

Syllabus «Models of Explanation in Sociology»

1. Course Description, Pre-requisites, Abstract, Objectives

a. Title of a Course

“*Models of Explanation in Sociology*” is a course for 1st-year Master’s students of the National Research University Higher School of Economics.

b. Pre-requisites

The course does not require any special background and establishes some demands on students’ skills in spoken and written English, and is aimed at those students who have acquired the level of English proficiency not lower than B2 in CEFR scheme. The course materials can be used later in the course of “Sociolinguistics”.

c. Course Type – compulsory.

d. Abstract

The course "Models of Explanation in Sociology" is designed for MA program Linguistic theory and language description (NRU HSE) and covers two interrelated questions:

- what are the main types of theoretical explanation in sociology?
- what kind of empirical evidence is used by supporters of different explanations?

Methodology and the philosophy of science believe that the ongoing debate for decades about the logic and methods of the social sciences is related to differences of strategies and models of theoretical explanation. The course systematically examines the main model of sociological explanation - especially positivist, behavioral, interpretive, ethnomethodological, functionalist and structuralist explanations. It also analyzes the impact that the differences between the models described in the methods of research, the conceptualization of the empirical material, as well as the criteria for evaluation of different theories.

"Field material" for the analysis of the described differences are major debates about the methodology of the social sciences - from the classic controversy "explanation-understanding" to the relatively recent controversy about the extent of how applicable the principles of rationality and uncertainty are to the analysis of human action. The course uses numerous examples of actual research practice, illustrating the various research methods and models of explanation.

2. Learning Objectives

The main learning objectives of the course “*Models of Explanation in Sociology*” are

- to familiarize students with the key concepts and specific tools of explanation in sociology;
- to help them develop effective strategies for organizing their research in this sphere;
- to improve critical thinking and reasoning skills.

3. Learning Outcomes

As a result of the development of the discipline the student should:

- Learn the basic classification of sociological theories and methods of study; learn the basic approaches in the field of philosophy of the social sciences, the key concepts and categories such as "explanation", "interpretation", "paradigm", "model", "relativism", etc.
- Be able to apply various sociological theories (programs) to interpret empirical case studies and construct programs of sociological research, including general questions of methodological choice, research language, and quality criteria of the proposed research.
- Have skills (to gain experience) of recognition and assessment of methods of sociological theorizing and "cognitive styles" representing various schools, trends and relationships to different historical stages of development of sociological thought.

4. Course Plan

Theme 1. Introduction: research programs, models of explanation and logic of sociological inquiry.

The ratio of epistemology, methodology and methods of sociological research. Historical context: Methodenstreit ("The Debate on Method"). Intellectual context: "reconstructed logic" and "logic actually used".

The crisis of the positivist conception of science and the emergence of the doctrine of "scientific revolutions" (Kuhn). Post-positivism in the philosophy of the social sciences. Paradigms and research programs (I.Lakatos) and models of explanation. Leading sociological "paradigm" and the real logic of the study.

Are there any "rules of sociological method?" Explanation, semantic explanation and interpretation. Specificity of scientific explanations. The adequacy and justification of the explanations in non-experimental science. The problem of uncertainty of interpretation.

Theme 2. Social Behaviorism. Naturalistic paradigm. Positivism and the deductive-nomological model of explanations of the social sciences. Naturalist model of rational action.

Sociological version of "positivism." The doctrine of logical positivism and deductive-nomological model of explanation. The model of rational action by C. Hempel ("R scheme") and its criticism. Intentional behavior and paradoxes of practical rationality. The use of naturalistic model of rational action to macrosociological agents: the dilemmas of collective action and public choice, instrumentalism in theories of economic behavior.

Behaviorism and an alternative program of naturalistic explanation of action. The methodological principles of radical behaviorism. B. Skinner and the criticism of the concept of "an autonomous rational actor". Behaviorist model of action and its opponents. From micro-social to macro-social: behaviorist exchange theory in sociology.

Theme 3. Functionalism.

Motives, purposes and functions. Types of functional explanations. Classic functionalism and "illegal" teleology. An example: the functionalist theory of social stratification. Structural functionalism: the theory or methodology? Examples of functionalist explanations: analysis of functions of "political machine" (R. Merton) and "democratic leadership" in the men's military alliances (M. Douglas).

Logical functionalism: T. Parsons on the structure of social action. Can a "normative voluntarism" to solve the problem of interpretation of rational action?

Theme 4. Interpretation.

The core of the interpretive program in social sciences (anti-naturalism, "semantic" explanation of intelligible action, understanding).

P. Winch about the explanatory power of the "rules" in the social sciences. "The concept of social": public following of the rules in "language games." Winch on the impossibility of causal explanation of intelligible action. Criticism of Winch: the principle of uncertainty of rules and the problem of adequacy of an explanation.

"Hermeneutic circle," the uncertainty of interpretation and revision of the classical doctrine of hermeneutics. Formation of the radical "theory of interpretation" (Ch. Taylor, P. Ricoeur, H.-G. Gadamer). The concept of cultural context and cultural studies' model of interpretation of a text as an interdisciplinary paradigm for the social sciences. Criticism of the theory of radical interpretation. Example: constructionist "ethnography of science." Model of "double hermeneutic" (A. Giddens) in cultural anthropology and sociology. Strategy of "multiple triangulation" (N. Denzin). "Thick" and "thin" descriptions in cultural anthropology (C. Geertz)

Ethnomethodological critique of the interpretive program. Specifics of ethnomethodological model of explanation (reflexive use of the "body of knowledge", norms as "achievements", the problematic possibility of understanding situational character of the social order, the principle of "and so on"). Criticism of ethnomethodology: how possible is a "general theory of context?" Analysis of the research practice: to maintain of gender identity ("Agnes case," G. Garfinkel), procedures of conversational analysis (H. Saks).

Theme 5. Structuralism.

On the other side of an action: the structuralist model in social sciences. Structural determinants and macro-social context of action. Formation of the structuralist program: structuralism in linguistics and cultural anthropology. Features of the "strong" structuralist explanations (latency of universal structures, semiotic nature of structuralist explanations, equivalence and mutual transformation of communication systems).

C. Levi-Strauss and the analysis of the communicative sign systems in structural anthropology (myths, primitive classification systems, marriage rules, kinship systems). Binary oppositions as universal unconscious thinking. An example of structuralist explanations in cultural anthropology: the social organization of memory in Nuer (E. Evans-Pritchard).

The structuralist perspective of Marxism and psychoanalysis: "blind forces" of material and sexual reproduction.

Sociological version of structuralism. Example: three concepts of power (Marx, Parsons, Foucault). Structural theory of P. M. Blau: the emergence of social organization and inequality in exchange networks. Criticism of structuralist explanations.

5. Reading List

Required

Manicas, P. T. A realist philosophy of social science: explanation and understanding / P. T. Manicas. – Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 2006. – 225 c.

Macionis, J. J. Sociology: a global introduction / J. J. Macionis, K. Plummer. – 3rd ed. – Harlow: Prentice Hall: Pearson Education, 2005. – 486 c.

Bilton, T. Introductory sociology / T. Bilton, K. Bonnett, P. Jones, et al.. – 4th ed. – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. – 596 c.

Handbook of social theory / Ed. by G. Ritzer, B. Smart. – London: SAGE Publications, 2001. – 552 c.

Optional

Smelser, N. J.

Essays in sociological explanation / N. J. Smelser. – New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968. – 280 c.

International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences: in 26 vol. / Editor-in-chief N. J. Smelser, P. B. Baltes. – Amsterdam [etc.]: Elsevier, 2009. - First edition 2001.

6. Grading System

The final grade will be determined as follows:

- 1) Essay: 80 percent of the final grade maximum;
- 2) Presentation: 20 percent of the final grade maximum

Final grade: 100 percent maximum

7. Guidelines for Knowledge Assessment

Essay Details

Approx. 5-7 pages of text without title list.

Essay Required Form is:

1. CHOOSE the Case for further analysis. Describe it (1-2-3 pages):

- show?
Case?
- a) what is it? What kind of significant Empirical Evidences about this Case you can
 - b) what is the meaning of this Case for people/communities/institutions involved in this
 - c) what is the Social or Cultural context of this Case?

2. SELECT different relevant (!) Theoretical Explanations for this Case.

Two or more Theories are to be used. They have to be taken from *different* Models of Explanation in the Social Sciences.

3. APPLY these Theories to get 2 or more Explanations for the same Case.

1-3 pages of your understanding how these theories can explain your Case.

4. Compare obtained Explanations.

Draw the Conclusion about their Explanatory Power and their heuristics for Empirical Social Research.

As a Case you can take:

1. any kind of Social Action – interaction between people, both traditional or rational actions etc.
2. any Social Institution from classical (like Religion, Army, Professions, Family) to exotic one (like Bribe, Duel, Dowry ...)
3. any Social Practice (almost the Institution but not yet) – like Facebook behavior, Flash Mob, Youth Subcultural Social Innovations.

Please, use Sociological Dictionaries, Encyclopedias and other relevant scientific literature to awaken your Social Imagination... All literature you use must be indicated in the Reference List.

Essay Assessment.

1. Theories Selection. (0-3 of final mark)

Relevance and *adequacy* of theories you select for using is a subject of assessment.

2. Theory Applying for Case Interpretation and Explaining. (0-4)

Your Social Research “Schizophrenia” Skills is a subject of assessment. Please, show *appropriate* and *correct* using of selected theories.

3. Evaluating of Explanatory Power (0-3)

Result you are expecting to show is to evaluate *strengths* and *weaknesses* of different Theoretical Explanations, to show their Complementarity or Conflict, their potential and heuristic for Empirical Social Research.

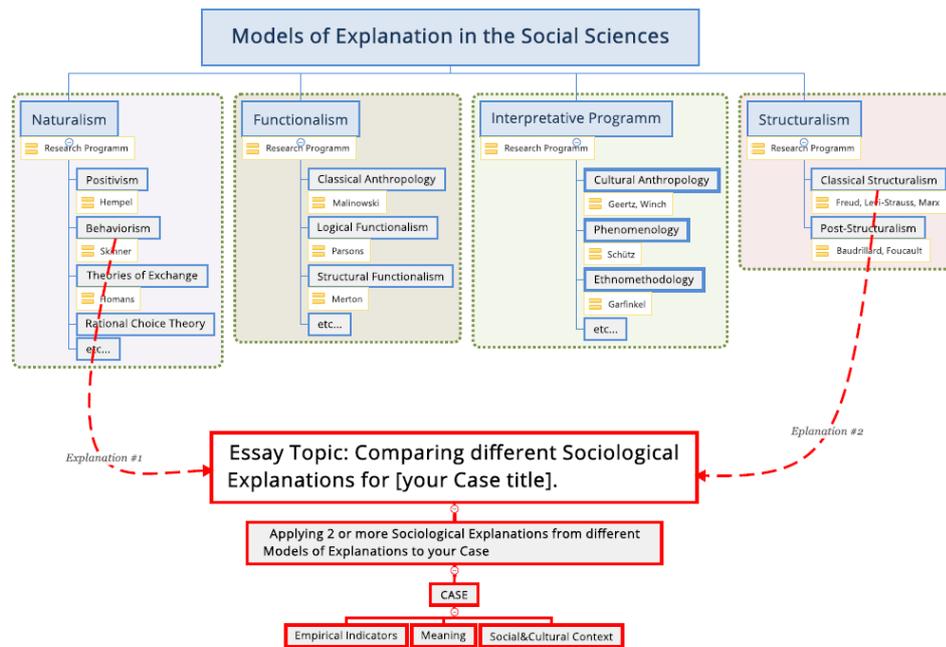
Additional Note about Academic Ethics.

Procedures for Applying Disciplinary Measures for the Violation of Academic Standards for Student Papers at the National Research University Higher School of Economics

1.3. The violations of academic standards regulated by the present Procedures include

- a. Copying
- b. Turning in the same paper twice
- c. Plagiarism
- d. Fraud
- e. Fabrication of data or results

1.3.3. **Plagiarism** refers to the appropriation of another person’s text published in hard copy or electronically without citing it or in cases when the text is cited yet the nature and scope of borrowings cast doubt on whether the paper or one of its main sections have been written by the student independently. Plagiarism may take two basic forms: Repeating another person’s text word-for-word Paraphrasing another person’s text with different words and expressions yet without changing the content of the borrowed text.



Exam Questions

1. The ratio of epistemology, methodology and methods of sociological research.
2. Explanation, understanding and description. Specificity of "scientific explanation."
3. The crisis of the positivist conception of science and the emergence of the doctrine of "scientific revolutions" (Kuhn).
4. Post-positivism in the philosophy of the social sciences. Paradigms and research programs (I. Lakatos) and models of explanation.
5. Leading sociological "paradigms".
6. The doctrine of logical positivism and deductive-nomological model of explanation. The model of rational action C. Hempel ("R schema").
7. Behaviorism as a naturalistic explanation of action.
8. Methodological principles of radical behaviorism. B. Skinner and criticism of the concept of "autonomous rational actor".
9. Behaviorist theories of exchange in sociology.
10. Types of functional explanation in the social sciences. Classic functionalism and "illegal" teleology.
11. Structural functionalism. The model of "strong" functionalist explanations.
12. Logical functionalism: T. Parsons on the structure of social action.
13. The core of interpretive programs in the social sciences (anti-naturalism, "semantic" intelligible explanation of the action, understanding).
14. P. Winch about the explanatory power of the "rules" in the social sciences.
15. Specifics of radical "theory of interpretation" (Ch. Taylor, P. Ricoeur, H.-G. Gadamer). The cultural model of interpretation of the text as an interdisciplinary paradigm for the social sciences.
16. Model of "double hermeneutics" in cultural anthropology and sociology.
17. "Thick" and "thin" descriptions in the cultural anthropology (C. Geertz).
18. Specifics of ethnomethodological model of explanation
19. The structuralist model of human sciences.
20. Features of the "strong" structuralist explanation.
21. C. Levi-Strauss and the analysis of the communicative sign systems in structural anthropology.
22. The structuralist perspective of Marxism.
23. Structuralist explanation in psychoanalysis.
24. Sociological versions of structuralism. Theories of power (Marx, Parsons, Foucault).
25. Structural theory of P. M. Blau: the emergence of social inequality in the organization and exchange networks. Criticism of structuralist explanations.

8. Methods of Instruction

The following educational technologies are used in the study process:

- the instructor lectures the material;
- group discussion and analysis of the results of home reading are used in seminars.

9. Special Equipment and Software Support (if required)

№ п/п	name	the conditions of access
1.	Microsoft Windows 10	<i>Internal nets of the university</i>
2.	Microsoft Office Professional Plus 2010	