Module 1 Introduction to Sociology

Lecture 4 Institution, Community and Association

In the last lecture, we examined the relationship between individual and society by reflecting upon the social contract theory and organismic theory of society.

In this lecture, we shall map the conceptual and theoretical contours of institution, community and association.

Institution

Institution refers to an established order comprising rule-bound and standardized behaviour patterns. The term “institution” is widely acknowledged to be used in a variety of ways, and hence often ambiguously.

Institution is widely used to describe:

- Social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated, are sanctioned and maintained by social norms, and have a major significance in the social structure.
- Established patterns of behaviour – institutions are regarded as a higher-order, more general unit that incorporates a plurality of roles.

Let us discuss the above points by providing an example. A school as a social institution embraces pupil roles, teacher roles (which usually include different roles for juniors, seniors and head teachers) and, depending on the degree of autonomy a school has from outside agencies, parent roles and the managerial/inspectorial roles associated with the relevant educational authority. The school as an institution embraces these roles across all the schools that jointly constitute the school system in a given society.

Five major complexes of institutions are conveniently identified.

(a) Economic institutions serve to produce and distribute goods and services.
(b) Political institutions regulate the use of, and access to, power.
(c) Stratification institutions determine the distribution of positions and resources.
(d) Kinship institutions deal with marriage, the family and the socialization of the young.
(e) Cultural institutions are concerned with religious, scientific and artistic activities.

What do we understand by the concept “role/s”?

Role/s

The concept “role/s” assumes that, when people occupy social positions, their behaviour is determined mainly by what is expected of that position rather than by their own individual characteristics.
According to *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (2010), ‘… roles are the bundles of socially defined attributes and expectations associated with social positions.’ For example, an individual school-teacher performs the role of ‘teacher’, which carries with it certain expected behaviours irrespective of her/his own personal feelings at any one time, and therefore it is possible to generalize about the professional role behaviour of teachers regardless of the individual characteristics of the people who occupy these positions.

Role is sociologically significant because it demonstrates how individual activity is socially influenced and thus follows regular patterns. Sociologists have used roles as the units from which social institutions are constructed. For instance, the school as a social institution may be analyzed as a collection of teacher and pupil roles which are common across all schools.

**Emile Durkheim** defines sociology as the scientific study of institutions. In everyday language, we refer to institutions in terms of a heterogeneous array of concrete social forms such as the family, the market, or the state.

**Talcott Parsons**, a major contributor to functionalist sociology, defines an institution as “a complex of institutionalized role integrates (or status-relationships) which is of strategic cultural significance for the social system in question”. Parsons argued that institutions are fundamental to the overall integration of social systems.

The contemporary analysis of institutions has, however, been decisively influenced by the sociological writings of **Peter L. Berger**, whose general sociology was in turn influenced by the philosophical anthropology of the German sociologist **Arnold Gehlen**.

According to **Bryan S. Turner**, institutions are the social bridges between human beings and their natural environment and it is in terms of these institutions that human life becomes coherent and meaningful. Institutions, in filling the gap created by instinctual deprivation, provide humans with relief from the tensions generated by their undirected instinctual drives. Over time, these institutions come to be taken for granted and become part of the implicit background of social action. The social foreground is occupied by reflexive, practical and conscious practices.

**Turner** argues that with modernization, however, there is a process of deinstitutionalization with the result that the taken-for-granted background becomes less reliable, more open to negotiation, culturally fluid, and increasingly an object of critical debate and reflection. Accordingly the social foreground expands, and the everyday world becomes risky and precarious. The so-called objective, sacred institutions of tradition recede, and modern life becomes subjective, contingent and problematic.

According to **Gehlen**, we live in a world of secondary or quasi-institutions. There are profound psychological changes that are associated with these social developments. In premodern societies, human beings had character that was a firm, coherent and definite psychological structure that corresponded with reliable social roles and institutions. In modern societies, people have personalities that are fluid and flexible, like the precarious institutions in which they live. The existential pressures on human beings are significant and to some extent modern people are confronted with the uncertainties of what Peter L. Berger, B. Berger and H. Kellner call *The Homeless Mind* (1973).
While a number of sociologists, such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, have argued that “de-traditionalization” and reflexive modernization are the predominant trends of late modernity, there are counterarguments, both sociological and psychological, to suggest that people in their everyday lives need stable social structures. Putting it succinctly, where there is de-traditionalization, there will also be countervailing movements of re-institutionalization.

Whereas traditional sociology was the study of institutions, the speed of social change in contemporary society and the apparent flexibility of social arrangements have meant that sociologists have sought to avoid treating institutions as if they were things, and have looked more towards social processes – that is towards institutionalization, de-institutionalization and re-institutionalization – than towards stable clusters of roles. Institutions may not be reified, but rather treated as maps by which to read social processes.

Community

The term community is one of the most elusive and vague in sociology and is by now largely without specific meaning. At the minimum it refers to a collection of people in a geographical area.

Three other elements may be present in any usage of the term community.

(a) Communities may be thought of as collections of people with a particular social structure; there are, therefore, collections which are not communities. Such a notion often equates community with rural or preindustrial society and may, in addition, treat urban or industrial society as positively destructive.
(b) A sense of belonging or community spirit.
(c) All the daily activities of a community, work and non-work, take place within the geographical area; it is self-contained.

Different accounts of community will contain any or all of these additional elements.

Many 19th century sociologists used a concept of community, explicitly or implicitly, in that they operated with dichotomies between preindustrial and industrial, or rural and urban societies.

Ferdinand Tonnies, for example, in his distinction between gemeinschaft and gesellschaft, treats communities as particular kinds of society which are predominantly rural, united by kinship and a sense of belonging, and self-contained. We shall elaborate this later while discussing association.

For many 19th century sociologists, the term community was part of their critique of urban, industrial society. On the one hand, communities were associated with all the good characteristics that were thought to be possessed by rural societies. Urban societies, on the other, represented a destruction of community values. Some of these attitudes persist today. However, it became clear that societies could not be sharply divided into rural or urban, communities or non-communities, and sociologists proposed a rural-urban continuum instead, along which sentiments could be ranged according to various features of their social structure.
There was little agreement about what features differentiated settlements along the continuum, beyond an insistence on the significance of kinship, friendship and self-containment. The community study tradition was also important in its development of techniques of participant observation but has lost favour recently, partly because, as national considerations become important, communities become less self-contained, and partly because urban sociologists have become interested in other problems.

**Amitai Etzioni** in *New Golden Rule* (1996) points out that community may be defined with reasonable precision. Community has two characteristics:

(a) A web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (as opposed to one-on-one relationships);
(b) A measure of commitment to a set of shared histories and identities – in short, a particular culture.

**David E. Pearson** (1995) states:

To earn the appellation of “community”, it seems to me, groups must be able to exert moral suasion and extract a measure of compliance from their members. That is, communities are necessarily, indeed by definition, coercive as well as moral, threatening their members with the stick of sanctions if they stray, offering them the carrot of certainty and stability if they don’t.

More recently, the term community has been used to indicate a sense of identity or belonging that may or may not be tied to geographical location. In this sense, a community is formed when people have a reasonably clear idea of who has something in common with them and who has not. **Communities are, therefore, essentially mental constructs, formed by imagined boundaries between groups** (Anderson 2006). An example of this is the nation as a community (for example, ‘Indianness’) and thereby different from other nations even when they could not know personally other members of the imagined community.

The term community continues to have some practical and normative force. For example, the ideal of the rural community still has some grip and we often see town planners aim at creating a community spirit in these designs.

### Association

Association refers to any group sharing common purpose or interest.

**Ferdinand Tonnies**, a German sociologist and a founder of the German Sociological Association, is best known for his distinction between ‘community’ and ‘association’, which he elaborated in *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (1887), translated as *Community and Association*.

**Tonnies** identified three separate branches of sociology:

(a) Pure or theoretical
(b) Applied
(c) Empirical
The distinction between ‘community’ (Gemeinschaft) and ‘association’ (Gesellschaft) constituted the core of his theoretical sociology. These ‘fundamental concepts’ were to guide empirical and applied sociology in the study of the transformation of society from communal to associational relationships. Although they are ideal types, Tonnies wanted to use his pair of concepts to describe the historical transformation of society of Germany from a rural to an industrial society.

Societies characterized by Gemeinschaft (community) relations are homogeneous, largely based on kinship and organic ties, and have a moral cohesion often founded on common religious sentiment. These relationships are dissolved by the division of labour, individualism and competitiveness; that is, by the growth of Gesellschaft (association) relationships. Whereas Tonnies regarded Gemeinschaft as the expression of real, organized life, Gesellschaft is an artificial social arrangement based on the conflict of egoistic wills.

Buttressing further, Gemeinschaft refers to relationships which are spontaneous and ‘affective’, tend to be related to a person’s overall social status, are repeated or long-enduring (as in relationships with kin), and occur in a context involving cultural homogeneity. Characteristically, these are the relationships within families and within simpler, small-scale and pre-modern societies. Gesellschaft refers to relationships which are individualistic, impersonal, competitive, calculative and contractual, often employing explicit conceptions of rationality and efficiency. Relationships of this are characteristic of modern urban industrial societies in which the division of labour is advanced. For Tonnies, such relationships involved a loss of the naturalness and mutuality of earlier Gemeinschaft relationships.

Tonnies argues that social relations are the products of human will; he identified two types of will: (a) natural will (Wesenwille), and (b) rational will (Kurwille).

Natural will is the expression of instinctual needs, habit, conviction or inclination. Rational will involves instrumental rationality in the selection of means for ends. Whereas natural will is organic and real, rational will is conceptual and artificial. These forms of will correspond to the distinction between community and association, since communal life is the expression of natural will and associational life is a consequence of rational will.

References


**Questions**

1. What do you understand by the term ‘institution’?
2. What do you mean by the concept of ‘role’?
3. What is meant by ‘de-traditionalization’?
4. What are the main elements of community?
5. What are the distinctions between community and association, according to Ferdinand Tonnies?
6. How do community and association represent rural and urban world?