Tips and Tools for Sociologists
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Types and Structures of Explanations
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October 18, 1996

The following list is **not exhaustive** and **not mutually exclusive**. It identifies some of the classifications of the more common explanations for social and cultural behaviour. It is meant as an aid as you explore explanations in the literature and as you develop your own as part of your research. By recognizing the logical structure of these explanations, you will be better able to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, critique their application, and develop appropriate research designs.

1. Demographic Explanations

These assume that "a causal force is assumed to be proportional to the number of people of a certain kind. The number of people of that kind is, in the general case, determined by other causal forces. Thus the explanation of many social phenomenon breaks down into two distinct problems of causal explanation: (a) explaining how many people of a given kind there are, and (b) explaining the proportionality between numbers of different kinds of people and the causal force producing the phenomenon." (Stinchcombe, 1968:60)

Examples

To explain	Kinds of people whose number must be specified	Proportionality factors
Number of births	Women of reproductive ages	Age-specific birth rates
Gross national product	Labour force in various industries	Industry productivities
Number of students at a given level	Age groups in population corresponding to level	School attendance ratios and level of distributions by age
Votes for leftist party	Eligible voters in various social classes and ethnic groups	Proportions of groups voting left

(Stinchcombe, 1968:60)

These are useful when arguing that different causal forces vary a great deal among different kinds of people.

2. Functional Explanations

These assume that "the consequences of some behaviour or social arrangement are essential elements of the causes of that behaviour." (Stinchcombe, 1968:80) They are often used where a single type of consequence is explained as the result of many different possible causes (equifinal structure).
Examples:

- Malinowski implies that the existence of a 'sociological father' is functional for the welfare of the child since in all societies, some male is ultimately responsible for the welfare of a given child. Sometimes it is the biological father, sometimes a stepfather, sometimes the mother's brother, sometimes an older relative, etc.
- Thompson suggests that management of uncertainty is functional for the survival of organizations since all organizations have some mechanisms for reducing uncertainty. This may be in the form of research on the uncertain factors, flexibility in adapting to the changes, buying or conquering the organization producing uncertainty, or levelling out the uncertainty by increasing the time period of inventories.
- Parsons argues that the training of youth is functional for the operation of society since all societies have some means to provide this training: the family, schools and universities, apprenticeship, fraternities, etc.

These explanations are particularly difficult to support and have come under considerable criticism for being non-critical of the status quo. Certain forms are also susceptible to tautological arguments (e.g. motivational explanations), where the causes are inferred from the consequences. Stinchcombe suggests the following situations where functional explanations are implied.
- If increased difficulty in achieving the end leads to increased activity on the part of individuals or groups.
- If the end is achieved in spite of causes tending to keep it from being achieved.
- If a variety of explanations or purposes, or inadequate and inconsistent purposes are offered by people behaving to explain their behaviour.
- If it is known that some causal process is operating which selects patterns of behaviour according to their consequences. (Stinchcombe, 1968:82-85)

3. Historical Explanations

These occur where "an effect created by causes at some previous period becomes a cause of that same effect in succeeding periods." (Stinchcombe, 1968:103)

Examples:
- Marriage: most couples are married this year because they were married last year.
- Once magical practices are established, they tend to persist where there are few competitors.
- Our electoral system is maintained largely because of the cost of changing.

Historical explanations have two components:
- How did the practice become established in the first place? Most often the responses to this question will take an equifinal form (cf. functional).
- What are the conditions under which the practice will be maintained? Answering this question should provide clues regarding the conditions under which the practice will atrophy or change. (Stinchcombe, 1968:107)

4. Genetic Explanations

These are explanations which are constructed by referring to specific events and to particular stages of processes. They are idiographic in form, although they often contain generalizations regarding intentions, purposes, and dispositions. They are statements reporting or describing specific events, processes, and situations which either dated or dateable.

Examples:
- The great stock market crash of 1929 originated in a banker's meeting on Oct. 28th, their intentions to let prices fall, and their belief that they were overcommitted in a falling market. (Brown, 1963:51-52)
- The Quebec referendum failed because ethnic and rich Quebecers wanted to keep Quebec in Canada.

If such claims were incorporated into nomothetic explanations, they would be referred to as "statements of initial conditions'.

5. Intentions

These are explanations which refer to the objectives of the actor or actors as a cause of the action.

Examples:
- The Quebec referendum failed because ethnic and rich Quebecers wanted to keep Quebec in Canada.
- The extent of poverty is increasing in Canada because the corporate owners are wanting to get more money for themselves.
- Students must write exams because teachers and administrators want to evaluate their performance.

Intention explanations are frequently used in public discourse, but seldom in academic materials since (1) they cannot be logically derived from non-intention statements alone, and (2) they are more useful as information for the analysis of goal-seeking (e.g. Why do they have these intentions under these conditions?)

6. Dispositions

These are explanations which refer to a tendency to behave in a certain way.

Examples:
- A person won't fly because they are afraid of heights.
- He beat his wife because he was jealous.
- More men are executives because those selecting them follow the norms.

Dispositional explanations are problematic to support since they often take a tautological structure. To infer a disposition, we need to point to a pattern of behaviour, but it is often this same pattern of behaviour which we are wanting to explain. For example, to explain the refusal to give to charity as a result of personal greed, we need to demonstrate that those who don't give are greedy. If we look at their history of refusing to give as an indication of their greedy

nature, we confound the cause and the consequence.

7. Reasons

These are explanations which are similar to intentions, but they refer to groups. It is an abbreviated way of asserting that the members of the group have the same reasons in common. For such explanations to apply they must (1) apply only to actions intended by the agents (2) they must be assignable to individual agents or to individual agents as members of groups, and (3) they are logically independent of functional explanations. (Brown, 1963:103)

Examples:
- Certain cultural groups prefer boys over girls because boys will help with the field work, make good warriors, will settle in the household of the parents, and support them in their old age.
- The university administration offered a retirement package because it reduced the salary expenses for senior faculty, and made room for new people at a lower salary level.

The acceptance of reasons as explanations requires us to accept the assertion of the agent as accurate.

8. Empirical Generalizations

Empirical generalizations are often invoked as part of explanations. They are statements about invariant relations between empirical phenomenon, most often supported by evidence.

Examples:
- Greenpeace has become more bureaucratic because organizations tend to oligarchy over time.
- I was late this morning because the traffic was heavy at rush hour.
- He can't be trusted because he often lies.