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"SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND SOCIAL PROCESSES"

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Symbolic interactionism focuses on the subjective aspects of social life, rather than on objective, macro-structural aspects of social systems. One reason for this focus is that interactionists base their theoretical perspective on their image of humans, rather than on their image of the society (as the functionalists do). For interactionists, humans are pragmatic actors who continually must adjust their behaviour to the actions of other actors. We can adjust to these actions only because we are able to interpret them, i. e. to denote them symbolically and treat the actions and those who perform them as symbolic objects. This process of adjustment is aided by our ability to imaginatively rehearse alternative lines of action before we act. The process is further aided by our ability to think about and to react to our own actions and even our selves as symbolic objects. Thus, the interactionists sees humans as active, creative participants who construct their social world, not as passive, conforming objects of socialization.

For interactionists, the society consists of organized and patterned interactions among individuals. Thus, a research focuses on easily observable face-to-face interactions rather than on macro-level structural relationships involving social institutions. Furthermore, this focus on interaction and on the meaning of events to the participants in those events (the definition of the situation) shifts the attention of interactionists away from stable norms and values toward more changeable, continually readjusting social processes. Whereas for functionalists socialization creates stability in the social system, for interactionists negotiation among members of the society creates temporary, socially constructed relations which remain in constant flux, despite relative stability in the basic framework governing those relations.

These emphases on symbols, negotiated reality and the social construction of the society lead to an interest in the roles people play. E. Goffman, a prominent social theorist in this tradition, discusses roles dramaturgically, using an analogy to the theater, with human social behaviour seen as more or less well scripted and with humans as role-taking actors. Role-taking is a key mechanism of interaction, for it permits us to take the other’s perspective, to see what our actions might mean to the other actors with whom we interact. At other times, interactionists emphasize the improvisational quality of roles, with human social behaviour seen as poorly scripted and with humans as role-making improvisers. Role-making, too, is a key mechanism of interaction, as all situations and roles are inherently ambiguous, thus requiring us to create those situations and roles to some extent before we can act.

Social processes

Interactions between people are the framework element which serves as a broad placeholder for social processes. Process (from Latin processus – movement) is a naturally occurring or designed sequence of operations or events, possibly taking up time, space, expertise or other resource, which produces some outcome. A process may be identified by the changes it creates in the properties of one or more objects under its influence.

Processes can be classified into singular, recurrent and periodic ones. A singular process is the one which occurs only once. Few processes in nature can be considered singular. Most processes found in nature are recurrent, as they repeat more than once. Recurrent processes which repeat at a constant rate turn to periodic ones. The more periodic is a process the more useful it is as the basis of development.

Social processes are those activities, actions, events or operations that involve interaction between people. Examples of social processes are known: progress, regress, integration, adaptation, assimilation, competition, facilitation, inhibition etc. As for interaction of particular groups, it is determined by a common platform such as common individual or group interest, values, way of life etc. Let’s take such groups as the Moslems and football fans. If social behaviour of the Moslems is directed by their national customs and traditions, such as rejection from pork, social behaviour of football fans may be directed by considerable differences which further differentiate fans, for instance in Russia, as those who support the football club “Spartacus” and those who support “The Central Sport Army Club”. It means that on the basis of interactions the process of uniting of people, or integration, may take place. But interactions may also entail disintegration, and then, social behaviour of the individual or a group may become deviant from norms and values of the given social milieu, such as deviant after-match affairs between fans of different clubs.

But the given processes are associated not only with changing interests or needs of a person but with interests of the social milieu which the person is a part of. For instance, a worker was a part-time university student, received a managerial qualification and moved up to a higher social stratum, thus disintegrating with the representatives of the lower stratum. At the same time he became a manager, learnt behaviours followed by managers of a certain level (leadership, creativity etc) and actively demonstrates them, thus, integrating with the representatives of a higher stratum.

In a group a number of dynamic processes may take place; some of them are:

* coercion on its members that enables to make them learn conformity and suggestibility;
* formation of social roles and distribution of group roles;
* changing of the activities of its members such as a result of facilitation as the art of leading people through processes toward agreed-upon objectives in a manner that encourages participation, ownership and creativity, or as a result of inhibition that discourages interaction and participation.

A well-known classification is that of R. Park who distinguished four major social processes: competition, conflict, accommodation and assimilation. He considered competition as the elementary universal and fundamental form of social interaction and defined it as the struggle for existence. Competition is interaction without contact when people are competing for prized goods or values, but a particular person as the individual unit is unaware of his competitors. Unconscious competition may turn to conscious conflict and competitors identify each other as rivals or as enemies. But it may take place only when the problems arising among subjects of interaction are perceived by them as not solved by any other means or perceived as a threat to their existence.

Accommodation means that individuals and groups get used to the conflict situation, their interactions are temporarily fixed and controlled through laws and norms. In accommodation the antagonism of hostile elements is regulated, and conflict disappears as an overt action, although it remains latent as a potential force.

In contrast to accommodation, assimilation is a process of interpenetration and fusion in which individuals and groups acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other people and groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common culture.

R. Park asserts that social conflict is an indispensable attribute of social interactions between individuals, groups and communities. It may come about when there is no consent between people, or the individual is fighting for his rights, or it is necessary to defend the homeland from a foreign attack etc. If in the result of the conflict the individual managed to defend his rights, he considers the conflict as a positive event. No doubt, many theorists such as G. Spenser, K. Marx, M. Weber, R. Dahrendorf viewed conflict not only as a stimulus of social development but as a norm of social relations and a normal state of the society. L. Gumplowicz, L. Coser and R. Park considered conflict as the uppermost element of social interaction. Their views on the issue gave shapes to conflict theory which states that the society or organization functions in such a way so that each individual and group struggle to maximize their benefits, which inevitably contributes to social change such as change in politics and revolutions.

There are various types of conflict differentiated by its basis, for instance, due to the object conflicts may be seen as economic, political, familistic, religious and ideological; due to the subject – intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, ethno-national, international.

Russian sociologists Yu.G. Volkov, A.V. Popov and others suggest the following classification: cognitive conflict as struggle of people’s opinions which may turn to struggle of personalities, or interpersonal conflict, which may develop into a conflict between personality and group, and further into intergroup conflict and finally, to a social conflict as a clash between various social communities (classes, nations, states or social institutions).

American sociologist L. Coser classifies conflicts as realistic and non-realistic ones. Realistic conflicts are oriented to achieve a definite outcome, and the reason for their emergence may become inequality as a distinction of any society, for example, unequal distribution of some resources or benefits (power, wealth, territories) among participants, failure to satisfy their needs etc. Non-realistic conflicts may be brought about by accumulated negatives emotions, offence, hostility and the like. It means that an acute conflict interaction can become not the means to achieve a definite result but the end in itself.

Conflicts can also be destructive when they break effective interaction and bring harm to the both interaction partners, and constructive enabling to identify contradictions and solve them, develop forward, correct interactions etc. L. Coser stresses that conflict can’t entail only positive or only negative consequences; it produces both of them simalteneously.

Any conflict is represented by individuals with their social orientations, values, opinions and expectations that’s why it is always bound to subjective estimations and realization by people that their interests are in contradiction with the interests of other individuals, groups, communities or societies. This proposition differs from the Marxist conception arguing that economic inequality is at the heart of all societies. The dominating class owns means of production that’s why it exercises social control over other classes. As soon as the proletariat realizes its oppressed position, its relations with the dominating class are becoming more and more conflictive that leads to social revolution. As history shows, the Marxist ideological conception which emphasized the absolute character of economic relations and ignored subjective estimations and forms of behaviour in real social life, turned out groundless.

R. Dahrendorf expressed another view considering as the basis for conflicts such political factors as struggle for power, prestige, and authority. To his mind, conflict may emerge in all social groups and communities where there are relations of domination and submission. But in this conception the factor of consciousness plays a leading role as a person must realize his position, compare it with the other participant’s position and form directions to struggle for power, authority, prestige etc.

Modern conflict theory is based on the following four primary assumptions:

1. Competition. Competition over scarce resources (money, leisure, sexual partners etc) is at the heart of all social relations. Competition rather than consensus is characteristic of human relations.

2. Structural inequality. Inequalities in power and reward are built into all social structures. Individuals and groups that benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained.

3. Revolution. Change occurs as a result of conflict between competing interests rather than through adaptation. It is often abrupt and revolutionary rather than evolutionary.

4. War as the extreme form of conflict. Even war is a unifier of the societies involved, as well as war may set an end to whole societies.

As in any structure there is always a reason for a conflict situation to appear, world community would have to be in a permanent state of “war”. To avoid social conflicts systems of social, cultural and legal norms regulating interactions are created, both the forms of expressing disagreement and levels of tolerance in social relations being settled. In international relations such are diplomatic notes of protest against some violation in the relations between the states, economic embargo etc.

There are various methods to avoid acute forms of social conflicts. The first constructive method is deviation from the conflict interaction, excluding demonstration of one’s own success, advantages, benefits etc. in order to humiliate the partner so that he isn’t able to resist. Another often applied method of settling conflicts is of opposite character – it is coercion which turns to military affairs with making use of military forces when interethnic and interstate contradictions become sharp. Former Yugoslavia is an example. Other constructive methods to settle a conflict are as follows: compromise when agreement is achieved by making mutual concessions; negotiations implying that mutual benefit is found after existing differences are accepted and shared by both parties. In interethnic and interstate conflict an effective method is trying mediation – applying to the third party or mediator who is not directly involved in the conflict so as to cease fighting and start cooperating. The mediator remains neutral and helps the parties to work out what they think would be the best solution. When disputing parties fail to reach a settlement through mediation, **arbitration or court** is the last resort for them to settle a conflict. Arbitration is a number of procedures of conciliatory character exercised by formally authorized establishments or agencies such as labour courts.

Although conflicts are impossible to avoid, one should keep in mind the methods which enable to turn hostile antagonisms of interests into a constructive way and settle them for the common good.

Peculiarities of social interaction in a transitive society

In the history of our country the 1990s were marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union, emergence of independent states which started cardinal reforms aimed at qualitative transformation of the society. Such reforms, however, were of a complicated and contradicting character. The society happened to be in a deep structural crisis which embraced all spheres of social life: political, economic, spiritual etc.

A transfer to a market entailed changes in the employment structure which caused redistribution of labour from the state and agricultural sectors to the private one. Under the Soviet power value and normative stereotypes in employment oriented individuals to stability and invariable guarantees. The whole system of material and moral rewards which was aimed at consolidating employees’ professional and qualification positions in production, helped to fix them to the working place, restrain non-sanctioned social and labour mobility etc.

In a transition period the main social contradiction emerged in employment is that, on the one hand, a market model lets the person’s economic initiative and his independent choice of job develop free. The respondents assert that as a result of reforms they have got chances to create a new life and manifest their gifts.

On the other hand, in a transition to a market economy when people’s behaviour began to be regulated by norms and orientations of labour which are quite different from those established over the years of Soviet power, a lot of people had not only to change their social and professional statuses, but in most cases move to a lower stratum after they became unemployed, and then they had to get a new qualification which, as a rule, didn’t require their education or acquired professional knowledge.

As the social status of a person is primarily determined by his professional and job level, the causes for growing conflict situations at all levels of social interactions in a transitive society have become clear. When the head of the family has been out of job for a long time, it may lead to destroying his family; in this case an interpersonal conflict takes place. Representatives of lower classes are forming negative views about unemployment, wealth in general and successful businessmen in particular. It means that in the society there are causes for an increase of group conflicts, too.

In the context of interpersonal conflicts’ increase in the world the number of deviants who consider themselves outside formal social structures (for instance, criminals, dope fiends, homeless, alcoholics) is increasing in transitive countries, too. These people do not share and demonstrate norms and values dominating in the society, they reject them and generate hostility to others. Although in small numbers these inevitable products of social life, which is now becoming more and more complicated, don’t make social relations seriously destabilized, at the micro-level those subjects always produce conflict situations. Growth of interpersonal conflicts in post-soviet societies is also caused by non-critical perception of Western countries’ experience which has fixed different ideals of a strong man (gangster, killer etc), by collapse of the previous system of values and borrowing of a new system of norms and patterns of behaviour heterogeneous to Slavonic culture.

Basic concepts

Accommodation – a form of social interaction when individuals or groups get used to the conflict situation, their interactions are temporarily fixed and controlled through the laws and norms.

Action – movement with a meaning and purpose.

Arbitration – a number of procedures of conciliatory character exercised by formally authorized establishments or agencies such as labour courts.

Assimilation – a process of interpenetration and fusion in which individuals and groups acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other people and groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common culture.

Coercion – making use of military forces when interethnic and interstate contradictions become sharp.

Competition – an elementary universal and fundamental form of social interaction, the struggle for existence (by R. Park).

Compromise – a method to solve a conflict when agreement is achieved by making mutual concessions.

Conflict – a form of social interaction when actors identify each other as rivals or as enemies because the problems arising among them are perceived as not solved by any other means or perceived as a threat to their existence (by R. Park).

Constructive conflict – conflict enabling to bring about contradictions and solve them, develop forward, correct interactions, etc.

Destructive conflict – conflict which breaks effective interaction and brings harm to the both interaction partners.

Deviation – a method to settle a conflict when one avoids from a conflict interaction, excluding demonstration of one’s own success, advantages, benefits etc. in order to humiliate the partner so that he isn’t able to resist.

Interpersonal (face-to-face) interaction – observable interaction among people in dyad, triad and between one to many.

Group interaction – observable interaction among members of a group when both the group’s social orientations and values shared by all or most of its members are manifested.

Mediation – applying to the third, neutral party, or mediator who is not directly involved in the conflict so as to cease fighting and start cooperating.

Non-realistic conflict – conflict caused by accumulated negatives emotions, offence, hostility and the like (by L. Coser).

Realistic conflict – conflict oriented to achieve a definite outcome, and the reason for its appearance may become inequality as the distinction of any society (by L. Coser).

Social action – a person’s movement with a meaning and purpose that requires a response from another person.

Social behaviour – action addressed towards other people.

Social contact – a pair of social actions.

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

Social relation – a multitude of social interactions, regulated by social norm, between two or more people, each having a social position and performing a social role; a stable system of regulated interactions between two or more partners on the basis of a certain platform (i. e. interest).

Social process – those activities, actions, events or operations that involve the interaction between people.

Societal interaction – indirect interaction bearing on the level of community and society.

# Additional literature

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