

See also Ethnomethodology; Feminism; Feminism Epistemology; Foucault, Michel; Historical Materialism; Phenomenology; Postmodernism; Poststructuralism

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SOCIAL ACTION

Social action occurs when thought processes intervene between a stimulus, an actor, and their subsequent response. In other words, it is a process whereby an individual attaches a subjective meaning to his or her action. This is different from reactive behavior in that a simple reaction involves a response to a stimulus with no intervening thought. The concept of social action is of particular importance to sociology because many aspects of the field are built on the principle of understanding the subjective meanings that actors attach to actions and how they come to understand the actions of others (and themselves).

The sociology of Max Weber rested on his concept of social action. He stated that the goal of sociological analysis was "the interpretation of action in terms of its subjective meaning" (Weber [1921]1968:8). This did not, however, lead him to support the psychological study of the mind but, rather, to pursue a sociological study of mental processes. He was not as concerned with the roots of action in consciousness as much as he was interested in the ways in which social structures affected individual action.

The focus of Weber's interest in social action was on the individual. He acknowledged that there were occasions when the collective had to be treated as an individual, but only as "the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable

action" (Weber [1921]1968:13). Therefore, in contrast to what the name might imply, social action is in nearly all instances performed by the individual actor and not the social collective.

Weber outlined four basic ideal types of action. The most important to him were the two basic types of rational action because these are the ones most likely to be understood by sociologists. The first of these, means-ends rationality is based on a set of expectations of other actors and their assumed responses to environmental stimuli and other human actors. These expectations are the "means" by which the actor calculates his or her own actions in order to obtain his or her desired "ends." An example of this type of action would be extending one's hand to a new acquaintance with the expectation that that person will shake your hand and the goal of a successful social exchange. The second type of rational action, value rationality, is based on the belief that some actions must be undertaken for their own sake regardless of whether or not they will be successful. The confession of sins to a Catholic priest in hopes of saving one's soul is an example of this type of action.

The other two types of action for Weber have a seemingly more irrational basis. Affectual action is the result of the emotional state of the actor. An example of this would be throwing expensive dinner plates across the room in a fit of rage or acting in socially unprescribed ways in the name of love. Traditional action is rooted in the individual's routine systems of behavior. This would include things such as showering at night versus in the morning, having tea at a certain time every day, or celebrating one's birthday with a cake and candles.

Although Weber outlined four specific types of social action, he made it clear that nearly every instance involved some combination of these four ideal types. For example, celebrating one's birthday with candles and a cake is not only traditional action but could be interpreted as value action as well.

Weber's concept of social action led to a more general action theory. Although it has declined in popularity since the 1930s and 1940s, a number of notable theorists at that time, including Robert MacIver (1931), Florian Znaniecki (1934), and especially Talcott Parsons (1937), all engaged in action theory. It was mostly the work of Parsons, however, that brought action theory to the spotlight.

Parsons did not intend his action theory to explain all parts of social reality. Instead, he recognized that such a theory was limited primarily to the most basic forms of social life. In turn, the most basic component of his action theory is the unit act. The unit act, for Parsons, has four characteristics: (1) an actor must be present, (2) the act must have a goal to which it is oriented, (3) the situation in which the act occurs must be different from the ends that it aims to accomplish (which is not the same as saying the means must be different from the ends; Parsons saw the

means as only one aspect of the situation—the parts over which the actor has control; the other subdivision of a situation is conditions, or those parts over which the actor has no control), and (4) norms and values exist for an actor that orient his or her choice of means to the desired end.

The last element of the unit act is of critical importance in helping to distinguish action from a behavioral response. The contemplation of a choice implies that the actor is engaging in voluntarism, a well-known concept developed by Parsons. Voluntarism does not mean total freedom to do as one wishes but, rather, the ability to choose from among the range or options available, given the conditions or the restraints of the situation.

In Parsons's later works, he almost entirely abandons his idea of the unit act in lieu of a focus on systems, which he sees as composed of and emerging from unit acts. In other words, he moved in a more macro direction and sought to explain those aspects of social reality that he did not feel could be explained by the individual unit act. Nevertheless, he was influential in bringing Weber's ideas of social action to the United States and to further developing them into the field of action theory.

— Michael Ryan

See also Parsons, Talcott; Weber, Max

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SOCIAL CAPITAL

The term *social capital* refers either to the capacity of an individual to obtain valued material or symbolic goods by virtue of his or her social relationships and group memberships or to the capacity of a plurality of persons to enjoy the benefits of collective action by virtue of their own social participation, trust in institutions, or commitment to established ways of doing things. The former capacity has been called “relational social capital” and the latter “institutional social capital” (Krishna 2000). The common element underlying both types of social capital is social embeddedness. Individual and collective action alike are enabled and constrained by the resources that actors can leverage within and between levels of social structure.

Like the complementary concept of “human capital” (the knowledge, skill, and understanding acquired by persons through training and experience), the concept of social capital stems from an analogy to physical and financial capital. Capital in general refers to finite assets available for purposive deployment in the satisfaction of future wants (rather than present consumption). Capital assets accumulate as stocks. Put to productive use, they generate flows of benefits for the asset holder and his or her exchange partners. Capital assets are said to be “fungible” (interchangeable), “transferable” (conveyable from one place or situation to another), and “alienable” (transferable in ownership). Since social capital is only slightly fungible, mildly transferable, and inalienable, some economists—for example, Kenneth Arrow—reject the analogy to capital theory. However stretched the analogy may be, the concept of social capital captures something that most sociologists consider an elemental truth—that the resources embedded in social structures facilitate individual and collective action, and generate flows of benefits for persons, groups, and communities.

No one knows who first used the term social capital in the ways defined above. Robert D. Putnam nominates L. Judson Hanifan on the basis of the Progressive educator's 1916 essay on community centers. “The individual is helpless socially, if left to himself,” Hanifan (1916) observed of the rural poor in West Virginia. “If he comes into contact with his neighbors, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community” (p. 130). The core elements of the concept are clearly present in this quotation: agential capacitation through relationship formation, interdependent asset cumulation, and “social potentiality,” the facilitation of collective ends.

Two contemporary social theorists who developed the concept's theoretical potential are Pierre Bourdieu and James S. Coleman. Bourdieu arrived at the concept independently, while Coleman built on economist and policy analyst Glenn Loury's use of the term to designate all the family, class, and neighborhood characteristics that affect actors' investments in human capital. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define social capital as the actual or potential resources at play in the “field of the social”—that is, in the sphere of “mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 1991). For Bourdieu, modern society is an ensemble of relatively autonomous fields—for example, the religious field, the linguistic field, the economic field, each with its own strategic logic and specific form of capital—religious capital, linguistic capital, economic capital, and so on. Of these, the most important, the one that exerts the greatest force on the other fields, is the economic. Having limited social capital to the sphere of direct social relations,