**Introduction to Sociology**

Chapter 4 “Perspectives”: Assignments with answers

**4.1 The origins of sociological perspectives**

**Q1**

In many fields of research, including sociology, different perspectives can be used to approach a problem or topic. What is the purpose of a perspective? Do perspectives differ from frameworks or paradigms? Argue why or why not.

Answer:

A perspective is a way of setting boundaries in what is and isn’t considered relevant in evaluating or studying a certain problem or topic. Perspectives, frameworks and paradigms do not generally differ from each other; all three signify a delimited way of approaching a problem. This means they are often used interchangeably in a research context.

**Q2**

Can different perspectives be used to understand the same problem or topic? Argue why or why not.

Answer:

Different perspectives can be used to study the same problem or topic. This is because different perspectives generally provide complementary information. In this way, using multiple perspectives increases the understanding of a certain phenomenon.

**4.2 Sociological themes and topics**

**Q1.**

What is a “sociological topic”? Give an example of a sociological topic that is debated in your country.

Answer:

A sociological topic is a specific subject/area of research that (often) concerns a specific social problem. Sociological topics, such as crime or immigration, are often the centre of debates in political or social discourse.

**Q2.**

Explain what a “sociological theme” is. How do sociological themes relate to the concept of “perspectives”?

Answer:

Sociological themes are overarching categories that can be used to relate different sociological topics to each other in an abstract way. Consequently, a sociological theme is similar to a perspective in that it sets boundaries as for what is and isn’t relevant when researching a topic.

**Q3**

Suppose you’re interested in the sociological dimensions of climate change, such as in the human behavior that causes this change, or in the consequences of climate changes for human beings. Can you link this topic to the three overarching themes of sociology, i.e., Culture, Social Relations and Inequality? Formulate one question per theme, and identify what type of question you pose (descriptive, theory, application). Use the following table:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Sociological theme** | **Sociological questions** | **Type of question** |
| 1 |  |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |  |

Answer:

Here are a few examples.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Sociological theme** | **Research question** | **Type of question** |
| 1 | Culture | Why do certain social norms increase delinquent behavior? | Theoretical |
| 2 | Social relations | Did the marriage rate change in France in the past 20 years? | Descriptive |
| 3 | Inequality | To what extent do women’s wages differ from men’s? | Descriptive |

**Q4.**

Suppose you want to study the topic of crime. Give an example of how different sociological themes can be used when approaching this topic, and how these approaches may lead to different explanations for criminal behavior.

Answer:

Answer should contain at least (1) two different sociological themes applied to this topic, and (2) one explanation for criminal behavior per theme. For example, if the topic of crime is approached from an “inequality” perspective, the explanations that arise for criminal behavior may focus on mechanisms such as the differential access to resources. If a “social relations” perspective is taken, social influence from deviant members in the social network group may be considered a relevant mechanism. In this way, the perspective that is used determines the way in which a subject is studied.

**Q5.**

Below is a table with research questions. Link these research questions to one or more sociological theme, and if applicable, to a sociological subtheme.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Research question** | **Sociological theme (s)** | **Subtheme(s)** |
| 1 | What are the social causes of stereotypes? |  |  |
| 2 | How does the number of friends someone has at work influence their likelihood of getting a promotion? |  |  |
| 3 | To what extent are groups in conflict with each other? |  |  |
| 4 | Which determinants make children academically outperform their parents? |  |  |
| 5 | Do what extent does peer-group pressure influence behavior? |  |  |
| 6 | How does an individual’s level of education influence their job status? |  |  |

Answer:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Research question** | **Sociological theme** | **Subtheme** |
| 1 | What are the social causes of stereotypes? | Culture | Opinions |
| 2 | How does the number of friends someone has at work influence their likelihood of getting a promotion? | Social relations (friends), Inequality (getting promotion) | Networks |
| 3 | To what extent are groups in conflict with each other? | Social relations | Groups |
| 4 | Which determinants make children academically outperform their parents? | Inequality | Social mobility |
| 5 | Do what extent does peer-group pressure influence behavior? | Culture | Norms |
| 6 | How does an individual’s level of education influence their job status? | Inequality | Resources |

**4.3 Causal explaining or subjective understanding?**

**Q1**

Suppose a team of researchers wants to understand why certain neighborhoods have higher crime rates than others. They find among other factors that bad upkeep of buildings and public amenities in a neighborhood causes higher crime rates.

Q1a. In Chapter 1, different levels of analysis were introduced (i.e., macro, meso, micro). On what level does this finding operate? Explain why the other two levels are not applicable here.

Answer:

This research finding operates on the meso-level: it concerns a community of people who are differentiated from greater society by a shared characteristic: geographic locality, in this case. It is not a micro-level explanation, as the relationship does not mention the role of individual actors. It is not a macro-level explanation, because this level is related to larger units such as societies or nations.

Q1b. Is this finding closer to an ecological explanation or an application of “Verstehen”? Explain why.

Answer:

This finding can be considered an ecological explanation, because it relates collective outcomes (crime rates in neighborhoods) to neighbourhood characteristics, without specifying why such a relationship occurs.

Q1c. Is this an example of a “Black Box” explanation? Argue why or why not.

Answer:

This is indeed an example of a Black Box explanation. We do not know *why* the specific finding happens: the micro-level mechanism is missing.

**4.4 Multilevel framework**

**Q1**

Empirical findings show that the homicide rate in the US is much higher than it is in many other western countries, like the Netherlands and Italy. Use a multilevel framework (see below) to come up with an explanation for this finding. Fill in the empty boxes, identify the type of relationships for each arrow, and explain the relationships between the different boxes.

Homicide rate in a country

*…*

*…*

*…*

Answer:

Example A: It can be argued that in countries having larger inequalities, such as the US (as compared to the Netherlands), those having fewer resources (‘lower class’) get frustrated and try to succeed in realizing their goals using violence -including shootings (as we will see, this argument resembles ideas from the sociologist Robert Merton). So, we have: inequalities in a country have a positive effect on levels of frustration in lower class families (‘social context effect’, i.e., macro conditions impact micro-level conditions). As a result of this frustration, there will be more shootings (‘individual effect’, i.e., micro conditions affect micro outcomes). And then we aggregate these individual outcomes to the macro level:

Social dynamics

Homicide rate in a country

Inequality in a country

+

+

Social context effect

Aggregation

+

Conflicts and shootings

+

Frustration in lower-class

Individual effect

Example B: A completely different explanation for the difference between the US and other countries like the Netherlands and Italy, focuses on ‘opportunities’. Specifically, in the US, it is legally possible to own a gun, and gun ownership is much, much higher than in other western societies. Some scholars have argued that the availability of guns and other weapons will result in more homicides. So, summarizing these ideas in a multilevel scheme, we get something like this:

Social dynamics

Homicide rate in a country

Legal opportunities to own a gun in a country

+

+

Social context effect

Aggregation

+

Shootings

Private gun ownership

+

Individual effect

**Q2**

The year 2020 was a year of protest around the world (e.g., Black Lives Matter, anti-vaccination protests, anti-China protests in Hong Kong, etc.). Often, protests start small, but then the number of people protesting grows strongly. How can you explain this increasing support for protests movements? Why are more and more people joining protests and riots? Use a multilevel framework to present a scientific explanation of this phenomenon.

Answer:

In the first step, you can fill in what is known: namely, that the size of the protest is increasing over time in a country. So, we get this macro-level change:

Social dynamics

Size of the protest in a country at t2

Size of the protest in a country at t1

+

In the second step, you need to come up with an explanation for this social change. One idea is that, when the size of the protest increases, individuals may perceive that their risk of getting caught by police (in case of anti-government, illegal protests) goes down. Say, if you’re protesting with 10 other people you feel you’ll get easily caught, but if you are with 10.000, why would it be risky to join? So, initially, when only a handful of people are protesting, the rest will not join easily. But when more people are taking part in the protest, even more people will quickly follow (i.e., there is a negative effect of the size of the protest on perceptions of getting caught by police, and a negative effect of these perceptions on participation). Let’s summarize this idea:

Social dynamics

Size of the protest in a country at t2

Size of the protest in a country at t1

+

Social context effect

+

Aggregation

-

-

Participate in protest

Perceived risk of getting caught by policy

Individual effect

Of course, reality is more complex than this simple model. In reality, the police may for example tolerate a handful of protesters, but once it has reached a certain threshold, say more than 100 protesters, the government may implement more severe measures and it can actually become more dangerous to join the protest. Still, however, it’s useful to present your explanation in a multilevel model -as this helps you to think more systematically about the interplay between macro and micro, i.e., the social environment and individual behavior.

Let’s take another example. Not all protests are related to anti-government or violent/illegal actions, of course, and hence the issue of ‘risk’ may not matter at all in these protests. Suppose a handful of people are protesting, but the rest of the country is unaware of that. But after a couple of days of protesting, more and more people become aware of what’s happening, and then they also join. So, ‘salience’ of the protest may be an important factor:

Social dynamics

Size of the protest in a country at t2

Size of the protest in a country at t1

+

Social context effect

+

Aggregation

+

+

Participate in protest

Salience of the protest

Individual effect

**Chapter generic assignments**

**Q1.**

Read the following article about Christians in Sri Lanka, on *The Conversation*: <https://theconversation.com/who-are-sri-lankas-christians-115799>

Q1a. Describe which sociological themes are applicable to this article, and why this is the case. Do these themes overlap in this article?

Answer:

All sociological themes are applicable in this article. The theme of inequality is apparent for example when power struggles are being discussed (inequal resources). The theme of social relationships is applicable because the main tensions described in the article revolve around different groups – religious groups, such as Christians and Buddhists, as well as ethnic groups, such as colonial influences by the British as well as Tamil minorities. Finally, the theme of culture fits this article because it clearly delineates the differences in cultural practices between colonial groups and natives. Each sociological theme addresses the topics that are being discussed in a different way. In this, we clearly see how the different perspectives are used complementarily, rather than competitively.

Q1b. Which sociological topics are being discussed in this article?

Answer:

Religion, ethnicity, politics, migration.

Q1c. Take the sociological theme of “social relations”. Come up with an appropriate descriptive and theoretical question regarding the issues discussed in this article, that links to this theme. Also indicate which subtheme of social relations is most appropriate for each question.

Answer:

Answers should relate to the theme of social relations, so relating to the subthemes of “groups” or “social networks”. Descriptive questions should aim to describe the current situation, or the development over time. Examples: “What is the relative group size of Tamils compared to the total population”, “How are the different groups divided over the country?” or “Along which group-lines do tensions exist in Sri Lankan society?”. Theoretical questions should aim to explain empirical patterns. Examples: “Why did Catholicism spread to Sri Lanka”, “What caused the revival in Protestantism in the 19th century?” or “Why do Tamils strive for political representation”.

**Q2**

Select a social problem you find interesting and find a news article about this problem; it can be anything you like. You might be interested in the rising income inequality in western countries, crime among young people, anything goes. Please answer the following questions with respect to the social problem and news article you selected:

1. Briefly describe the societal problem and news article (in just 3-4 sentences).
2. Formulate a normative question about this societal problem.
3. Formulate a descriptive and theoretical (sociological) question about this social problem.
4. Formulate a hypothesis, which gives an answer to your theoretical question.
5. To which sociological theme is your social problem and hypothesis related?
6. Use a multilevel framework to explain the social problem you’re interested in.
7. Suppose you want to test whether your explanation is true or not. Which method do you prefer to use? Describe the data will you use and why (administrative, survey, online data, qualitative field research, experiment)? Please give a sufficiently detailed description of your data.
8. Please reflect on the issues of *internal validity and external validity* and how do you deal with them? Do they threaten the conclusions of your study?

Make sure that you can present your answers in the meeting.