory and critical theory. In addition, the emphasis on social definitions of gender roles draws heavily from symbolic interaction theory as well.

Chapter 17 will review structuration theory and systems theory. Structuration theory highlights the interdependence of agency and structure, with the routine practices of everyday life contributing to the maintenance (or transformation) of the structures in which they are involved. The overview of systems theory will emphasize how the dynamics of social systems reflect the changing relations and patterns of interdependence that make them up as well as how they can be distinguished from other systems with which they are related.

Chapter 18 will introduce the sociobiological perspective to show how social behavior and cultural patterns may be viewed as reflecting human beings' biological and genetic heritage. Chapter 19 will focus on the dynamics of cultural system, particularly beliefs and systems of knowledge, patterns of behavioral self-control, and moral codes. Chapter 20 will deal with several themes from postmodern theoretical perspectives, including the fragmentation of cultural meaning and skepticism regarding all forms of knowledge and systems of authority. The arbitrary and socially constructed nature of the social world as highlighted in postmodern perspectives contrasts sharply with the sociobiological emphasis on our underlying biological and genetic heritage. Finally, Chap. 21 will be devoted to a brief summary of the major theoretical perspectives that we have reviewed, highlighting once again the importance of multiple theories to advance our understanding of the multiple levels of our complex and multidimensional social world.

Any textbook author seeking to cover a field as broad and as fragmented as contemporary sociological theory can certainly be accused of omitting important scholars or theoretical schools, of overemphasizing certain perspectives and

underemphasizing others, or perhaps even misinterpreting some of the key ideas of important theorists. This volume is no exception in that regard. The effort to incorporate these different theories in a single volume is intended to suggest that they may indeed be integrated so as to provide a more comprehensive picture of the social world than any one theory by itself. Fortunately, despite their primary focus on either the micro and macro level, most of the major theories to be covered in this volume can be expanded to other levels as well.

In addition to comparing and contrasting different specialized theories with one another, I also seek to relate key theoretical ideas to everyday life experiences. The questions for study and discussion at the end of each chapter are intended to stimulate additional reflection on some of the major concepts and ideas that are covered and their application to various aspects of the social world with which you are familiar. Readers of this volume are already highly knowledgeable and skilled participants in their own social world. This means it is not necessary to start from scratch. Despite the abstract nature of the major theoretical perspectives in our field, the ultimate test for any sociological theory is its power to expand our consciousness of all aspects of the social world and to provide new insights that go beyond our implicit everyday life understanding.

It is a challenging but rewarding adventure that can last throughout your life. Welcome to the adventure!

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