Social Problems

ECED7009

Session 1

How Do
Our Values Change?

Power

- Power is . . .
  - ‘the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will, despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability exists’ (Weber, 1978:53).

Discuss this statement in detail as a group. What is Weber saying about the nature of power here?

Legitimate Domination

- Weber saw power as ‘domination’ or ‘discipline’
  - Domination
    - The probability that a command will be obeyed
  - Discipline
    - Domination becomes discipline, only when, through habit and routine, obedience becomes unthinking and automatic.

Balancing Power

- Power
  - Can be imposed against the will or interests of others
- Domination
  - Involves a certain level of voluntary acceptance or compliance with the right of the powerful to rule and to be obeyed

Norms and Power

- 'The merely external fact of the order being obeyed is not sufficient to signify domination in our sense; we cannot overlook the meaning of the fact that the command is accepted as a 'valid' norm' (Weber, 1978: 946).

Discuss this statement in detail as a group. What is Weber saying about the nature of domination here?

Domination by Whom?

- ‘Legitimate’ Domination
  - Economic domination by market forces
  - Money
  - Monarchy
  - Civil servants following a written procedure on ‘benefits claim’
- Such an order is ‘legitimate’ or ‘valid’ when it is followed as ‘binding’ because of the prestige attributed to the institution or individual issuing it

Power
and Modern Society

- Even the most brutal dictatorship always makes some effort to legitimate its rule!

Social Action

- Sociology is concerned with social action
- Social action can change the status quo
- Erode barriers
- Challenge accepted norms.

Ideal Types of Social Action

- Four types:
- Instrumental-rational
- Value-rational
- Affectual
- Traditional

Instrumental-Rational Action

- Relationship of means and end
  - Action is instrumentally rational (zweckrational) when the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed' (Weber, 1978: 26).
- determined by expectations as to the behaviour of objects in the environment of other human beings; these expectations are used as "conditions" or "means" for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends

Value-Rational Action

- Value-rational behaviour or substantive rationality
- Self-conscious belief in the intrinsic value of some ethical, artistic, intellectual or religious purpose
- This is regardless of the cost to individuals, value conviction are a guide to action for their own sake

Affectual Action

- Stimulus to action provided by emotional or psychological feelings
- ‘action is affectual if it satisfies a need for revenge, sensual gratification, devotion, contemplative bliss, or for the working off of emotional tensions’ (Weber, 1978: 25).
- Affectual Action lacks the self-consciousness of value rationality, although both transcend ulterior or instrumental motives

Traditional Action

- Habitual, customary, almost automatic reflexes in the practical action of everyday life
- It represents a borderline case
- Could include ‘unthinking imitation’ (non-social action) or it can merge into value rationality as it becomes more self-conscious and meaningful (pure social action).

Functionalist Formation: Merton

- Social Problem:
- ‘a substantial discrepancy between widely shared social standards and actual conditions of social life’ (Merton, 1971: 799).

Social Problems

- Are both partly
- Social disorganisation
- And partly
- Deviant behaviour

Social Disorganisation and Deviant Behaviour

- ‘We can be reasonably sure that the two concepts are analytical, not depictive; abstract, not concrete. They do not describe classes of events in all their complexity but refer only to selected aspects of them. That is why we find in each of the concrete problems examined in this book . . . Evidence of both social disorganization and deviant behaviour, though in differing compound ‘(Merton1971:819)

Social Disorganistaion

- ‘refers to inadequacies or failures in a social system of interrelated statuses and roles
- such that the collective purposes and individual objectives of its members are less fully realized than they could be in an alternative workable system’ (Merton, 1971:820).

Thus . . .

- the structure of statuses and roles is not as effectively organized as it might be
- This type of statement, then, amounts to a technical judgment about the workings of a social system
- And each case requires the sociological judge to supply competent evidence that the actual organization of social life can, under attainable conditions, be technically improved (Merton, 1971:820).

Problem

- Critics would suggest that 'its not that easy' to give evidence of how such social systems could be improved!
- We have already highlighted that
- social exclusion has aspects of multiple-dimensionality
  - Can you recall some of these?

- Many would also suggest that rather than society having 'technical issues' exclusion is a result of 'political issues'

Merton Acknowledges that . . .

- For the sociologist to confine himself only to the conditions in society that a majority of people regard as undesirable would be to exclude study of all manner of other conditions that are in fact at odds with the declared values of those who accept these conditions

Social Values / Social Problems

- Not all conditions and processes of society inimical (unfavourable) to the values of men (sic) are recognized as such by them
- Those objective social conditions identified by problem definers as
  - at odds with social values
  - are latent social problems
  - conditions that are also at odds with values current in the society but are not generally recognized as being so (Merton, 1971: 806).

Constructing Social Problems

TABLE 1

		Sociologist's Definition	
		Social Problem	No Social Problem
Members' Definition	Social Problem	(1) "Manifest" Social Problem	(2) "Spurious" Social Problem
	No Social Problem	(3) "Latent" Social Problem	(4) "Normal" Social Condition

- Members' Definition
  - Members of the system or 'society' under consideration
- Sociologist's Definition
  - How the 'problem' is defined by sociologists.

Sociologists perspective

Perspective of the members of the group	This is a problem	This is not a problem
This is a problem	**(1) Manifest social problem**	**(2) Spurious social problem**
This is not a problem	**(3) Latent social problem**	**(4) Normal social condition**

Defining Social Problems

- ‘Spurious’ social problem
  - Sociologists take the ‘moral high ground’ and consider the organisation as ‘seeing what’s not there’
- ‘Manifest’ social problem
  - Both the organisation and sociologist agree ‘there is a problem’
- ‘Latent’ social problem
  - Again the sociologist takes the ‘moral high ground’ and suggest that the organisation ‘can not see the problem’
- ‘Normal’ social condition
  - Both sociologist and organisation do not perceive a problem!

So . . .

- Defining social problems is often dependant upon where an individual ‘sits’ in society
  - Viewpoints are value laden
  - Those with power decide ‘what is a problem’ and how this definition is constructed
    - E.g. unemployment
      - I want to work but can’t find a job
      - They are lazy and there are jobs out there if they look

Value-Conflict Approach: Waller, Fuller & Myers

- This approach is linked to Merton's typology but is distinct
  - A social problem is a condition which is defined by a considerable number of persons as a deviation from some social norm which they cherish (Merton, 1941b: 320).

Problem Agents

- Merton does not define
  - whose standards and whose perceptions of actual conditions and discrepancy are being indicated
- Fuller and Myers specify
  - A considerable number of persons who subscribe to the social norm in question, perceive the condition as a deviation from them, and define it as a social problem.

Whose Problem

- Fuller and Myers (1941b: 320) consider that
  - if conditions are not defined as social problems by the people involved in them, they are not problems to those people
- This perspective gives a voice to the group under consideration

Value Judgements

- Sociologists must, therefore, study
  - not only the objective conditions phase of a social problem
  - but also the value-judgments of the people involved in it
  - which cause them to define the same condition and means to its solution
  - in different ways (Fuller & Myers, 1941b:321)

Objective Conditions and Subjective Awareness

- Fuller and Myers view the
  - objective conditions
  - as not sufficient (but rather as only necessary) for the existence of a social problem
- This leads them to be concerned equally with explaining
  - the causes of the objective conditions
  - and the process by which they become defined as social problems

Value Judgements: Waller, Fuller & Meyers

- Value judgments lead people to
  - denounce conditions as undesirable and repugnant to them and to define such conditions as social problems
  - value judgments lead people to define conditions
- Thus values are the key element in explaining the subjective elements of social problems

Value Judgements: Waller, Fuller & Meyers

- Fuller (1938:419)
  - Value-judgments themselves are in most instances a formal cause of the condition which is regarded as undesirable

Typology of Social Problems: Waller, Fuller & Meyers

- Fuller and Myers (1941a)
  - classify problems as to whether the causes of the conditions include
    - physical events
    - value-judgments
    - or moral ambiguity

Value Judgements: Waller, Fuller & Meyers

- Value-judgments
  - not only help to create the condition but prevent its solution (1941a:29)
    - E.g. A value-scheme which prohibits frank discussion of sex problems in the home and school is a causal item in the existence of the condition, venereal disease

Taboos

- The same taboos which contribute to the causation of the condition frustrate public programs which are designed to eradicate it
  - value-judgments which deny social acceptance to the mother of a child born out of wedlock
    - not only contribute causally to such conditions as
    - abortions
    - infant mortality
    - and abandoned children
  - all of which are socially disapproved
    - but such value-judgments also obstruct efforts to solve the illegitimacy problem by impeding free discussion of it (Waller, Fuller & Meyer, 1941a:26).

Paradox

- The very people
  - Social workers
  - liberal statesmen
  - and assorted other "do-gooders"
  - among whom they included sociologists
- who invoke their humanitarian mores to define conditions as social problems
  - Themselves subscribe to and support policies based on those same mores, that insure the persistence of the social condition without alleviation, amelioration, or eradication

Social Mores

- Values both
  - cause the condition
  - and inhibit its solution
- Waller's position that
  - conflicts in and between the mores themselves produce social problems
  - with the implication that
    - different values or mores
    - acting independently
    - may interfere with each other or work at cross purposes

Active Agents in Society

- To the extent that
  - Values
    - rather than individuals or groups of people
  - are seen as the active agents in the society

Value Conflict: Becker (1966: 6)

- Becker acknowledges that group definitions of social problems usually do have reference to some
  - empirically verifiable social conditions
- Groups do not typically get upset over "nothing."

Empirically Verifiable Claims

- Empirically verifiable claims about the
  - Scale
  - Intensity
  - Distribution
  - and effects of the imputed social conditions
- May be present
  - but it may not and theoretically it need not

Social Problems as Process

- Social problems can be defined as
  - the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions

Groups Defining Conditions as Social Problems

- May be kept going by interests or values, or any mixture or combination of them
  - Some of the interesting varieties might include the following:

Groups Defining Conditions as Social Problems

- Value groups may find that as they raise a condition as a social problem,
  - they gain as allies other groups who have a vested interest in their position
  - Or they may be opposed by groups who have a vested interest in the status quo

Groups Defining Conditions as Social Problems

- Interest groups may find that
  - the dialogue of public debate must take place in terms of values or ideals
- In order to present its claims effectively, or argue its position,
  - it must acquire a set of values that legitimate their claim

Groups Defining Conditions as Social Problems

- A given protest group may find a convenient overlap between
  - their interests and their values
- That is,
  - the things they want to ask for are just those things that are easily justified and legitimated

Groups Defining Conditions as Social Problems

- Alternatively,
  - a group may find itself
    - cross-pressured
  - when their interest requires them to
    - sacrifice
    - or ignore some strongly felt value
    - or their values require them to work against their own best interests

Groups Defining Conditions as Social Problems

- To the extent that a disinterested value-oriented group is successful in their activity
  - they may develop various interests to protect
    - Organizations
    - Careers
    - Reputations
  - They may face a crisis of the
    - 'routinization of disinterest'
  - when they become vulnerable to the charge of being
    - interested
    - and self-serving
  - rather than humanitarian

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