**MINISTERY OF EDUCATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS**

Belarus State Economic University

**REFERAT:**

**«SPECIFICITY OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE»**

**Minsk 2008**

**1. The concept of social reality and social fact**

Very often we come across the concept of social reality and believe that social reality is something that can be understood and learnt. But yet the given concept hasn’t been defined precisely in sociology and it is often used as a synonym of such concepts as “social life”, “society”, “social world”, “social and historic existence” etc. Moreover, the problem is made more complicated due to the fact that judgments “social reality” and “social world” belong to different theoretic paradigms. Theorists are united only by the circumstance that human social world can be learnt.

In sociology there are two dominating theoretic approaches – individualistic and positivistic ones that specifically explain the nature of social reality. The individualistic position views ***social reality*** as a result of purposeful or sensible human behaviour. An Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz, founder of phenomenology, defines social reality as “a total sum of objects and phenomena of social world” in the way how social world is shaped in everyday consciousness of people living among other people and connected with them by various interactions. Thus, social reality is an everyday world, experienced and interpreted by people living in it; it is a world of meanings which are typical notions about the objects of this world.

In contrast to an individualistic approach, a positivistic approach suggests a viewpoint according to which ***social reality*** is something with its own life having an external and compulsory character to a person (i.e. that his behaviour is determined by reality) and materializing human consciousness.

The ideas of the positivistic position were shaped under the influence of a French sociologist Emile Durkheim who is considered its smartest representative. This approach suggests interpreting the concept of social reality through the prism of a social fact. According to the paradigm of a social fact, social reality is represented by two groups of social facts – social structures and social institutions, and emphasis is made on the nature of their interaction. E. Durkheim believed that social facts are characterized by specific properties; they are samples of thoughts, actions and feelings which are capable to exist outside man and have a compulsory influence which makes man acquire and interiorize them.

The concept of a social fact was criticized by Sigmund Freud and his followers, supporters of the paradigm of social behaviour. They consider the concept metaphysical as it ignores human behaviour which, in their opinion, is a single social reality.

Many theorists agree that social reality is formed in the process of people’s social interactions; it is a result of their consciousness and activities in a definite limited territorial and temporal (historic) area. Social reality may be fixed in people’s behaviours, in the character of their value orientations, in forms of life organizion and in role behaviour. A summarized index of social reality is culture considered as a system of values, social norms of life, patterns of behavior, language, character of communications, customs and traditions, material culture etc.

As levels of interactions may differ, levels of social reality or social life may also differ. A social world of man, group, society or world community can be spoken about. Very often differences between these social worlds may be polar. A proof is a layer of beggars existing in an economically prosperous society like in the USA, France or Great Britain, or people with a very low cultural level in a highly cultural society.

What is a social fact? Traditionally, world is divided into three groups of facts. The first group includes biological facts such as breathing, nutrition, sleeping, human recreation etc. The second group includes psychological ones such as emotions of love, hatred or perception, emotions giving satisfaction, for instance while admiring works of art. The third group includes social facts connected with social relationships and society. The term “social fact” was coined by E. Durkheim to describe human behaviour that is not attributed to the human’s characteristic but to social facts. He considered s**ocial facts** as things that force people to do certain behaviours.

***A social fact*** is a socially meaningful event or a totality of homogeneous events typical for a definite sphere of the society or definite social processes.

In the ontological meaning, a social fact is any event or any totality of events which took place at a definite time at definite circumstances, no matter whether or not they were watched by researchers or other subjects who were not participants of the given events. As social facts become known only by registration, they are considered true or reliable in case they are given a grounded description taking into consideration their whole integrity and their connections with essential characteristics of a social situation.

The following fragments of social reality can be fixed as social facts:

* behavioural socially meaningful people’s acts, i.e. what they do;
* results or products of people’s activities acquiring social significance, i.e. material and cultural artifacts;
* people’s verbal acts, i.e. socially significant expressed views, judgments, opinions;
* different interactions.

But the point is how to see if a social fact is reliable. As a rule, scientific grounds of social facts depend on the researcher’s world outlook, the objective character of the sociological theory, in the concepts of which social facts are measured or described, and reliability of the method and technique of registration of sociological data characterizing the manifestation of this or that social fact.

Let’s consider the following example. A man is buying a packed trip to Thailand for a family of four. In Thailand they’ll spend a fortnight. A psychologist would like to know why the man decided on Thailand. An economist would like to see if there could be another way to spend money. A sociologist would see that it is a family of four and would like to find out how the wife and children could influence on the head of the family’s decision. Thus, one and the same fact is explained in a different way by different sciences.

**2.** **Laws and categories of sociology**

As sociology is a relatively young science, its system of laws and categories is still being actively formed. For any science, having such a system is a basic question of its status as it is categories and laws where the obtained knowledge is concentrated in.

A direct object of research of sociology is the social in the process of its development, transformation, usage, management at different levels of a social system. So the first mostly wide category is the concept of “the social”. Other important concepts include “social interactions”, “social institutions”, “social groups” etc. In sociology there are a lot of categories that reflect qualitative state of social processes such as collectivism, groupism, social homogeneity, social differences and interests etc. But the kernel of any science is its laws. A law is known to be reflection of significant, stable and necessary ties taking place both inside of a process, system or phenomenon and between them. As a rule, laws are expressed in categories. So each branch of science has its language. When specialists speak their professional language, other people can hardly or not understand them. A famous joke explains that science happens when known things or phenomena are spoken about in the language impossible to understand.

A famous Russian sociologist G.V. Osipov defines ***a social law*** as relatively stable and systematically reproduced relationships between peoples, nations, classes, socio-demographic and professional groups, between the society and social organization, society and labour collective, society and family, society and personality etc.

Sociology should be noted to deal with social laws that take place in all spheres of human activities and differ from each other by the form of their influence, the area of extending etc. For instance, some laws embrace only small groups or classes, others – the society as a whole.

Like all scientific laws, social laws possess the following characteristics:

* a law acts only under certain conditions;
* under certain conditions a law is displayed without any exceptions;
* conditions, under which a social law acts, are realized not in full measure but partially and approximately.

For instance, a statement like “A constructive social conflict in the organization is always solved after getting rid of the causes of its emergence unless external factors influence or/and redistribution of recourses within the organization take place” describes the action of a social law because its conditions are clearly defined. It means that in the organization it’s impossible to completely avoid influence of external factors or hinder material resources and information from redistributing within the organization. On the other hand, it may happen that external factors don’t influence so the law is realized partially.

Social laws can be divided into two main groups: those of functioning, or organizing, and those of development. Of primary importance are laws describing integrity of the organization and development of the whole society and civilization. They are called ***all-sociological*** or ***grand*** laws. For instance, dependence of any social phenomenon on correlation of the basis and superstructure, law of time economy etc.

A specific character of a grand law’s functioning is determined by a definite social and economic structure (formation) because any social phenomenon depends on the level of the society’s development, way of production of material and spiritual wealth. Different formations with common grand laws differ from each other by the specificity of these laws’ functioning. For instance, an economic or political crisis in the society may develop against positions of political leaders, parties and sometimes against the will of the majority of the population. A typical example is the destruction of the USSR against a position occupied by the majority of the country’s population.

Besides there are some laws typical for the family, labour organization, personality in a social group etc. It is them that form the carcass of specialized theories.

**3. Structure of sociological knowledge**

Modern sociological knowledge is of a complex inner structure. As any other sciences, historically sociology developed in two basic directions – fundamental and applied. But sociologists, representatives of different paradigms, used different criteria and concepts for defining one and the same event and phenomenon that resulted in confusing. So nowadays, sociological knowledge is structured as follows.

The first structure is macro- and micro-sociology. The point is that for the first decades of its existence sociology developed in Europe as macro-sociology pretending to reveal global laws of the society, and this aim is reflected in its name. But soon micro-sociology appeared to stop philosophizing about the society in general and get down to learning human behaviour in different social conditions, motivations of human deeds, mechanisms of interpersonal interactions etc.

Since then the development of sociology has gone along two parallel directions that were of little correlation with each other. Macro-sociologists operated with the concepts “society”, “social system”, “social institution”, “civilization”, “culture” etc. It means they used abstract categories. Micro-sociologists preferred discussing stimuli of human behaviour and people’s reactions, factors determining their certain deeds, deviant behaviour etc.

***Macro-sociology*** is sociology investigating large-scale social systems and historically long processes taking place in the society. Another area of its interest is tendencies of the society’s development in general. As macro-sociology is often referred to as a fundamental science, most of its attention is paid to social institutions such as the family, religion, education etc. and to political and economic systems of social order It also studies interrelations between different parts of the society and dynamics of their changing.

***Micro-sociology*** is sociology studying small-scale social structures, groups and direct interpersonal relationships. The object of micro-sociological research is a human as a member of the group, association or community.

##### So a criterion for differentiation between macro- and micro-sociology is basically their contents: macro-sociology is destined to study laws, factors and perspectives of development of the society and its largest parts (civilizations) while micro-sociology studies relationships between groups and individuals.

The second structure is fundamental theoretic and applied empirical sociologies. ***Fundamental*** ***theoretic sociology*** gives answers to questions what is investigated (i.e. it defines the object and subject of research) and how to investigate (i.e. main methods of sociology are meant). Fundamental sociology is to get new knowledge on social development. That’s why it concerns with social and philosophic comprehension of most general problems of the society’s development and functioning and a personality’s place in it. That’s why its concepts are characterized by a high level of abstraction. Fundamental sociology does not investigate such definite units as a social group or social process, and this point presents its most distinctive feature. It is the fundamental level where sociology realizes its interrelations with other sciences such as philosophy, history, psychology etc.

***Applied empiric sociology*** studies and suggests ways of influence on social reality and social communities. It is to give conception about real processes of social development, being engaged in forecasting, projecting and forming a social policy, working out recommendations for social governance. It is also to find out means to achieve socially important goals, implement propositions of fundamental sociology and methods of social planning and forecasting. So the criterion for differentiating between fundamental and applied sociology is the character of sociological knowledge: abstract and practical.

##### Some researchers thought that development of macro-sociology lead to formation of modern fundamental sociology, so as development of micro-sociology – to applied sociology. The idea has a ration to exist but it can’t be accepted true in full measure. Macro- and micro-sociology have two levels, both fundamental and empiric ones. Macro-sociologists (E. Durkheim, M. Weber, F. Toennis, P.A. Sorokin) were very active in carrying out empiric sociological researches, and micro-sociologists (representatives of the American sociological school G. Mead, G. Homans, P. Blau) became founders of most significant sociological theories. It only means that macro- and micro-sociology developed both as fundamental and applied.

The third structure came to existence not long ago. Sociology is a relatively young science that historically emerged from social philosophy and psychology. First sociological theories were fundamental, being based on observations, conclusions and generalizations of different sides of social life. To work out such a theory a researcher needs exact data of certain social facts which constitute the society’s structure and the process of changing. These data are obtained with methods of empiric research (interviews, observations, experiments etc.). Gathered empiric facts are processed and generalized; after doing it, a researcher can make primary theoretic conclusions about definite phenomena of social life. Fundamental theories and empiric researches should be closely connected as pure theorizing without knowing definite facts of social realm becomes impracticable. At the same time empiric researches which are not supported withfundamental theoretic conclusions cannot explain the nature of most social phenomena.

In the first third of the XX century a sharply increased level of empiric researches demanded a universal theoretic apparatus to explain the results of research. But the apparatus of fundamental sociology couldn’t be applied to studying such various social phenomena as the family, deviant behaviour, social governance etc. In its turn, fundamental sociology was in great need of empiric information as empiric researches were carried out, as a rule, to meet narrow-practical, utilitarian needs and it was hard to make up an entity of them. It resulted in creating a breakout between fundamental sociology and empiric researches that became an obstacle in the way of developing sociology and prevented researchers from uniting their efforts.

However, the way out was found in formation of one more level of sociological knowledge under the name of ***middle range theories***. The term was introduced by an American sociologist Robert Merton who, in his work “Social theory and social structure” published in 1949, stated a number of propositions of middle range theories – concepts of manifest and latent function, social dysfunction, referent group etc. Middle range theories, to R. Merton’s mind, had to unite empiric generalizations and theoretic conceptions to counterbalance T. Parsons’s universal theory.

**Levels of sociological knowledge**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Grand/ all- sociological theories | Learning social structures | Learning social development, integration and disintegration processes | Learning  a personality’s development | Learning models, methods and techniques of sociological reseach |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Social institutions | Social communities | Social processes |
| Middle  range theories | Sociology of family  Sociology of science  Sociology of education  Sociology of religion  Sociology of labour  Sociology of arts etc. | Sociology of small groups  Sociology of organization  Sociology of crowd  Sociology of strata, classes  Ethnosociology  Feminist sociology etc. | Sociology of conflicts  Sociology of town  Sociology of social movements  Sociology of deviant behaviour  Sociology of mobility and migration etc. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Primary generalization of empiric data | Carrying out empiric sociological researches in social groups and institutions |

At present there exist a number of middle range theories that occupy an intermediate place between theories of the grand or all-sociologicallevel and empiric generalization of primary sociological information. They are aimed at generalizing and structuring empiric data within definite areas of sociological knowledge (the family, organization, deviant behaviour, conflict etc.) applying both the ideas and terminology borrowed from fundamental sociological theories and specific concepts, definitions formed only for the given branch of sociological research.

When emerged, middle range theories created a number of indisputable advantages. First, researchers were given a possibility to make up solid theoretic grounds for investigating definite areas of human activities, not applying to the conceptual apparatus of fundamental theories; second, middle range theories allow to exercise close interaction with people’s real life as the subject of their research.

Middle range theories gave birth to rather a narrow specialization of sociologists who work, for instance, only in the area of the family or management, gather empiric data, generalize them and make theoretic conclusions within the given area of applied sociological knowledge. That’s why these theories bear an applied,or branch character. At the same time, applied theories enabled to increase effectiveness of fundamental researches because sociologists were given an opportunity to generalize theoretic outcomes in separate sociological branches without constant applying to first-hand empiric data.

All middle range theories can be conditionally divided into three groups: those of social institutions, social communities and specialized social processes. Theories of the first group investigate complex social dependences and relationships; those of the second one consider structural units of the society (social groups, classes, communities etc.); those of the third one study social processes and changes.

In each group the number of middle range theories is constantly increasing as far as learning the society is deepening, and sociology as a science is developing. Sociologists, who study applied social problems, work out a specific conceptual apparatus, carry out empiric researches of their issues, generalize the given data, make theoretic generalizations and combine them into a theory within their own branch.

Thus, sociology is not some monosemantic or homogeneous formation because it includes different levels of sociological knowledge. Although at each of the given levels the notion of the subject of research, goals and objectives are given a definite expression to, in all cases sociology is represented as a scientific system. It means that its main goal is to get scientific knowledge about the society on the whole or about its parts and subsystems.

**Additional literature**

* Blau P. Exchange and Power in Social Life. (3rd edition). – New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1992. – 354 p.
* Bourdeiu P. Logic of Practice. – Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990. – 382 p.
* Coser L. The Functions of Social Conflict. – Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1956. – 188 p.
* DurkheimE.The Division of Labour in Society. – New York, NY: Free Press; 1997. – 272 p.
* DurkheimE.Suicide. – New York, NY: Free Press; 1951. – 345 p.
* Goldthorpe J. H. Class Analysis and the Reorientation of Class Theory. – *British Journal of Sociology*, 1996, # 47.
* Homans G.Elementary Forms of Social Behavior. (2nd edition) – New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.