**Introduction to Sociology**

Chapter 1 “Questions”: Assignments with answers

**1.1 The Sociological Perspective**

**Q1**

Chapter 1 mentions obesity as an example of behavior which you can explain by looking at individual and sociological perspectives. Can you think of another phenomenon than obesity, and explain it with these two perspectives? What would be an individual explanation? And what is a sociological explanation?

Answer:

Individual perspective: focuses on characteristics of the individual as key drivers of behavior rather than contextual conditions. Individual characteristics can be related to genetic factors, personality, etc. Sociological perspective instead considers the impact of the social environment, e.g., the role of peers, family, schools, etc.

**Q2**

Researchers study the happiness of people across the globe. The *World Happiness Report* 2017 presents the average happiness for a total of 155 countries, covering the period between 2014 and 2016. The happiness score ranges from 0 (very unhappy) to 10 (very happy), and they are based on self-reports. Visit <https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2017/HR17.pdf> to view the 2017 report yourself (or alternatively search for the 2017 world happiness report with a search engine). On page 20, a ranking of all countries from least to most happy is presented. Briefly look over the ranking and answer the following questions.

Q2a. Explain why these numbers suggest that personal happiness is not (only) caused by individual factors, but by social causes as well.

Answer:

Happiness scores differ between countries. This means that, next to possible individual factors that could impact happiness (e.g., personality, genetic makeup), there are strong social forces –related to the country in which people grow up- affecting how happy they are.

Q2b. Can you think of any social causes that may explain the differences between the top 10 happiest countries and the lowest 10 countries?

Answer:

The top-10 happiest nations are very wealthy, their GDP is far higher than in the lowest-10 countries. In wealthy nations, there are more social security measures, and people do not have to stress about the basic human needs (e.g., food, shelter, safety).

**Q3**

Smoking is regarded as a (social) problem in many countries. It is well known that smoking has negative health consequences. Although government campaigns have attempted to reduce smoking prevalence, it is still common in large segments of the population. To target this social problem more effectively, it is critically important to understand the reasons for people to smoke. Broadly speaking, two different approaches can be taken.

Q3a. Take an ‘individual perspective’, and explain why some people smoke, while others don’t.

Answer:

An individual perspective would emphasize individual characteristics. For example, it would argue that some individuals, due to genetic-personality makeup, have higher inclinations to smoke. Individuals differ in their human biology, and this could have consequences for how attractive smoking is to them.

Q3b. Now use a ‘sociological perspective’, and argue how you would explain differences in smoking differently from this perspective.

Answer:

A sociological perspective would focus instead on social conditions. An example is the peer group, i.e. peers may put pressure on each other to conform to the social norms in their group. When it is regarded as cool to smoke, then it is more attractive to smoke, whereas anti-smoking norms would reduce smoking.

**Q4**

Some people say that we live in a society with (almost) unlimited opportunities. In the past, so it is assumed, success depended on the socio-economic status of your family, of the neighborhood in which you grew up. But this is no longer the case. Today, success is a choice. If you work hard, everything is possible -it all depends on your talents and effort. Can you relate this idea, this ideology, to a certain perspective? And what are the implications of this ideology in case we fail?

Answer:

If we say that circumstances no longer matter, than we ignore the role social conditions play in getting ahead. It’s a very individualistic perspective on human behavior. And so that means that, in case you don’t succeed, you can’t say it’s due to circumstances, e.g., your poor family background, etc. Failure is seen as a personal choice.

**Q5**

When we try to explain human behavior, we may differentiate between individual and sociological perspectives. These can be seen as opposite ways of understanding behavior. However, we can also combine the two perspectives. In doing so, an important difference is that between *proximate* and *ultimate* causes. Suppose you want to explain why young people nowadays often have burn-out issues, more so than in the past.

Q5a. Use the following scheme to come up with a logical chain of explanations.

**Ultimate cause**

*…*

**Proximate cause**

*…*

**Outcome**

Rise of burn-out among youth

Answer:

Proximate causes= the factors that are ‘close to’ the phenomena the researcher wants to explain, whereas ultimate causes are factors that are ‘deeper’, ‘hidden’ in the background. Examples of proximate causes = working too hard, multitasking, not sleeping well, fomo, enduring stress. Examples ultimate causes = Social pressure/competition, societal ideology to excel, rise of social media and smartphones giving us 24/7 opportunities to compare with others (look great and do amazing stuff), and temptation to strive for more followers and likes on social media, as a way to gain self-confidence.

Hence, an answer might be this:

**Ultimate cause**

 Rise of smartphones and social media

*…*

**Proximate cause**

 Fear of missing out

**Outcome**

Rise of burn-out among youth

Q5b. In what way are the individual and sociological perspectives incorporated in this figure?

Answer:

Proximate cause=individual perspective. Ultimate cause=sociological perspective.

**Q6**

Imagine that you want to explain why some students are using their smartphone excessively, i.e., they check social media messages hours and hours per day. Try to come up with a ‘proximate cause’ and with an ‘ultimate cause’, using the scheme below.

[insert Ch1\_Assignment\_Fig1]

**Ultimate cause**

*…*

**Proximate cause**

*…*

**Consequence**

*Excessive smartphone use*

Answer:

Proximate causes are the factors that are ‘close to’ the phenomena the researcher wants to explain, whereas ultimate causes are factors that are ‘deeper’, ‘hidden’ in the background. An example of proximate and ultimate causes of excessive smartphone use is:

**Ultimate cause**

*Rise of social media, digitally connected social networks*

**Proximate cause**

*Fear of missing out on social media*

**Consequence**

*Excessive smartphone use*

**Q7**

What do sociologists mean when they talk about ‘micro level’, ‘meso level’ and ‘macro level’?

Answer:

Micro level = behavior of individuals. Meso level= conditions that individuals share in their immediate environment, like the school they attend, neighborhood they live in, same family they grow up. Macro=larger units, like bigger geographical areas, countries, etc.

**1.2 Social problems**

**Q1**

When do personal troubles become social problems (public issues)?

Answer:

Suppose you’re unemployed, which can be very frustrating. It’s personal trouble. But not necessarily a societal problem. Only when many people are unemployed in society, we speak of social problems -it’s a problem that goes beyond the individual, many people are concerned about it.

**Q2**

Social problems are often the starting point for sociological research. It is therefore important to know what the most important contemporary social problems are. What do you think are the three most important contemporary social problems in your country? And what evidence can you provide for your claim that these are the three most important problems now?

Answer:

Social problems are issues that (1) go beyond the individual (it affects many people), (2) it is a public issue about which many people are concerned (it is in conflict with certain values). To find out what the most important social problems are, therefore, it is relevant to consider not just the opinion of a single person, but instead to look at broader concerns about certain issues. E.g., consult statistics about social trends (e.g., excessive alcohol use, murder rates, poverty), or surveys on what people in society are most concerned about.

**1.3 The three aims of sociology**

**Q1**

Excessive alcohol consumption and binge drinking is sometimes seen as a social problem. In what way can sociology contribute to the government and social policy making, to solve this problem?

Answer:

In three ways, sociology can contribute to solving this problem. First, sociology comes up with accurate *descriptions* of this phenomenon. This is an important contribution to the understanding of social problems, because people could uphold erroneous beliefs about it. Second, sociologists come up with scientific *explanations* for excessive alcohol use and binge drinking. If politicians and policy makers want to solve these social problems effectively, they need to know what causes it (and not rely on common sense thinking). Third, sociologists can *apply* their insights. They could predict, for example, the outcomes of certain policy measures, but also suggest alternative, more-effective (evidence-based) social interventions that reduce excessive alcohol consumption and binge drinking.

**1.4 Sociological questions**

**Q1**

What type of questions do sociologists ask?

Answer:

Descriptive questions, theoretical questions, application questions.

**Q2**

Indicate, for each question, whether it is a *descriptive*, *theoretical*, *application* or *normative* question.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Question | Type of question |
| 1 | To what extent was there a change in alcohol consumption among youth in Russia, between 1990 and 2018? |  |
| 2 | Why is delinquency higher among men than among women? |  |
| 3 | Are there differences in unemployment between ethnic minority and majority members in the UK? |  |
| 4 | Are anti-bullying programs effective in reducing bullying at schools? |  |
| 5 | To what extent do depression prevalence levels differ among countries? |  |
| 6 | Why are higher educated people having more positive attitudes towards ethnic minority outgroups than lower educated people? |  |
| 7 | Is it important to society to reduce income inequality? |  |
| 8 | Are social media campaigns effective in reducing smoking? |  |
| 9 | How can we understand the high unemployment rate among youth in Spain? |  |
| 10 | What social factors explain divorce? |  |

Answer:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Question | Type of question |
| 1 | To what extent was there a change in alcohol consumption among youth in Russia, between 1990 and 2018? | Descriptive |
| 2 | Why is delinquency higher among men than among women? | Theoretical |
| 3 | Are there differences in unemployment between ethnic minority and majority members in the UK? | Descriptive |
| 4 | Are anti-bullying programs effective in reducing bullying at schools? | Application |
| 5 | To what extent do depression prevalence levels differ among countries? | Descriptive |
| 6 | Why are higher educated people having more positive attitudes towards ethnic minority outgroups than lower educated people? | Theoretical |
| 7 | Is it important to society to reduce income inequality? | Normative |
| 8 | Are social media campaigns effective in reducing smoking? | Application |
| 9 | How can we understand the high unemployment rate among youth in Spain? | Theoretical |
| 10 | What social factors explain divorce? | Theoretical |

**1.5 The art of asking good sociological questions**

**Q1**

Consider the social problem of ‘poverty’.

Q1a. Formulate an *ill-defined*, *descriptive* question about this social problem.

Answer:

An ill-defined question is a question which is very imprecise. An example of an ill-defined, descriptive question is: ‘How much poverty is there?’ This question lacks detail, because it is unclear to which social context, period and population the question refers to. Also ‘poverty’ might be seen as a broad label, which needs further specification.

Q1b. Reformulate your descriptive question, so that it becomes very precise.

Answer:

You can make the question more precise, by specifying the social context (e.g., India), period (e.g., 2015) and population (e.g., women). An example is then: ‘How much poverty was there among women in India, in 2015?’

**Q2**

The World Prison Population List presents (for each country) the number of people incarcerated per 100,000 inhabitants at the end of 2015. The full list can be found here: <http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_11th_edition_0.pdf> (or alternatively look up the 11th edition of the world prison population list with a search engine). Use the information from the table that you consider interesting to study yourself and answer the following questions.

Q2a. Formulate a *precise*, *theoretical* question about (some of) the information provided in this table.

Answer:

Theoretical questions are ‘why questions’. When you formulate them in a precise way, the following question ingredients have been specified: (1) the behavior you are interested in, (2) the social context, (3) the period, and (4) the population. Hence, an example could be: ‘Why was the prison population rate of the inhabitants in the U.S. higher than that of the inhabitants of Canada, in 2010?

Q2b. Formulate a *false theoretical* question about (some of) the information provided in this table.

Answer:

False theoretical questions are theoretical questions about phenomena that do not exist, but nevertheless suppose as if they exist. An example is: ‘Why was the prison population rate of the inhabitants in the U.S. lower than that of the inhabitants of Canada, in 2010?

Q2c. Formulate a *single-case*, *descriptive* question about (some of) the information provided in this table.

Answer:

Single-case questions are about a *single* social context (e.g., Brazil), a *single* year (2010), and a *single* population (all inhabitants) within that context. An example of a single-case, descriptive question is: ‘What was the prison rate in Brazil in 2010, among the general population?’

Q2d. Formulate a *comparative-case*, *descriptive* question about (some of) the information provided in this table.

Answer:

Comparative-case questions entail some sort of comparison, e.g. social context (e.g., Brazil versus India), year (e.g., 2010 versus 2018), and populations (e.g., men versus women). An example of a comparative-case, descriptive question is: ‘What was the prison rate in Brazil as compared to India in 2010, among the general population?

**Q3**

In 2006, sociologist McPherson and co-authors published an article called ‘Social isolation in America’. Please read the abstract below.

**![Afbeelding met tekst

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving]()**

Q3a. The authors address the following question: “have the core discussion networks of Americans changed in the past two decades?” Which type of sociological question is this?

Answer:

This is a descriptive question, it’s about change in society -it’s not a theoretical question (explaining social phenomena), application question or normative question.

Q3b. Read the abstract and take a closer look at the question the authors address. What is the behavior they are interested in? In which social context do they study this behavior? What is the period of investigation? And which population do focus on?

Answer:

Behavior of interest=size of core discussion networks; Social context=US; Period of investigation=1985-2004; Population: population of US

Q3c. Do you think the authors raised a relevant question? Why (not)?

Answer:

Scientific questions can be related to societal issues and scientific research. Questions that advance our understanding of societal issues have societal relevance, whereas questions that increase our knowledge of scientific insights has scientific relevance. In this case, one may argue that the authors raised a question with high societal relevance.

**1.6 Sociology and common sense**

**Q1**

The philosopher of science Karl Popper argued that ‘*It is very important to appreciate the huge difference between a thought that is only subjectively or privately thought or held to be true, which is a dispositional psychological structure, and the same thought when formulated in speech (perhaps also in writing) and thus presented for public discussion.’* Explain, in your own words, what Popper argues here, and while doing so, also use the distinction between ‘private sociologists’ and ‘academic sociology’.

Answer:

The idea is that, when people keep their ideas private, they are not subject to criticism in the same way as they would when speaking them out, or writing them down so that others can think about -and reflect on- these ideas. As ‘private sociologists’ we have many such private thoughts about social reality. In contrast, in ‘academic sociology’, it is critical to have an open, critical discussion about the ideas we have, and therefore, in sociology, ideas are shared (via presentations, publications) and critically reviewed.

**1.7 Sociology as Cumulative Science**

**Q1**

Sociology is a cumulative science. Explain, in your own words, what this means, and use the concept of ‘background knowledge’ in your answer.

Answer:

It means that studies are not conducted in isolation from one another: theories and observations of earlier scholars are incorporated in the work of successive studies. By background knowledge, we indicate all knowledge (i.e., observations and theories) at the time of a new study. New studies attempt to *contribute* to the background knowledge; this is how cumulative science works.