

2. Social Change Introduction

Introduction to Social Change What Causes Social Change?

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Social change is the transformation of culture and social organisation/structure over time. In the modern world we are aware that society is never static, and that social, political, economic and cultural changes occur constantly. There are a whole range of classic theories and research methods available within sociology for the study of social change.

There are four main characteristics of social change (Macdonis 1996): -

➤ **It happens everywhere, but the rate of change varies from place to place.**

For example, the United States would experience faster change, than a third world country that has limited access to technology and information.

➤ **Social change is sometimes intentional but often unplanned.**

For example, when the airplane was invented people knew that this would increase and speed travel. However, it was probably not realised how this invention would affect society in the future. Families are spread through out the country, because it is easier to return for visits. Companies are able to expand worldwide thanks to air travel. The numerous crashes and deaths related to airplanes was not predicted either.

➤ **Social change often generates controversy.**

For example, the move over the recent years to accept homosexual rights has caused controversy involving the military, religion, and society overall.

➤ **Some changes matter more than others do.**

For example, the invention of personal computers was more important than Cabbage Patch dolls.

What Causes Social Change?

There are various causes of social change. These causes include the following: -

➤ **Culture**

Culture is a system that constantly loses and gains components. There are three main sources of cultural change.

The first source is *invention*.

Inventions produce new products, ideas, and social patterns. The invention of rocket propulsion led to space travel, which in the future may lead to inhabitation of other planets.

The second source is *discovery*.

Discovery is finding something that has never been found before, or finding something new in something that already exists.

The third source is *diffusion*.

Diffusion is the spreading of ideas and objects to other societies. This would involve trading, migration, and mass communication.

The 'mass media' is a vital factor in the speed of social change. It permits rapid diffusion of ideas, making these manifest in the private and relaxing environs of the home, where audiences are at their most susceptible

➤ Conflict

Another reason social change happens is due to tension and conflict (between races, religions, classes etc.). Karl Marx thought that class conflict in particular sparked change.

➤ Idealistic factors

Idealistic factors include values, beliefs, and ideologies. From Max Weber's perspective: in essence, values, beliefs, and ideologies have a decisive impact on shaping social change. These factors have certainly broadly shaped directions of social change in the modern world. For example: -

- Freedom and self-determination
- Material growth and security
- Nationalism, e.g. French & English Canadians, English & Irish, Germans & French, Palestinians, Kurdish, Basque separatists and Spanish
- Capitalism: not only the type of economic system, but also ideology, connected set of values and ideas emphasising positive benefits of pursuing one's private economic interests, competition and free markets
- Marxism

Max Weber thought that the expression of ideas by charismatic individuals could change the world. Here are some examples of influential people who caused changes in the world (good and bad): Martin Luther King, Jr.; Adolf Hitler; Mao Tseng Tung; Mohandas Gandhi & Nelson Mandela

➤ The need for adaptation

The need for adaptation within social systems, for example: the development of efficient bureaucracies is an adaptive response of firms to a competitive economic environment.

➤ Environmental factors

Change can be through the impact of environmental factors such as drought and famine. The degree of natural disasters between different countries and regions also lead the different social changes between the countries. The shift from collecting, hunting and fishing to agriculture may have happened because, in some areas, the human population grew too large to be sustained by existing resources.

➤ Economic & political advantage

International shifts in economic or political advantage also have great impacts on social change. For example, 'Globalisation' & 'the WTO' are key factors in our modern society affecting the global economy, political structures and dynamics, culture, poverty, the environment, gender etc.

➤ **Demographic Change**

Change occurs from an increase in the population or human migration between the areas. Compared to the Netherlands and Tokyo the United States has an abundance of physical space. The United States was affected by migration the late 1800's to early 1900's. When masses of people came to America, farm communities started to decline and cities expanded. Human migration between rural villages and big cities in China is causing a great impact on society in China as a whole.

➤ **Social Movements and Change**

Change can also occur from people joining together for a common cause. This is called a social movement. Social movements are classified according to the kind of change they are seeking. Two questions to ask about each type of social movement are: 'Who is changed?' and 'How much change?' More detailed information and discussion will be showed in the later section.

➤ **Consumerism**

Maiteny and Parker have defined globalisation as a system of values based on the assumption that well being is best achieved by accumulating the maximum wealth as quickly as possible (Maiteny and Parker). The myth is that consuming more and more goods and services makes us happy. Increasingly, economic globalisation has led to cultural globalisation, in that our values are being formed by the underlying consumerist ideology: our desires have been manipulated to benefit the capitalist system, with its emphasis on economic growth. The West has adopted values and lifestyles corresponding to neo-liberalism, i.e. consumerism and individualism, which, in turn, lead towards corresponding outcomes, i.e. a high impact on the environment and social alienation. The more this situation progresses, the more the forces of social change react and mobilise.

➤ **The Role of Values and Ethics**

Human values are formed by a similar process and act in a similar manner. Although the word is commonly used with reference to ethical and cultural principles, values are of many types. They may be physical (cleanliness, punctuality), organisational (communication, coordination), psychological (courage, generosity), mental (objectivity, sincerity), or spiritual (harmony, love, self-giving). Values are central organising principles or ideas that govern and determine human behaviour.

Unlike the skill or attitude that may be specific to a particular physical activity or social context, values tend to be more universal in their application. They express in everything we do. Values can be described as the essence of the knowledge gained by humanity from past experiences distilled from its local circumstances and specific context to extract the fundamental wisdom of life derived from these experiences. Values give direction to our thought processes, sentiments, emotional energies, preferences, and actions.

An historical study of certain societies bears out the development of ethics in line with cultural (and individual) development. Gradually, exploitation, injustice and oppression are recognised and rejected - as can be seen with examples such as the abolition of slavery, the banning of racism and the introduction of sexual equality.

Animal exploitation and suffering is increasingly recognised and dealt with as such ethical attitudes develop, but this invariably takes longer - as human identification with animal suffering requires a greater degree of empathy and compassion.

Our ethical foundations (especially in the West) have evolved as a human-biased morality, but the past 20 - 25 years have brought a significant change. Both the animal rights and the Green movements have shifted the focus of attention to include the non-human world.

This perspective is, in fact, not at all new. The ancient, yet living, traditions of Indians and Aborigines show a reverence and understanding for the natural world, which combines a respect for the sustainability of the environment with a care for the individual animal.

It is interesting to note that many individuals who championed causes of human welfare also campaigned against cruelty to animals (for example, William Wilberforce and others who campaigned to abolish slavery; great Victorian reformers such as Lord Shaftesbury, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill; black spokesmen such as Toussaint L'Overture of Haiti; and even Abraham Lincoln).

Progress with animal ethics in one country can also influence other countries. There is without doubt a moral influence from more advanced countries. There is also their role in regional and international meetings. Once the momentum has begun, there is no holding back the tide. We often see the situation where progress in one country takes a long while, then gradually other countries follow suit, then more and more follow. The '100th monkey theory' below is very interesting!

The 100th Monkey Theory
A story about social change
By Ken Keyes Jr.

The Japanese monkey, *Macaca Fuscata*, had been observed in the wild for a period of over 30 years.

In 1952, on the island of Koshima, scientists were providing monkeys with sweet potatoes dropped in the sand. The monkey liked the taste of the raw sweet potatoes, but they found the dirt unpleasant.

An 18-month-old female named Imo found she could solve the problem by washing the potatoes in a nearby stream. She taught this trick to her mother. Her playmates also learned this new way and they taught their mothers too.

Various monkeys gradually picked up this cultural innovation before the eyes of the scientists. Between 1952 and 1958 all the young monkeys learned to wash the sandy sweet potatoes to make them more palatable. Only the adults who imitated their children learned this social improvement. Other adults kept eating the dirty sweet potatoes.

Then something startling took place. In the autumn of 1958, a certain number of Koshima monkeys were washing sweet potatoes ... the exact number is not known. Let us suppose that when the sun rose one morning there were 99 monkeys on Koshima Island who had learned to wash their sweet potatoes. Let's further suppose that later that morning, the hundredth monkey learned to wash potatoes.

THEN IT HAPPENED!

By that evening almost everyone in the tribe was washing sweet potatoes before eating them. The added energy of this hundredth monkey somehow created an ideological breakthrough!

But there is more! A most surprising thing observed by these scientists was that the habit of washing sweet potatoes then jumped over the sea...Colonies of monkeys on other islands and the mainland troop of monkeys at Takasakiyama began washing their sweet potatoes.

Thus, when a certain critical number achieves awareness, this new awareness may be communicated from mind to mind.

Although the exact number may vary, this Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon means that when only a limited number of people know of a new way, it may remain the conscious property of these people.

But there is a point at which if only one more person tunes in to a new awareness, a field is strengthened so that this awareness is picked up by almost everyone!

But perhaps this is not at all surprising when seen in the context of the build-up and release of energies for social change? Once *Pioneers* begin to release the energies, they are imitated, the ‘multiplier effect’ comes into action and the energy is released and made explicit.

➤ Religion

Society develops in response to the contact and interaction between human beings and their material, social and intellectual environment. Ethical views differ greatly from country to country. This is partly because of factors such as culture and religion, as well as the practical circumstances in which people are brought up (e.g. in the case of animal issues whether population are living in close contact with animals, such as farm animals or wildlife, or not).

Religion is all about beliefs - beliefs about creation, purpose, destiny, life, and love. It shapes the lives of believers. What people believe or disbelieve about God and the world affects all aspects of their being, including their day-to-day behaviour. Social movements are all about changing and shaping people’s belief systems. It follows, therefore, that religion can be vitally important to the social change movement. Religion can affect attitudes and ethics, either positively or negatively. For example, a society that is strongly Roman Catholic is likely to be very human-centred, and believe that animals have no souls and that humans have ‘dominion’ over them – whereas a Buddhist or Hindu society is likely to have a strong belief in the ‘oneness’ of life and the importance of protecting and respecting nature and animals.

➤ Technology and Information

As a society develops to higher levels, non-material resources play an increasingly important role as factors of production. This principle is embodied in the concept of the Information Age, an era in which access to information has become a valuable input and precious resource for improving the quality of decisions and the productivity of activities.

Internet technology has an enormous impact on the globalisation of culture and ideas. It has considerably increased the speed of social change. It is also a valuable tool for social change organisations.

Further Resources

🔗 Web Sites

Social Movement Theories

http://husky1.stmarys.ca/~evanderveen/wvdv/social_change/social_movement_theories.htm

How Societies Change

<http://gsociology.icaap.org/chiro.html>

Sociology and Social Change

<http://www.chss.montclair.edu/~hadisb/dev3.htm>

Social Change

http://husky1.stmarys.ca/~evanderveen/wvdv/social_change/sc_course_documents.html

Books

Macdonis, John J., (1997), Sociology, (6th. ed.), Prentice Hall: New