Sociological Methodology

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Assignment #4 – Course Learning Journal The journal is a written reflection of your learning journey while working in each course. The Learning Journal integrates the essential elements of the course within your professional field of interest. The objective of the course journal is to produce a degree of acculturation, integrating new ideas into your existing knowledge of each course. This is also an opportunity to communicate with your professor insights gained as a result of the course. The course learning journal should be 3-5 pages in length and should include the following sections: 1. Introduction –Summarize the intent of the course, how it fits into the graduate program as a whole, and the relevance of its position in the curricular sequence. 2. Personal Growth - Describe your personal growth–how the course stretched or challenged you– and your progress in mastery of course content and skills during the week and through subsequent readings – what new insights or skills you gained. 3. Reflective Entry - Add a reflective entry that describes the contextualization (or adaptation and relevant application) of new learning in your professional field. What questions or concerns have surfaced about your professional field as a result of your study? 4. Conclusion – Evaluate the effectiveness of the course in meeting your professional, religious, and educational goals.

# Introduction

Sociological Methodology coming in the second half of Core 2 integrates well with the preceding courses. Hermeneutics provided a timely review and updating of current theories regarding how human beings interpret their world and make meaning. Research for the 21st Century provided a refresher for basic research tools and methodologies that are available to the social researcher. Faith Learning Integration was helpful in reconsidering how secular approaches may be useful or detrimental to establishing knowledge. Review of popular worldviews was also helpful for macro level understanding. With these pieces in place Sociological Methodology was more understandable. I had some sociology training as an undergraduate in the 90s. This helped to reframe the sociological approach as we examined the three major approaches of Functionalism, Conflict theory, and Symbolic Interactionism as both world views and hermeneutical approaches. Given the D. Phil program is all about the integration of religion and society, it is very helpful not only to conducting research, but examining research to understand the secular approach to understanding both religion and society. The course not only reviewed the three major approaches to sociological research, but it also introduced the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative research, as well as the same for macro and micro level examinations. I suspect this will serve as a valuable precursor leading into statistical studies and research design.

# Personal Growth

My earlier training in sociology was very much in the functionalist and structuralist camps. I continue to be a foundationalist, so I struggle with more anti-foundational approaches such as Conflict Theory and Symbolic Interactionism. I also lean heavily on a systems model of understanding human interaction. I use a modified Family Systems Theory in my congregational consulting, that has been developed over the years by various experts in my Lutheran tradition engaged in Intentional Interim Ministry. Both functionalism and systems theory see society and smaller group elements as a set of interrelated and interdependent parts which interactions and functions existing because of interdependence. The criticism offered that all interactions are human interactions is a valuable insight. I suspect these dynamics are more of a both/and rather than either or. Groups do develop patterns of reinforcing behavior that seem to take on a life of their own. But it is good to be reminded that groups are composed of individuals who have their own motivations for interacting the way they do. This is a tension that reflects that society, and groups are composed of individuals in interdependent relationships.

This course also had me considering the value of micro level research. Symbolic Interactionism was intriguing in that it does provide a valuable set of tools and approaches for mining data, interpreting it, and describing it, though it is less useful in critiquing it. However, this made me more aware that constantly looking at the forest trying to figure out how it grows and what is changing can lead one to miss out on some very important human behavior, losing the trees among the forest so to speak.

I gained a bit more respect for Conflict theory, though I remain skeptical of this approach. Conflict theory is too full of contradictions and logical fallacies to qualify as a very useful tool for social research. It ends with conclusions shaped by where it begins with a Marxist worldview that is simply too generalized to capture nuanced human behavior. It may be that conflict plays a key role in human interaction, but it is a stretch to prove that conflict is the decisive role. And even if it were to be true, Conflict theories solution seems to be more conflict, only advocating for different victors than the ones the theory identifies as existing in today’s time. Flowing out of antifoundational skepticism Conflict theory turns out to be one more grand metanarrative of human behavior that is one big exercise in circular reasoning. I did find it useful though in hearing how people perceive their world and in perhaps exposing some of the interactions related to conflict. So, I’ll continue to keep an open mind about Conflict theory.

I remain a foundationalist and I still see value in the functional and systems approach to society. The key criticism of functionalism that it couldn’t predict the social upheaval and change that occurred beginning in the late 60s is not in my opinion sufficient to eliminate the general approach. Some specific claims that society will progress through a process akin to gradual growth and homeostasis are worth criticizing in the light of history. But the idea that systems go out of balance and find a new balance is a central understanding in systems theory and goes a long way to explaining when society is disrupted and when society is more integrated and functional for greater numbers of its people. It is true that a homeostatic state can mean an oppressive state. I do not believe systems theory claims that all homeostatic states are necessarily good for everyone, but merely that systems, especially living systems, tend toward some kind of balance that keeps the system integrated and continuing, otherwise it falls apart and dies. However, this course has led me to be more open to criticisms of systemic, functionalist, structuralist approaches and to consider what human dynamics these approaches may be overlooking.

The course left me with suspicion. Given sociologists desires to be scientist, if soft scientist, leads to a dilemma. First there was the desire to depend only on empirical data gleaned from large population groups that could be predictive of future behavior. But human beings prove to be too complicated and unpredictable for a process grounded in a materialistic view of the universe, something that Christian researchers would understand all to well. Thus, sociology has moved in the last decade to being more amenable to qualitative and microlevel research. However, anecdotal evidence may be problematic because it lacks generalizability. It can be biased and subjective and may not be reliable for drawing broad conclusions. It is prone to confirmation bias, cannot prove causation, and tends to overemphasize rare events. Additionally, anecdotes are difficult to verify and can be emotionally persuasive, leading to decisions based on feelings rather than facts.

Functionalism has its set of problems and limitations, Conflict theory another set, and Symbolic Interactionism another set. It seems that something is missing, something more is needed. It is as if Sociology is a wagon trying to move along on only three wheels. The Christian researcher might argue the fourth wheel is the insight provided by Scripture, but it may be that this dynamic would better be understood as providing a map of the roads the wagon must travel. I suspect sociology’s methodological problems and deficiencies are related to its adoption of an anti-foundationalist postmodern worldview. I suspect insights from systems theory as postmodernism evolves into transmodernism, something I’ve argued is happening in other assignments, will lead to a fourth approach in the near future. I will be pondering what this might look like, but it is too large a task to begin here.

# Reflective Entry

As a parish pastor, and congregational consultant this course greatly augmented my professional toolbox as I work with challenged and sometimes congregations dealing with a diverse range of issues. As mentioned above, my training included the application of Family Systems Theory to congregations. But I have learned over the years that each congregation is different. I have used both macro and micro level analysis, congregational surveys, and individual interviews. Sometimes the center of gravity for the dysfunction or stuckness was a congregational habit or process that needed adjusting. Often the dysfunction was rooted in a center of gravity located in an influential individual. Symbolic Interactionism and particularly the dramaturgical approach is proving useful in understanding how individuals are interacting within the congregation. I’ve noticed before that certain people, especially leadership, will say one thing and be one way in person and be somewhat different in a formal meeting or congregational assembly. The dramaturgical approach with front stage and backstage insights are helping me to better frame and understand this behavior, enabling me to be a better consultant. In addition, change for the congregation often comes from finding the correct leverage point, something that Symbolic Interactionist insights can be helpful in finding.

# Conclusion

This course was the second most instructive (and enjoyable) course coming in just behind Hermeneutics. This is likely because these courses enabled me to review, assess, and build upon prior training. I believe this course will provide a good foundation for proceeding further into the D. Phil program with exploration of statistics and research design. This course gave me valuable updating of my understanding of contemporary sociological methodologies and had laid a beginning for considerations as to which approaches might be useful in my own research in the future. As I seek to help my denomination weather the cultural changes of the post-Christian era so that we remain as proficient as possible in the mission of the Church, this course will be an invaluable beginning toward enhancing research and communicating knowledge. But one thing this course has taught me is that I have much more to learn for human life for all its simplicity is paradoxically also quite complicated.