Mini-Lecture on Agreements

From the sociological perspective, human social and mental life are one and the same. They both start from an interactional level. We can see the logic in this proposition in how this perspective attempts to answer the following three questions:

1) How do we come to know the world?
2) How do we achieve predictability in relating to others?
3) How do we achieve meaning in our life and an identity for our selves?

A general answer can be found in the following four interrelated concepts:

AGREEMENTS

↓ Language ↓

CULTURE     STRUCTURE

As a result of numerous surveys given in different societies and cultures, anthropologists and sociologists have come up with four consistent answers when they ask people the simple question: What do people want out of life? Typical answers are:

1. Survival: food, water, air, shelter
2. Comfort
3. Security: translates into Predictability & Control
4. Satisfaction: belonging, friendship, nurturance, power, respect, property, wealth, etc., etc., etc.

Answer #1 tends to be the first response. Answers #2 & #3 tend to follow, but the two vary in order roughly 50% of the time, and #4: (What satisfies people?) has the greatest variance, with answers suggesting belonging, friendship, nurturance {something equivalent to love} being the most frequent across different societies.

Of the four answers, I would like you to think about security/predictability for the moment. Although answers for #3 follow # 1 & #2, survival based on food, water & shelter (let alone comfort) could not really exist without predictability and control. If you didn’t know that what ‘worked today’ {to get you food and keep away the predators} would also ‘work tomorrow,’ there would be no sense of predictability and control in your daily life. You would be just a quivering mass of protoplasm until some other animal came over and sucked you up. This is why anxiety is such a predominant
normal pathology in the realm of mental health. It is associated with fear → the lack of control or predictability in one’s life.

Every single living animal needs predictability and control, and most come with the process either wired in or are able to learn it very quickly (via learning principles based on classical & operant conditioning). Think of a frog! It doesn’t know what a dragon fly or a bee is (not in the sense that we know!). In it’s world, if an object is moving at a certain speed, and if it’s a certain size, and the sound it makes is within a certain frequency—SLAPP!!! out comes the tongue and ‘Walla!!’ another meal for the day. So on the frog’s phylogenetic level, predictability is partly wired in or learned very quickly in its short existence. At the same time, most animals (including simians), below humans on the phylogenetic scale, are mobile very early in their young life. Some literally drop out and are up and running. Humans, on the other hand, are born ‘too soon’ even compared to our simian cousins. We have to be! Our heads and/or pelvises are bigger and we couldn’t get out!!! So we have a relatively longer period where we are immobile and highly dependent on our care-takers, more so than any other animal. But this can be a good thing because it gives us a greater amount of time to adapt to various and numerous environments. But we need predictability just like any other animal. This could be bad?!?!? ---- because potentially, we could be faced with numerous possibilities for what is food and what isn’t, who is part of our group and who isn’t, or how and whom to approach for sexual contact (Hmm, so you think that’s instinctual in us!? Well, that’s another question that we’ll have to deal with later.). The point is, we are faced with potentially more choices of how to go about life than any other animal, and yet, we need to make choices about who is friendly and who is a potential enemy, what is food, what isn’t food, etc. So that we are not in constant lock-down every time we come across a new person or situation we need some method of narrowing down our choices. And we do this primarily through agreement reality. However, once we make an agreement there is a human tendency to forget that it was just a convenient agreement and, in the long run, we tend to reify them → give them an absolute quality. This can make the world more predictable, but it can get us into trouble as well. Let’s see how?

Agreement reality vs. Experiential Reality
(Much of the following material was borrowed from the work of another sociologist, Earl Babbie, in his book Society by Agreement first published in 1977 with numerous follow-up additions.)

First, let’s compare agreement reality with another form of reality acquisition, experiential reality. Agreement reality is essentially transmitted via human communication, basically language. In fact we will see that language itself is solidly based on the process of agreements. For purposes of comparison I am going to use Earl Babbie’s definition of experiential reality which is “any knowledge gained from direct contact with the environment that does not include the medium of language”. For example if an alien came to the U.S. for the first time and is able to drive a car, s/he might eventually learn (assuming s/he survives) that every time s/he comes near an octagonal sign that is red, it would be good to slow down and stop. However, if s/he knew English with the help of a star-trek translator, s/he would learn to stop via the
agreement system – since it would inform her that red octagonal signs with the word STOP means exactly that! She would not have to learn via direct experience. Now for a little exercise that I’ve given to numerous classes, some with only 10 students, others with 300 split up into groups: Try to think of what you know to be true that is only based on experiential reality and not agreement reality. Then, after this exercise you will get a good idea of how much of our truths are gained by one process over the other.

Agreements and agreement systems: the foundation of our cultural reality

Two ways to look at the significance of Agreements:

Agreement Systems and Agreement Evolution

Agreement systems:
The basic agreements of any culture are concepts that you are quite familiar with: they are the origin of your beliefs, values and norms as well as recognizable objects, i.e., artifacts.

In order to achieve a greater degree of precision in the use of these terms, social scientists tend to narrow the boundaries of how they are used. Whereas in everyday conversation the concept of belief often is synonymous with ones opinions or values, here these concepts are more narrowly defined and applied.

So for the purposes of sociological application a cultural belief about reality represents what is true, i.e. the if-then statements (if you don’t get enough sleep you will be very tired and irritable the next day), or because statements: (nine-year olds should not babysit their younger peers because they are not mature enough). They are agreements about how the world works. They may or may not be true scientifically – until they are tested systematically, but the culture accepts them as true regardless of testing. [By the way the belief that human beings have ‘free choice’ is one of these agreements. Most people in the culture just assume this is empirically obvious! We may get to talk about that later.]

Values are behaviors or goals that are recognized as desirable or undesirable, good or bad. Norms are the should(s) and should not(s) of a culture → the expectations that guide behavior. Now these definitions may seem trivial at first, but we can get into a lot of trouble when we just assume we are talking about the same thing. As stated above in everyday nomenclature we use these concepts interchangeably or we group them into a larger category of beliefs or opinions.

---

1 Actually we can get away with sloppy definitions in everyday conversation because as the famous anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, remarked most of everyday conversation is not really for the exchange of relevant information. We are really like monkey’s picking verbal bugs off each other. In other words, when monkeys groom each other by picking various bugs off each other, they are really reinforcing the social bonds between the group’s members. So ‘small-talk’ is not really that small when you view its larger significance.
We also tend to learn these agreements separate from each other, but they are usually part of a subtly connected system. The diagram below suggests that norms are justified by certain values which, in turn, are justified by certain beliefs. In the opposite direction, beliefs suggest certain values which in turn suggest certain norms. For example, it was a cultural belief/truth (and still is in a large part of the U.S. culture as well as other cultures) that women are more emotional than men. However, this belief is also related to the value, that for the most part, it is good that women are more emotional. In fact, they should(norm) be more emotional than men because that trait is connected to another belief: that women are naturally the caretakers of other human beings. Okay!!!

BELIEFS
What is True
↓ ↑

VALUES
What is Good or Bad (Desirable or Undesirable)
↓ ↑

NORMS
What is Expected (Should or Should not do)

Finally, cultural objects are recognized by the agreements of how to use or act toward them. Again this may seem trivial, but we tend to respond to a world that we are familiar with and ignore the rest of the world, once we learn what is ‘not a threat’ in our environment. (So you think everybody sees the same thing in front them when they walk out the door, do you?!?!

**Agreement Evolution:**
Babbie suggests that agreements in life are like agreements in games or sports.

There are four steps in the evolution of most agreements:

1) The agreement is **essential** for solving a problem.
2) The agreement is often **arbitrary**. Other agreements may have also dealt with the problem.
3) And yet some agreements are more **appropriate** than others for solving the problem.
4) But most agreements tend to become **reified**, i.e., they acquire an absolute quality about them, like absolute truth.

A football metaphor example.

It is **essential** that there is some agreement for scoring points which decides who wins and who loses. In U.S. football the ball has to be carried or caught over the 100 yard line. In Canadian football the field is 110 yards long. It is really **arbitrary** which field length is used here. But what if the field was 500 yards long. Somehow the game would not be quite the same. So 100 or 110 is more **appropriate** than 500 yards. Then again, there are some U.S. citizens who can’t understand why those Canadian
need an extra 10 yards. These people believe their version of football is somehow more real (*reified*).

OKAY! Now we are ready to apply the two different agreement models to two examples: agreements about 1) where we drive and 2) why we wear cloths.

1. Why do we drive on the right side of the road? First try the system models. Does your first answer represent a belief (what is true), a value (what is good or bad), or a norm (what one should or should not do). Then apply the agreement evolution model. What’s essential about the problem? What’s arbitrary about the agreement solutions? Are some agreements (solutions) more appropriate than others? How have we reified our agreements? HINT: My student soldiers in Europe often complained to me in a question form: “Why do those *crazy* Brits drive on the other side of the road anyway?” The belief-value-norm connection should be pretty simple for this one.

2. Why do we wear cloths? What’s the first answer that comes to your mind? Write that down! Again, lets start with the system model for this question. Ask yourself: does your original answer represent a belief (what is true), a value (what is good or bad), or a norm (what one should or should not do)? Now the evolution model. What was the initial problem for creating the agreement in the first place?

1) Why do we drive on the right side of the road? It’s actually *arbitrary* which side we drive on, but it is *essential* that we have an agreement directing us to one place on the road that is different from on-coming traffic. The English have chosen to drive on the left side of the road and Americans on the right. Both agreements solve the problem. Now you may be able to think up another solution, say what they use in Strangeville \( \uparrow \downarrow \uparrow \). This would prevent most head-on collusions! Wouldn’t it? But then again, what do they do when it comes to making right and left turns. The poor town has spent an awful lot of the tax payers money on extra street lights and elaborate clover-leaf turn structures. So it turns out that the typical American and British solutions are more *appropriate* agreements than Strangeville’s. But remember the American service men/women students that still saw those Brits as kind of loony? Why? Because they had reified the right side of the road agreement. Some how, it was just better!!!! By the way, these agreements are answers to daily living problems. They work. In fact they work for us all no matter what social class we belong to. They are *because* or *if/then* truth *statements*. If you drive on one side of the road you are less likely to run into another on-coming car. Now this system has developed because we *value our lives* and we *value our cars*. So it is good – desirable! We also develop *norms* based on this value. In this case, laws to make sure people stay on the right (or should I say correct in respect for the Brits?) side of the road.

2) Now, let’s look at the reason we wear cloths. Usually students have very quick and immediate answers to this one when asked in my on-site classes. They actually had to think a while before providing an answer for the driving problem. Isn’t that interesting?
Following are the five most common answers from numerous classes that I’ve surveyed (in the order of the most frequent response).

1. To keep warm!
2. It’s against the law to go nude!
3. Because we couldn’t get any work done if we didn’t!
4. For public health reasons
5. Because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God

Now three of these fit the simple definition of Babbie’s belief statements (1, 3 & 4). In and of themselves they fit the category of because or if/then statement. The second answer is a normative statement. It doesn’t tell us why we developed that norm in the first place. The 5th entails both a belief and a normative statement. It suggests a belief that God exists and normative because whatever s/he tells us to do approaches that of a law (a norm recorded by the appropriate civil authority).

Now all of the straightforward belief/truth statements do imply a value. It’s desirable to be warm! Constructive work is somehow better than always attending to one’s bodily urges! Our health is important so we need to be careful that we don’t leave residue behind. Until human beings started to live in large numbers in smaller and congested areas this wasn’t such a problem. All of the straightforward belief/truth agreements (1, 3 and 4) suggest values and equally suggest norms. What is good should be promoted or what’s bad shouldn’t be.

For the students that gave the agreement -- to keep warm! I asked them whether they would wear clothes if it was 80 degrees out. Almost all told me “no!” and ended up giving me one or more of the other agreement answers. Then I asked them what they thought of people who want to walk around nude? A number of students responded with some variation of the word “weird” --- an obvious value statement. Ahhhh! The power of reification. By the way, even though Freud would have supported agreement #3, many anecdotal reports, surveys of people in nudist camps and research reports from the labs of the famous sex scientist, Masters and Johnson have contradicted this idea. People seem to get aroused when they are ready to get aroused. I’ll leave it at that for now.

By the way, most social scientists accept answer #4 as the most logical and empirically based explanation, at least for the lower extremities. Think about diapers!!!!! Are they more necessary for human beings living outdoors or indoors?????? Remember, regardless of the original problems that initiated an agreement, they often end up becoming reified and taking on a separate life (meaning) of their own – so wearing clothes just becomes natural and good “in its own right” and people who want to shed them must somehow be “un-natural!” We’ve placed all of our energy and focus on the value part, often creating new truth myths, and forgetting the original problem historically.
The Rational for this mini-lecture

You will soon discover that most of the agreements in any society can be analyzed using the above two models. Also, the agreement concept should be helpful in distinguishing the major points in each of the three dominant paradigms of sociological theory: symbolic interactionism, structural-functionalism, and conflict theory. Symbolic interactionism basically looks at how agreements come about—the process; structural-functionalism asks how or what existing agreements serve the entire society, if indeed they do so; and conflict theory asks which group benefits most from the existing agreements. Conflict theory suggests that the dominant agreements of any society tend to be the agreements that benefit those who have the most power.

Another Thought Question:
You are at a party and the host is passing around some chocolate covered goodies. Ahhhh! You immediately grab one, assuming you are one of the many chocolate lovers in the larger U.S. culture. Then, with a devious smile on her face, the host asks you “how do you like the chocolate covered crickets?” …At this point you immediately head for the bathroom and up-chuck your snack.

*Now, is this an example of agreement reality or experiential reality?
I would also like you to think about your bodily “feelings/reactions” to the world around you. Often we use the word feelings as a synonym for emotions. Would you look for an explanation of emotions in the field of psychology or the field of sociology? The answer you provide to the agreement/experiential dilemma on the chocolate covered crickets could provide a different perspective regarding the distinction between the two fields.