

Transcript: Social Inequalities: Sociological Theory and Research

>> Human societies are exceedingly complicated. Which might be why constructing theories about them is such a difficult endeavor. But what is theory? And how do sociologists use theory? Let's listen to a few insights from the experts.

>> When I think of theories, I like to think of theories as a sort of map. It can be very helpful in letting you know how you get from one place to another. And I think that theories look to -- pretty much do the same thing, looking to sort of the social terrain. It maps of course, and theories too, sometimes get outdated. And you use your excursions through that terrain to try to figure out in which ways those maps need to be corrected.

>> Well theory in any field of study is important because it allows us to take the complexity and the chaos of the world and sort of make it comprehensible. Theory and sociology. Sociology being the scientific study of society. Sociological theories aim to explain, understand and sometimes predict human behavior.

>> It's common to hear people dismiss an idea as just a theory, as if theories were just opinions. But sociological theory is far more than mere opinion. Theories are a set of interrelated concepts. And how those concepts relate to one another is learned only through careful observation. Unlike most opinions, theories are subject to logical scrutiny and are systemically reevaluated when new data is available.

>> The sociologist, Max Weber, once remarked "Even the smallest slice of reality can never be exhausted." And so we use theories to work like maps. Helping researchers navigate a complicated reality. Theories provide sociologists with a kind of frame with which they can piece together an image of reality. But how do we piece together the image? How do we put our theories to the test?

>> One of the key driving questions in the social sciences has been inequality. Whether inequality over time get more pronounce. Whether it over the long run people of the extremes of inequality tend to converge towards one another. So much of my research has focused on these questions. On alternative theories about why one should expect inequality to lead to either convergence or divergence among different groups of people. For example, there is a particular measure called Gini coefficient, which is a single number that summarizes how much inequality there is within a given population. So, through our research, we have been able to calculate Gini's and look at them over time. And more over what we have been able to do is sort of deconstruct these Gini's to trick to ourselves more precisely how much of the changes are due to shift in inequality between countries or shifts in inequalities within countries.

>> So my current research, I'm interested in exploring the relationship between art and politics. And specifically, I'm interested in understanding the ways that artists understand their art to have a political dimension. And since I'm interested in sort of studying the world view of artists, it made sense that I chose a method that would allow me to do that. And so the qualitative methodology of ethnography does precisely that. And so, using ethnic graphic methods, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, sociologists sort of get at the indigenous local meanings of a community or social group.

>> So whether a sociologist uses qualitative methods of the sort described by Valerie Chip [phonetic] or quantitative methods similar to Patricio Cortenowitz [phonetic]. Theories guide the research process from the very start. But here is where the idea of theory as a map or frame breaks down. Unlike maps or puzzle edge pieces, the data sociologist encounter in the field, often changes the theory. So while we use theories or frames to make sense of the world, we are constantly in a process of using our subsequent observations to redraw our frames.