

Formal sociology

Formal sociology is a scientific approach to sociology developed by Georg Simmel and Leopold von Wiese.[1] In his studies, Simmel was more focused on forms of social interactions rather than content. This is why his approach to sociology became labeled as formal sociology. In formal sociology, one formal concept can be applied to understand various events.[2] From Simmel's point of view, one form of a social phenomenon is always associated with many formal events. The aim of formal sociology is to reveal that although the process of social interaction may be very complex, the social forms of these interactions can be isolated and may even be found to be identical. G. Simmel is best known in contemporary sociology for his contributions to our

understanding of patterns or forms of social interaction. Simmel made clear that one

of his primary interests was association among conscious actors and that his intent

was to look at a wide range of interactions that may seem trivial at some times but

crucially important at others. One of Simmel's dominant concerns was the form rather

than the content of social interaction. From Simmel's point of view, the sociologist's

task is to impose a limited number of forms on social reality, extracting

commonalities that are found in a wide array of specific interactions.

One of the main focuses of Simmel's historical and philosophical sociology is

the cultural level of social reality, which he called objective culture. In Simmel's

view, people produce culture, but because of their ability to reify social reality, the

cultural world and the social world come to have lives of their own and increasingly dominate the actors who created them. G.Simmel identified a number of components of objective culture, including tools, transportation, technology, the arts, language, the intellectual sphere, conventional wisdom, religious dogma, philosophical systems, legal systems, moral codes, and ideals. The absolute size of objective culture increases with modernization. The number of different components of the cultural realm also grows [12; 6].

Simmel's insistence on the forms of social interaction as the domain peculiar to sociological inquiry was his decisive response to those historians and other representatives of the humanities who denied that a science of society could ever come to grips with the novelty, the irreversibility, and the uniqueness of historical phenomena. G.Simmel agreed that particular historical events are unique: the murder of Caesar, the accession of Henry VIII, the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo are all events located at a particular moment in time and having a nonrecurrent significance.

The sociologist does not contribute to knowledge about the individual actions of a King John, or a King Louis, or a King Henry, but he can illuminate the ways in which all of them were constrained in their actions by the institution of kingship. The

sociologist is concerned with King John, not with King John. On a more abstract level, he may not even be concerned with the institution of kingship, but rather with the processes of conflict and cooperation, of subordination and superordination, of centralization and decentralization, which constitute the building blocks for the larger institutional structure.

To Simmel, the forms found in social reality are never pure: every social phenomenon contains a multiplicity of formal elements. Cooperation and conflict, subordination and superordination, intimacy and distance all may be operative in a marital relationship or in a bureaucratic structure [8].

Simmel's insistence on abstracting from concrete content and concentrating on the forms of social life has led to the labeling of his approach as formal sociology.

However, his distinction between the form and the content of social phenomena is not always as clear as we should like. He gave variant definitions of these concepts, and his treatment of particular topics reveals some obvious inconsistencies. Formal sociology isolates form from the heterogeneity of content of human sociation. It attempts to show that however diverse the interests and purposes that give rise to

specific associations among men, the social forms of interaction in which these interests and purposes are realized may be identical [8; 5].

Simmel's interest in creativity is manifest in his discussions of the diverse forms of social interaction, the ability of actors to create social structures, and the disastrous effects those structures have on the creativity of individuals. All of Simmel's discussions of the forms of interaction imply that actors must be consciously oriented to one another. Simmel also has a sense of individual conscience and of the fact that the norms and values of society become internalized in individual consciousness. In addition, G.Simmel has a conception of people's ability to confront themselves mentally, to set themselves apart from their own actions, which is very similar to the views of George Herbert Mead [12; 10].

G.Simmel constructed a gallery of social types to complement his inventory of social forms. Along with the stranger, he describes in great phenomenological detail such diverse types as the mediator, «the poor», «the adventurer», «the man in the middle, and «the renegade. G.Simmel conceives of each particular social type as being cast by the specifiable reactions and expectations of others. The type

becomes what he is through his relations with others who assign him a particular

position and expect him to behave in specific ways. His characteristics are seen as

attributes of the social structure. For example, the stranger», in Simmel's

terminology, is not just a wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow», having no specific structural position.