UNIT 10: GEORGE SIMMEL: A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to–

- understand how the interaction between groups and individuals brings meaning to the society
- discuss the Concept of Money by Simmel
- explain Simmel's concept of Formal Sociology
- identify objective culture
- understand Simmel's concept of Fashion
- discuss how urban society or metropolitan society is different from traditional society.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

George Simmel was an early German sociologist known for creating social theories that nurtured an approach to studying society, which defied the natural science methods. According to many scholars, he can be regarded as one of the founding fathers of sociology, although his place in the discipline is not always given due recognition.

Simmel was born on March 1, 1858, the youngest in a family of seven children. His father was a prosperous Jewish businessman in Berlin but converted to Roman Catholicism before George was born. He died when his youngest son was still an infant.

After graduating from the Gymnasium in 1876, Simmel enrolled himself at the University of Berlin, where he studied history, philosophy, and psychology. He received his Ph.D. in 1881 based on a study of Kant's philosophy of nature.

In 1885, Simmel became a lecturer at the University of Berlin. *Simmel's* early lectures at Berlin concentrated on philosophy and ethics. He was marginalized within the German academic system due to his Jewish ancestry. Despite his scholarship, he found it difficult to obtain academic advancement. He was not given due recognition in Berlin University, where he taught for 15 years. Only in 1914, Simmel obtained a regular academic appointment, in Strasbourg, far from Berlin. In spite of these problems, he wrote extensively around 200 articles on various topics such as– the nature of association, culture, social structure, the city, and the economy. *Some of his major Publication are:*

- On Social Differentiation (1890)
- The Problems of the Philosophy of History (1892)
- Introduction to the Science of Ethics (1892-1893)
- The Philosophy of Money (1900)
- Soziologie (1908)

Simmel and Max Weber, together with Ferdinand Tonnies, were the major figures in the establishment of Sociology in the German University system in the beginning of twentieth century. Simmel was the first German academics to use the term "sociology" as the title of the book *Soziologie* (1908) where he grappled with purely sociological issues and problems long before others. Although he outlines his general approach to sociological analysis, throughout much of his life Simmel did not attempt to present his own system of thought in an organized fashion to the public. He preferred to publish his materials in journals and periodicals that were not devoted exclusively to scholarly work.

Simmel's analysis on social structures, the city, money, and the modern society have similarities to the analysis of Durkheim (problem of individual and society), Weber (effects of rationalization), and Marx (alienation). Simmel views himself as an independent scholar and an outsider who was not afraid to be ingenious and confrontational.

He considered society to be an association of free individuals, and said that it could not be studied in the same way as the physical world. Therefore according to him Sociology is more than the discovery of natural laws that govern human interaction.

According to him, society is made up of the interactions among individuals, and sociologists should study the patterns and forms of these interactions, rather than quest after social laws. He is also known as a Micro-Sociologist who played a substantial role in the development of small-group research. His ideas regarding the patterns or forms of social interaction that emerge at the micro-level of interaction and how they relate to macro-level phenomena are very relevant in contemporary sociology.

Simmel made clear that one of his primary interests was relationship among conscious actors. He intended to look at a wide range of interactions that may seem unimportant at some times but significantly important at others. One of Simmel's central concerns was the practice rather than the content of social communication. From Simmel's point of view, the sociologist's task is to impose a limited number of forms on social reality, take out commonalities that are found in a wide range of specific interactions.

Some of the unconventional and varied topics that he wrote on are-the structure of flirting, the sociology of adventure, the importance of secrecy, the patterns of fashion, the social significance of money, etc. He is generally seen at the time as not having a systematic or integrated theory of society. In the previous unit we have discussed the Marx's Concept of Alienation. In this Unit we shall try to understand George Simmel's Contribution to Sociology.

10.3 INDIVIDUAL, SOCIETY AND FORMAL SOCIOLOGY

According to Simmel, there is a dynamic or dialectical tension between the individual and the society. Individuals are free and creative spirits, yet they are part of the socialization process. Simmel views that in modern society, individual creates much greater freedom unlike in historical and traditional society where bonds of the community members are strong. However, individuals experience a great sense of isolation within the culture of urban life.

Simmel made assumption about the relationship between individual and society. He states that individuals are both within and outside society. Individuals are both objects and subjects in social interaction. The individual seeks to acquire and display himself through different interactions in society, while society also tries to integrate the individuals through socialization.

People are both creative and conscious individuals. They apply it in several forms of interaction, which exists in social life. In the social life, conscious individuals or groups of individuals interact with one another for a variety of motives, purposes, and interests. People's mind plays a fundamental role in this mutual orientation and social interaction. Human creativity allows for freedom on the part of the individual but, at the same time, it helps to create the structures of objective culture, which constrain and limit this freedom. That is, social interaction become standardized and has patterns to it, which becomes a form of association.

According to Simmel, Society does not have a separate reality of its own. It is a name for a number of individuals, connected by interaction. Society is not a substance; it is not concrete but an interaction of one individual with another. According to Simmel, Society is a lived experience and social forces are not external to individual, but it is individuals, who reproduce society in every living moment through their actions and interactions.

Simmel began his inquiries from the bottom up, observing the smallest units of social interactions and attempting to see how larger-scale institutions emerged from them. In doing so, he often noticed phenomenas

which other theorists have missed. Simmel observed that the number of parties to an interaction can affect its nature. A relationship between two people, which he called a Dyad, will be very different from a three-party relationship, or Triad. Here he was concerned with the form of the group, rather than the content of the interaction. In the dyad, a relationship can be considered relatively straightforward, in that each individual can present themselves to the other in a way that maintains their identity, and either party can end the relationship by withdrawing from it. Various strategies emerge in the triad that change the form of interaction from the dyad. In the triad, there may be strategies that lead to competition, alliances, or mediation. The triad is likely to develop a group structure independent of the individuals in it, whereas this is less likely in the dyad.

Group size increases individual freedom, then to small circle of early or premodern times, which were firmly closed against the neighbouring stranger or in some way antagonistic circles. Traditional society allowed its individual members only a narrow field for the development of unique qualities and self-responsible movements. However, as the group grows in number and extends itself, the group's direct interaction and inner unity loosens, and the inflexibility of the original demarcation against others is softened due to expansion of society. This implies much greater possibility of individual freedom and flexibility, leading to weakening the common culture and older form of association.

Simmel opines that society exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction. What he means is that whenever people gather, something happens, that would not have happened if the individuals had remained alone. For example, people attune themselves to one another in a way that is very similar to musicians tuning their instruments to one another.

Simmel argued that the social interaction does take a specific form. Simmel proposed the study of the social forms that recur in different contexts and with different social contents, rather than quest after social laws. Among the variety of common forms that he studied were superiority and subordination, cooperation, competition, division of labour, and money transactions. These forms can be applied in a variety of contexts to give

social form to different contents or specific drives, e.g. spiritual, acquisitive, defensive, playful, etc. Simmel focused on the key question: How is society possible? In his essay *The Problem of Sociology*, he states that there is no such thing as society as such. Society is just the name we give to the multitude and variety of interactions that operate at any one moment. However, these phenomena of social life do have recognizable forms, and these forms or patterns do guide the behaviour of individuals in a regularized way. His approach and emphasis to study forms to know the human interaction in the society is called Formal sociology.

10.4 METROPOLIS AND THE MENTAL LIFE

George Simmel becomes one of the first academicians to examine the conditions of the modern urban city life, claiming that the city produces conditions of behavior immeasurable to those in the country. While city provides individual with freedom, which is liberating but it also produces artificial and over stimulating conditions that separate the city dweller from his fellow man.

According to Simmel, primary element of the city is the multitude of motivations. He claims that from the indulgence of the various senses, humans are fundamentally changed. Ultimately, in the mass accumulation of bodies and objects, people become emotionless to their surroundings, and lack their personal daily interactions.

People in cities must be able to adapt to changing circumstances and their feeling differs from people in more conservative settings. Instead of reacting emotionally, in metropolitan cities people react primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness.

The city people react with their heads and not their hearts, which he terms as psychological intellectualistic attitude. Life conditions in the city prevents the development of customary ways of living, of deeply held traditions that pattern life. City people must deal with ever-shifting contexts, and therefore, they must adopt what in comparison seems a blasé attitude to protect themselves. Their relations are mediated through impersonal

means– money. Money becomes the measuring instrument among people because anything else would be less universally applicable, in the city. He also use the term 'metropolitan intellectuality' to describe the mindset of the city dweller. Punctuality and calculability are requirements in the complex and extensive metropolitan life.

Simmel notes that growth and the increasing number of people in the city, leads to a brevity and scarcity of the inter-human contacts, as compared to the social intercourse in traditional society, which makes the objective spirit. The individual develops objective personality to deal with circumstances of modern metropolitan society.Simmel viewed,the contextual interaction of individuals and forms of the social life in the city as an 'Objective culture'. Subjective culture on the other hand is the capacity of the actor to produce, absorb, and control the elements of objective culture. In an ideal sense, individual culture shapes, and is shaped by, objective culture creating a life of its own.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: How according to Simmel does group size affect individual freedom?

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Q.2: How according to Simmel does people from Metropolitan Cities react in Social Situations?

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10.5 FASHION

Simmel's essay on fashion, notes that fashion is a form of social relationship. It allows those who wish to conform to do so while also providing

the norm from which individualistic people can deviate. He views that fashion develops in the city. Modern individuals tend to be detached from traditional clutches of social support. Fashion allows the individual to signal or express their own personality or personal values. Simmel noted that fashion provides the best arena for people who lack autonomy and who need support, yet whose self-awareness nevertheless requires that they be recognized as distinct and as particular kinds of beings.

Fashion can be considered to be a part of objective culture.It allows the individual to come into conformity with norms of a group but enable them to produce objective culture that transcends them.It can express individuality, as individual may choose to express some difference from norms. Fashions leads to a new norm, as it is dynamic and has an historical dimension to it. The change of fashion is always being followed by some deviation from older fashion, and possibly degradation of the original norm. Within the fashion process, people take various social roles that play off the decisions and actions of others. In summary, fashion allows personal creative values to be expressed at the same time norms are being followed.

10.6 PHILOSOPHY OF MONEY

The Philosophy of Money perhaps was one of Simmel's most important work and a much-neglected classic. Simmel was concerned with social meaning of money, and how money affects people and society. In modern society, money becomes an impersonal or objectified measure of value. Money denotes impersonal, rational ties among people that are symbolized and institutionalized. The use of money distances individuals from objects and provides the means of overcoming this distance. The use of money allows much greater flexibility and freedom for individuals in society.

Simmel assesses the impact of the money economy on the inner world of actors and the objective culture as a whole. Money, according to him, is linked with social phenomena such as exchange, proprietorship, luxury, skepticism, individual freedom, and style of life, culture, greed and the value of personality. It provides the means by which the market, the economy, and ultimately society, acquire a life of their own that is external to

actor. The significance of the individual declines as money transactions became an important part of society. In a modern society, where money becomes an end in itself, money can cause individuals to become increasingly contemptuous and to have a blasé (indifferent) attitude.

Money makes our interactions more instrumental and calculative in character, which resulted in transformation of human sociality. Money in modern economic exchange can best be understood as a form of social interaction. It has replaced the earlier forms of exchanges and transaction between social actors. Money has transformed human interactions by making it impersonal. It thus helps promote a rational calculation in human affairs. Now, abstract calculation intrudes into areas of social life, dissolving kinship relations, which were earlier the domain of qualitative rather than quantitative assessments.

Money makes it possible to limit a transaction to the purpose at hand and it helps increase personal freedom. Money in the modern world is more than a standard of value and a means of exchange. It is an economic function, which symbolizes and represents the modern spirit of rationality.

10.7 CONCLUSION

George Simmel according to his core enthusiastic followers deserves to be ranked alongside Marx, Weber, and Durkheim in the positions of founding fathers of Sociology. However, efforts to raise his status have been hampered by Simmel's tendency to avoid systematic theory.He wrote in an essayistic style on a variety of topics. Even though his writings are universally acknowledged to be brilliant and insightful, Simmel is most frequently criticized for the fragmented character of his work. He did not devise a systematic sociology on a par with Marx, Durkheim, or Weber. His writings have also been considered to be lacking in the persistent intellectual focus that was required of a major figure. Although he had less to say about social structure or its dynamics than did Marx, Weber, or Durkheim, his contribution is taken seriously in contemporary sociology for his views on urban society and social interaction. Simmel's focus on how social forms emerge became very important for micro-sociology, symbolic interactionism, popularized by

the Chicago School in the mid-20th century. His analysis of the creation of new social forms was particularly tuned into capturing the fragmentary everyday experience of modern social life that was bound up with the unprecedented nature and scale of the modern city.



10.8 LET US SUM UP

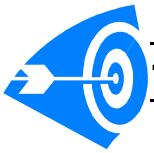
- Society is a lived experience, and social forces are not external to individual, but it is individuals, who reproduce society in every living moment through their actions and interactions.
- Approaches and emphasis to study forms and patterns of human interaction in the society is called formal sociology.
- A brevity and scarcity of the inter-individuals contacts leads to contextual interaction in the city, which ultimately leads to an objective culture.
- Subjective culture is the capacity of the actor to produce, absorb, and control the elements of objective culture.
- Fashion is the individual creativity to express himself or herself in urban society.
- Money is a medium of modern social exchange, which makes our interaction more instrumental and calculable.



10.9 FURTHER READING

1) Abel, T. (1970); *The Foundation of Sociological Theory*; New York: Random House.
2) Abraham, F.; Morgan J. H. (2011); *Sociological Thought*; New Delhi: Macmillan publisher Indian Limited.
3) Ashley, D.; Orenstein, D. M. (1998); *Sociological Theory Classical Statements*; Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
4) Ritzer, G. (2008); *Modern Sociological Theory*; New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education.

5) Wolff, K. H. (1964); *The Sociology of George Simmel*; London: The free Press.



10.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: According to Simmel, Group size increases individual freedom. In case of smaller groups, individual can exercise less freedom but as the group grows in size there is greater possibility of individual freedom and flexibility.

Ans. to Q. No. 2: People in Metropolitan Cities reacts in a rational manner rather than reacting emotionally. According to Simmel, the city people react with their heads and not their hearts.



10.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions: (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What is Formal Sociology?

Q.2: What is Subjective Culture?

Q.3: What is Objective Culture?

B) Long Question: (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: Explain and elaborate the concept of Philosophy of Money?

Q.2: Describe the Metropolis and the objective behavior of individuals in that society.

Q.3: Explain Simmel's view regarding the relationship between Individual and Society.

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