

[Open Peer Review on Qeios](#)

What Is Sociological Theory?

Georg Oesterdiekhoff¹

¹ Karlsruhe Institute of Technology

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

There are several types of sociological theories one has to discriminate from each other. Certain sociological theories earmark only single phenomena and do not differ from explanations used in everyday life. Then there are general sociological theories, mainly general theories of action, e. g. rational choice or interpretative sociologies. Finally, one has to feature macro-sociological theories that point out historical or societal developments pertaining to structures such whole societies, family patterns, or processes such as industrialization or globalization. The article mainly deals with the difference between rational choice and psychological approaches.¹

I will tackle the answer to this question in stages. First, I will define the concepts of "theory" and "explanation". Then I will explain the difference between macro- and micro-sociological theories.

A theory involves an attempt to explain a phenomenon. The existence of a particular phenomenon is inferred from other phenomena that underlie and cause it. Winds are explained by temperature differences in neighboring areas and the purchase of a bottle of water is explained by the thirst or boredom of the buyer. In both cases, these are explanations. A sociological theory is an explanation of the internal and external conditions associated with a social phenomenon and its explanation. The theory explains the explanation of the phenomenon in more detail by providing the relevant information associated with the phenomenon and its explanation. A theory discusses the context in which an explanation is situated.

A distinction can now be made between specific and general sociological theories. Special sociological theories are formulated ad hoc in order to explain a specific phenomenon without referring to general principles and without referring to a general theory, for example a general theory of action. Some understand Weber's Protestant ethics in this sense, for example. The emergence of industrial capitalism is derived from the Protestant doctrine of grace. The reasoning then goes like this: if some theologians had not formulated this doctrine of grace, then industrial capitalism would not have developed either. Accordingly, more or less coincidental historical conditions associated with the implementation of the doctrine of predestination are responsible for the emergence of a huge social transformation that was not planned and would not have occurred otherwise. Accordingly, a singular phenomenon, a completely contingent historical situation, a historical coincidence as it were, would be the cause of the industrial system. No general theory and no general theory of action play a role here, but rather a single phenomenon is positioned as the cause of another single phenomenon. I do not interpret Weber's theory in this way, but there are authors who understand Weber in this way.

Another example that is quite similar: some authors believe that the diversity of states in Europe caused its progressive development in modern times, as competition between states encouraged innovation, whereas Asian countries did not have this incentive. This occasional explanation is also based on the assertion of a single phenomenon as the cause of another phenomenon without recourse to a general theory or wider contexts.

This type of special sociological theory also plays a certain role in hyphen sociologies, in the sociologies of culture, religion, family, etc., as well as in sociological accounts that focus on specific events or historical developments. This type of special sociological explanation is not really different from explanations that occur in the everyday world. These are special explanations with regard to social phenomena. A social phenomenon is explained with reference to one or more other phenomena. That is all.

However, there are also general sociological theories that are not tailored to singular phenomena, but have a broader application. These include theories of action or psychological theories such as utility theory (rational choice), behavioral and learning theory, interpretative sociology and developmental psychological theory. These theories compete with each other as to which can best explain human behavior. They all claim to be able to explain more or less all human action in all societies and in all situations. They therefore explicitly or implicitly claim universal validity. Sometimes their proponents believe that their theory of action represents the basis of a sociological explanation at all. However, there are also other authors who are of the opinion that no theory of action has a monopoly claim and that different theories of action are needed for different phenomena or even that certain phenomena can be illuminated more comprehensively by drawing on several theories. I myself tend towards the latter view. I consider all four theories of action mentioned to be conditionally correct, but only if the foundations and limits of the respective theories are defined correctly.

I will start with utility theory, also known as rational choice. It is based on the assumption that social phenomena are the result of rational decisions and actions that people make and carry out when they seek advantage and try to avert harm from themselves. All people are assumed to have the same intellect, the same rationality and the same goals, at least as a general rule. Consequently, human action results from the logic of the situation in which people find themselves. An example: A person jumps into a swimming pool and realizes that there is a crocodile in it. So he leaves the pool again. Both entering and leaving the pool can be explained with reference to the rationality, self-interest and logic of the situation. You don't need differential and substantive psychology or interpretative sociology to examine ideas, and you don't need learning theory to explain this behavior. A look at the situation is enough to explain this human behavior.

Rational Choice theorists now believe that all human action in all areas and in all societies can be explained in this way. They claim that economic and professional action, the formation of friendships and social associations, the development of companies, organizations and societies can be explained in this way. Often enough, this situation-logical rationality model is expected to make a universal claim - which, however, actually implies a hopeless overextension and distortion. Nevertheless, it is obvious that this theory has a certain plausibility for methodological reasons alone, as a test procedure so to speak, and belongs in the toolbox of sociology. Even in everyday life, people tend to explain their actions in all kinds of areas as the result of their rational considerations and the situations and opportunities that present themselves to them. Rational choice can therefore be understood in a certain sense as an everyday theory that reflects the self-image of so-

called common sense.

I will now use an example from Lawrence Kohlberg's moral developmental psychology to both illustrate and limit the usefulness of utility theory and at the same time demonstrate the importance of developmental psychology as an alternative theory. A woman is terminally ill and can only be saved by a special medication. The pharmacist demands 2000 dollars for the medicine, which the man does not have. He therefore breaks into the pharmacy at night and steals it. Clearly, the utility theory explains the break-in from the logic of the situation. Lack of money and danger to life suffice as explanations; the man's behavior goes without saying, or so one would think. In many situations, including this one, both in everyday life and in sociology, we are all satisfied with the Rational Choice explanation and consider it sufficient.

However, Kohlberg did not even think of Rational Choice, but of developmental psychology. And it is by no means superfluous to study people's thoughts in detail, because there is no logic to the situation for many people who are confronted with this example. According to empirical studies, breaking into the pharmacy only represents a moral imperative and therefore a situational logic for people who are on moral stage five. People at stage four often still waver, as for them law-abidingness is more important than moral principles. For people on stage five, on the other hand, principles are more important than adherence to the law, which is why the percentage of pharmacy burglars is even higher among them. People on stages one and two, on the other hand, usually answer as follows: "I believe the man should only save the woman if he still loves her and still wants her," or like this: "I say he shouldn't break in because theft is forbidden."

Moral developmental psychology thus shows us that even in seemingly obvious situations, the assumption of situational logic can be quite speculative and questionable with regard to the conceptualization of human action and that utility theory can reach its limits faster than some people think. If a man on stages one or two possibly only saves his wife if he still loves her, how does a man on level five behave if he actually wants to get rid of his wife and no longer likes her at all? According to the empirical findings of moral developmental psychology, the latter also tends to break in because his conscience and moral standards make the rescue attempt more or less indispensable. In this respect, this moral research also corrects rational choice with regard to the understanding of self-interest and rationality. While people at stages one and two are dominated by self-interest, people at stage five also act against their self-interest because moral standards sometimes carry more weight in their minds. Rationality and situational logic therefore mean very different things to people at different stages.

The relevant surveys also show that not everyone who believes it is morally right to act feels compelled to do so. Many of those who consider it morally right to save the woman would not do so themselves. But at the higher stages, there is also a stronger tendency to follow what is considered morally right in practice. Of those who consider burglary to be morally right at levels two or three, fewer people would actually commit burglary than those who consider burglary to be morally right at stage five. Moral judgment and moral practice converge more strongly at stage five.

We can now see that the more precisely we analyze social phenomena, the deeper the layers we reach, i.e. layers that the utility theorist knows nothing about. After all, it is not superfluous to analyze and know people's thinking in detail and not to be satisfied with the blanket assumption of self-interest and rationality. However, analyzing people's thinking in

detail is not only a concern of psychology, but also of the interpretative paradigm. This attempts to fathom people's thinking using qualitative methods without being based on an exact psychological theory like developmental psychology. However, interpretative sociology would also have endeavored to get to know and describe the exact reasons that motivate people to commit burglary or to refrain from doing so.

As you can see, there is much to be said against committing oneself to one theory of action in order to pursue sociological theory. They can all be applied meaningfully if one is able to recognize and define their foundations and limits in the correct way.

However, sociological theories also include macro-sociological theories, not just micro-sociological and special explanations. With Weber's theory on the relationship between Protestant ethics and capitalism, I have already presented a macro-sociological theory. North's macroeconomic institutional theory can be seen as another example of a macrotheory. While North sees the emergence of modern society as a secondary result of economic growth, Weber and many sociologists see industrial economic growth as a result of the emergence of modern society. I think the macrosociologists are historically more correct on this issue than the macroeconomists. You can now see what macro-sociological theories deal with, with the explanation of organizations, institutions, social classes and entire societies. Another example is Norbert Elias' theory of civilization, which focuses on the history of European society since the Middle Ages.

Theories are attempts at explanation. They are assertions about facts. Whether their assertions correspond to the facts is revealed in test procedures that sometimes take a long time and have a varied history. In all sciences, not only in the social sciences, we see that theories that appear to be indisputable seem like yesterday's news to the next generation.

Footnotes

¹ The article is a publication of a lecture presented before the faculty of social sciences at the university of Oldenburg on the 18th of January, 2024.

References

- Georg W. Oesterdiekhoff, *Unternehmerisches Handeln und gesellschaftliche Entwicklung*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2013.
- Georg W. Oesterdiekhoff, *Kulturelle Bedingungen kognitiver Entwicklung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1997.
- Georg W. Oesterdiekhoff, *Zivilisation und Strukturgeneese*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2000.
- Georg W. Oesterdiekhoff, *Entwicklung der Weltgesellschaft*. Hamburg, Münster: Lit-Verlag 2005.