MINISTERY OF EDUCATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

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REFERAT:

"Social interaction and social relation. Levels of social interactions"

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Social interaction and social relation are identified as different concepts. The concept “social relation” is frequently used in social sciences, but there is no commonly agreed meaning for it. In the first instance, a social relation is regarded as a relation between people, and more specifically:

* a relation between individuals insofar as they belong to a group,
* a relation between groups,
* a relation between an individual and a group.

In this sense, a social relation is not identical with a unique interpersonal relation or a unique individual relation, although all these types of relations presuppose each other. Anyway, in sociological hierarchy, social relation is more advanced than behaviour, action, social behaviour, social action, social contact and social interaction. These concepts denote:

* animal-like behaviour is first and most basic behaviour, various physical movements of the body like walking, eating;
* action is a movement with a meaning and purpose, for instance, you pick up berries to eat yourself;
* social behaviour is addressed towards other people;
* social action requires a response from another person, for instance, you present a diamond ring to your girl-friend;
* social contact is a pair of social actions;
* social interaction is a sequence of social actions.

It should be noted that the last four movements can take place within the frameworks of a social act.

There must be three components so that social interaction is realized:

* the subjects (two and more people – who interacts?);
* the object (why to interact?);
* a mechanism to regulate interactions (how to interact?)

If there is no object, individuals don’t interact, if there is one, they do. For instance, a young man wants to get acquainted with a girl. It is the girl who makes a decision to interact: if she likes the man (the subject) or the object suggested, she continues the conversation, gives her telephone number etc. In other words, she performs particular actions to get social interaction done.

Social interactions can be differentiated into:

* accidental (also known as social contact) – not planned and not repeated, for instance, asking a stranger for directions. Social contact is interaction without further consequence, i. e. it is not likely to be repeated or the subject of interaction can be easily exchanged by another one. An example would be a failed and not-repeated attempt to start a conversation with the girl a young man likes if she doesn’t like him.
* repeated – not planned, bound to happen from time to time. For example, accidentally meeting a neighbour from time to time when walking in your street;
* regular – not planned, but very common, likely to raise questions when missed, for instance, meeting a doorman every workday in your workplace or your tutor at the University, dining every day in the same restaurant, etc.
* regulated – planned and regulated by customs or law, will definitely raise questions when missed, for instance, interaction in a workplace (coming to work or class to lectures, staff meetings etc), family etc.

The Romans said that man is a social animal, so an individual depends on the society he lives in. It means that he depends on other individuals with whom he enters into relations forming any social entity. That’s why social interactions are based on interdependencies between two or more people mutually oriented towards each other, i. e. social interaction is any behavior that tries to affect or take account of each other’s subjective actions or intentions. It suggests that the parties to the social interaction must be aware of each other. It does not mean being in sight of or directly behaving towards each other. Friends writing letters are socially interacting, as are enemy generals preparing opposing war plans. Social interaction is not defined by type of physical relation or behavior, or by physical distance. It is a matter of a mutual subjective orientation towards each other. Spying one on another is not social interaction if the other is unaware. Thus, even when no physical behavior is involved, as with two rivals deliberately ignoring each other’s professional work, there is social interaction.

Social interaction is a dynamic, changing sequence of social actions between people (or groups) who modify their actions and reactions due to the actions done by their interaction partner(s).

An American researcher R. Rummel in his work, Understanding Conflict and War, describes social interactions by their meaning, direction, intensity, extension, duration, and organization.

The meaning of social interaction involves understanding such behavior as act, action, or practice.

The direction of interaction depends on whether people orient their acts towards each other, and whether the acts involve common intentions and the desire or aim of helping each other to achieve that intention. There are two opposing directions of interaction – solidary and antagonistic. The first involves acts of similar intentions and a mutual orientation of the parties towards helping each other to achieve these intentions. For instance, friends helping each other to pass an examination, parents mutually cooperating to bring up their children, a team of scientists trying to discover a cure for cancer, and so on.

Antagonistic interaction takes place when the parties intend to hinder each other from achieving their purpose. For instance, two people competing for promotion to the same position, generals fighting for the same territory, or rivals trying to capture the same market share. The interaction between a master and slave, a prisoner and his guard are also examples.

It should be noted that antagonistic interaction does not imply that intentions are different. The parties share a common desire and mutual orientation towards each other. They have the same aims (a promotion, possession, achievement etc) which they don’t want to or can’t have together. Antagonistic interaction is characterized by this main element: a perception of incompatible purposes and the belief that the achievement of one’s own aim entails frustrating the others.

There is also a mixed interaction, which is partly antagonistic, partly solidary. The mutual acts may be solidary as the parties intend to achieve a common goal but their actions may be antagonistic. A doctor and patient may both have the patient’s health uppermost in mind, but the patient’s actions may be antagonistic, when he refuses to stay in bed as ordered.

On the other hand, the acts may be antagonistic while the actions are solidary, for instance, parents argue while keeping their voices down so as not to wake up their children.

Besides meanings and direction, social interactions are also characterized by high or low intensity. Deeply felt, strongly motivated intentions can be involved, as in a world chess match, war, labour strike, or marriage. On the other hand, the interactions may involve little emotion or peripheral intentions, as with those playing tennis to relax or disagreeing over what movie to see.

Due to extension interactions may be extensive or narrow. They may invoke a range of activities, such as beating all competitors for the presidency of a country, fighting a war, or building a good academic department. Narrow interactions may be restricted to particular activities, such as cooperation among friends cleaning up after a party, or a legislative disagreement over the tax on imported watches.

Another characteristic of interaction concerns their duration. Interactions may be of momentary or relatively short duration, such as a dispute at the supper table as to who will get the last piece of cake, or an interaction between a sales clerk and customer. Some interactions are of extended duration, as in the rivalry of nations at the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly, or the mutual love directed interaction of a marriage.

Finally, interactions can be characterized as to whether they are organized, that is, governed by law-norms defining a group, or not. For instance, interactions between individuals preparing for a joint weekend may not be organized, while trade between nations, or divorce proceedings are organized interactions.

In total, social interactions manifest various combinations of characteristics, or modalities in terminology by P. A. Sorokin. They may be solidary, intensive, but narrow, short and non-organized, like sexual intercourse; or intensive, extensive, durable, antagonistic and organized, like war; or intensive, narrow, short, organized, and antagonistic, like a coup d'état etc.

Within different conceptual frameworks sociologists classified social interactions into such forms as Gemeinschaft versus Gesellschaft, community versus association, cooperation versus conflict etc. The known conception is that of P. A. Sorokin who divided the interaction system of organized durable groups into three components: familistic, contractual and compulsory ones.

The familistic component comprises consistent, solidary, extensive, intensive and durable interactions. Those who are involved in them form an organically interdependent unity, interrelated into a “we”. What concerns one concerns them all; it is not a question of what each personally can achieve from the interaction, but what can be done together. Social interactions between father and son, members of religions, sects, athletic teams are often of familistic nature.

The contractual component comprises interactions which are partly solidary, partly antagonistic, limited in duration and extension, with high or low intensity, and legalistic. Contractual interaction tends to be utilitarian, a specific association of the actions of individuals for independent purposes. It is manifested in benevolent neutrality, passive resistance or reluctant cooperation, competitive cooperation, simultaneous love and hate. Examples are interaction between a seller and buyer, an employee and employer, a bureaucrat and citizen. Some modern couples transform their marriages into a contractual affair.

Compulsory interaction is characterized by consistent internal antagonism, as between lifelong enemies, conflicting nations, a slave and master. It may or may not be intensive, extensive, durable and organized. It comprises the attempt of one or more parties or groups to coerce others. The use of coercion is a hallmark of this type of social interaction. In a pure compulsory relationship the parties remain total strangers and outsiders to each other.

Describing interaction with a combination of modalities P. A. Sorokin styles it as the system of interaction or social relationship. If a social contact may have the form of exchange of information, joint activities etc., social interactions form the basis of social relations. Social relation refers to a multitude of social interactions, regulated by social law-norms, between two or more people, each having a social position and performing a social role.

Sociologists share the opinion of F. Znaniecki who defines social relations as a system of interactions comprising two partners (from individuals to societies) and a bound such as the object, interest, orientation, value which become the platform for the entity. An example of the bound can be parents’ obligations to ensure socialization of their child, i. e. to make him learn its own obligations with regard to the elder, brothers and sisters, society etc.

So, social relations can be defined as a stable system of regulated social interactions between two or more people on the basis of a certain platform (i. e. interest). This concept always suggests a goal which the united people intend to achieve. For instance, such institutions as the court or jail are created to maintain social order and punish deviants who break moral and legal norms, encroach on social material or spiritual values.

The availability of a common platform in social relations was marked by M. Weber who also underlined that social behaviour of the people should be defined and observed. And social institutions are designed to provide observation. If the function of the institution of the family is to reproduce the population, both physically as delivering children, and socially as their bringing up, consequently we can observe social behaviours of the members of a family such as their methods of influence on the children or planning the family. It leads to a logical conclusion that social relations form the basis of such concepts as social organization, social structure, social institution, social movement and social system.

Levels of social interactions

There are three levels of social interactions. Interpersonal or face-to-face interactions may be presented by interactions between two people (dyad), between three people (triad), between one person and many (between an actor and spectators, and many and many individuals (buyers – sellers). Interpersonal interactions are largely determined by psychical and physiological factors due to the fact that partners enter into direct interaction with each other. The other factors are purposes and orientations of the partners who predetermine the character of interactions because setting the purpose and formation of value orientations are connected with the processes of socialization, i. e. their learning social experience.

Interpersonal interaction is observable. At this level a number of units of observation are differentiated: interaction subjects (individuals), their actions mutually oriented toward each other (acts of interaction), symbols of actions, outcomes of interactions. Each of them may be classified as a functional element of the social system. For instance, interaction subjects can be analyzed from the viewpoint of a demographic or professional structure. The other example is formal or informal character of interactions under observation.

Group interactions are of a higher level at which both the group’s social orientations and values shared by all or most of its members are manifested. They are further determined by additional factors such as relations within a group, the character of leadership, value orientations of the group etc. The subjects of interactions are groups, not individuals. As in interpersonal interactions, in group behaviour one can observe and empirically fix the character of interactions, and determine the type of relations between the groups.

Societal interactions bearing on the level of community and society are always indirect. Such interactions are most often defined as social relations. As they are characterized by a high degree of indirectness, the interaction partners such as nations cannot be in direct contact that’s why it is difficult to fix empirically observed acts of interaction if formal structures or concluding of political, economic treaties etc. are not spoken about.

At this level of interactions other factors perform such as culture, morals, ethics, law which make the interactions regulated. As any society is interested in social order, the system of regulated interactions at any of its levels is supported by law and social control. The analysis of societal interactions can be made from the viewpoint of social structures or functional systems, for instance, education, the institution of power, social control etc. that, in turn, enables to determine the character of interactions at the societal level.

Theories of social interaction

There are a number of theories of social interaction as their authors are seeking for the answer to the question about what factors determine whether individuals enter into interaction, continue or break it. To such theories belong social exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, psychological analysis etc.

Social exchange theory is based on a central premise that the exchange of social and material resources is a fundamental form of human interaction. G. Homans underlined that without repeated social actions there are no enduring social structures. He developed five propositions which enable to explain why individuals enter into interaction, why they continue or break it.

The success proposition implies that an increasing frequency of reward leads to an increasing frequency of action, but it is obvious that such an increase cannot go on indefinitely.

The second proposition concerns the effect on the action of the circumstances attending it. Since in many accounts of behaviour these attendant circumstances are called stimuli, G. Homans calls this the stimulus proposition. It emphasizes the reappearance of the circumstances attending a successful action that make the repetition of the action more probable. For instance, if you pass the exam well, next time you try to reproduce the previous circumstances such as the same dress or suit, some rituals as a coin in the shoe, no washing in the morning, or a ticket numbered 3 in the upper row etc. But the uppermost here is knowledge.

The value proposition includes reward and punishment. The results of a person’s actions that have positive values for him are called rewards; the results with negative ones are called punishments. The proposition implies that just as an increase in the positive value of the reward makes it more likely that the person will perform a particular act, so an increase in the negative value of the punishment makes it less likely that he will do so.

The deprivation-satiation proposition implies that if a man has often received the reward, he begins to be satiated with it. Its value decreases for him, and by the value proposition, he becomes less apt to perform an action that is followed by this reward. Food is the best example.

The aggression-approval proposition implies that when a person doesn’t get what he expected, he is frustrated. When he is frustrated, he is apt to feel some anger. No doubt, the more valuable to a person is the reward he expected or the more painful the punishment he didn’t expect, the greater is his frustration and hence his anger. When a man is frustrated, he is apt to perform aggressive actions. These are actions that attack, break, hurt, or threaten the source of the frustration. The target of aggression may be an inanimate object though humans can also serve targets. When we are furious at someone and hit him, the sight of his wincing under our blow becomes intensely rewarding.

Social exchange theory explains interpersonal interaction, i. e. how we feel about a relationship with another person as depending on our perceptions of the balance between what we put into the relationship and what we get out of it. But the postulates of equal and mutually beneficial interaction known as balanced exchange can’t explain such phenomena as social inequality, coercion, or power. To do so G. Homans suggested the proposition of the least interest that states that a person, who is least interested in the continuation of exchange, possesses a greater ability to dictate the terms of this exchange to the interaction partners. The result of this kind of exchange is emergence of power because “one man can provide more rewards to the others than the latter can reward him”. The researcher asserts that any relations of power, even coercive ones, are examples of non-balanced exchange.

P. Blau’s version of exchange value makes a useful complement to Homans. He viewed social interactions from the other positions, those of structural exchange. The researcher stressed that behavioural propositions can explain people’s interactions at the micro-level when relations are oriented toward achieving the aim but this aim can be achieved only if partners interact with each other and they all have the means necessary to obtain the aim. Relations of power emerge when one of the interaction partners has monopolistic or exclusive rights to some reward which other partners are trying to get. In this case the owner will try to exchange the available reward at a higher cost possible, imposing his will on the other partners. But in order to be institutionalized, power must be legitimized on the basis of social norms and values constituting a particular cultural system, the latter not being connected with the exchange processes. In other words, P. Blau explains the essence of social interaction at the macro-level.

American sociologists have gone further in developing the theory within the framework of which social life can be treated as an exchange of rewards or resources between actors. Their main conclusion is that actors in exchange can be not only individuals but also groups, and that in-group processes and inter-group relations are more complex than being sets of market transactions.

# Additional literature

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