

Georg Simmel (1858 - 1918)

- German professor
- society as an invisible world
- Influence of fashion
- forms of interaction
- the role of money in society

1

Society as an invisible world

Since only individuals are physically real, the subject matter of sociology is the invisible world.

What would you guess is meant by "society is an invisible world?"

Culture and social values

2

What are invisible laws or controls in your life?

What about sociability (e.g., how we sit at the table) and flirtation?

Why is this considered part of society's invisible world?

3

The invisible world is perceived through the veil of language, myths, art

Simmel's "invisible" world was based on the socialization we receive (e.g., cultural norms).

4

Simmel stated that:

"Without the interspersed effects of countless minor syntheses, society would break up into a multitude of discontinuous systems."

What does this mean to you and do you agree?

5

Simmel believed there is a basic struggle between the individual and the "invisible" society—each wanting to control the behavior of the other.

Do you agree?
Do you perceive a struggle?

6

Simmel's Answer:

On one hand:

The individual can assess stimuli and decide what to do (free will)

On the other hand:

People reify the society so that it enslaves them (i.e., people don't realize they have a choice)

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Simmel wrote about the history and leaders of fashion? Does it exert any control over you?

(are you a conformer or individualist or both?)

8

Another contribution of Simmel was his focus on forms/patterns of interaction (rather than content).

Forms of interaction include:

1. social geometry (size of a group),
2. social distance (closeness of a person or thing), and
3. strangers.

We'll examine each.

9

1. Social Geometry examines dyads, triads, and larger groups

Would you say increasing group size causes one to experience more or less freedom and independence?

Simmel believed larger group size allowed for more independence

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Simmel proposes that:

- As size increases individuals feel more separated
- In large social structures one can feel alone, isolated

11

Simmel believed that people in groups are ruled by the lowest common denominator.

The higher forms of intellect and morality are always individual products.

Do you agree?

12

2. Social Distance:

The value of a relationship or thing may be determined by its social distance (closeness to the person/thing).

Something far out of reach or very hard to obtain becomes less valuable.

Something easy to obtain is also less valuable.

13

If it is somewhat out of reach but obtainable, then it is most valuable.

Do you agree?

14

3. Simmel discusses the "stranger" as providing a unique social interaction.

The stranger is someone who is neither too close nor too far from the group members.

15

Strangers have a more objective view of group activities.

Group members feel more comfortable expressing their confidences to a stranger.

Do you agree? Provide an example.

16

Simmel also wrote of:
The role of money in society

Money can redefine the value of things.

How can this be?

17

Money serves both to create distance from objects and to bring them closer.

Unless one has money most objects can't be obtained.

With money they can.

18

Do people themselves
become more or less
important with a
money economy?

How are personal
relationships affected?

19

With the use of money
there is no longer a need
to know people.

Encounters are more
impersonal (such as with
cashiers vs crafts people).

20

The End

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21