Framework to Consider a Social System: Derived from Research

Experience on Education and Learning Systems in Japan

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Abstract

Recent researches require international and interdisciplinary collaboration. In order to make such collaborative works effective, a definite research framework is mandatory. This paper proposes a research framework for both horizontal (internationally comparative) and vertical (historical and developmental) research on a social system of a (any) field. 1: A social system should be considered not only on an institution (ex. legal system) level, but also on a custom level that constitutes actual reality. The fundament of the both levels is actions by individual people. 2: This social system should be analyzed from four dimensions: a) characteristics of a nation, b) demographic patterns, c) governmental policy, and d) nature/technique complex that the country or the period has. These are collection of four systems that determine an individual’s actions: a) personality system, b) biological system, c) role expectation system, and d) economic system of the area or the period an individual lives in. They are made up of two axes: value versus physical reality and self versus environment, and are all inter-influenced upon.

Purpose of this Paper

I have been engaged in the research of education and learning systems in Japan from a sociological viewpoint and historical and international comparison, and have reached a potential framework to consider a segment of society as a social system in general: political, economical, educational, etc. This paper aims to propose a framework that can be applied to research of any social system in general, of a country or countries, giving examples taken from education and learning systems in Japan, since both are the fields that I have been mainly engaged in. I have an opinion that this can apply to research on any social system, both by horizontal – international – comparison and by vertical – historical and developmental – comparison, in any country or countries.

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Two Levels of Total Social Systems

Individual’s Action as Base of a Social System

As the very fundamental basis of a social system for a country, I lay actions performed by individual people.

Each and every person performs many actions everyday. A person may perform some kind of action repeatedly. This patterned action becomes his/her habit. Habit is personal, so long as it remains to an individual only and does not influence upon another individual’s actions.

Custom Level of a Social System

However, some actions begin to be repeated by a group of people, and then they begin to restrict the actions to members of a group. The members feel obligated to follow the action pattern so long as they want to remain as members of the group, and the deviance from the action pattern is penalized by various kinds of sanctions: such by being spoken ill of or by shrugging the shoulders in softer cases. In this way action patterns play a vital role to restrict people’s movement to push the members into a certain pattern. There is no definite regulation about it, but it has the power to mold members’ actions into a certain pattern. This is then no longer personal, but societal. It is a collection of individuals’ actions that have definite functions to work as a norm. Nobody knows, however, when and where the action pattern originated. Who and how cannot be clarified either. This constitutes a custom level of a social system. When a sanction is mild, and the molding power is weak, it is called folkways. When the molding power is stronger and is usually connected with evaluation, such as good manners or bad manners, decent or indecent, it is called mores. “Folkways” are flexible and changeable according to what people think and “mores” gives stronger measures to the actions of people. But in both levels, called “custom”, the molding power is weak and the content is changeable.

Ronald Door suggested (Door, 1984) that the samurai class male people’s literacy rate was 100 percent in the so-called Edo Period (1603–1867) even though it was believed that this period was pre-modern and literacy rate on the whole was very low. Those who failed to become literate could not remain in the Samurai class, though Samurai was originally a warrior class whose competency should have least relationship with literacy. Women’s literacy rate was also high in this social class.

Institution Level of a Social System

Folkways and mores gradually become to take on a more definite shape. I will call this stage level “institution”. Once the institution is established, it compels people to follow whenever they reached a certain condition.

In this stage the content of the action pattern that is compelled to people is rationally considered and systematically organized by certain definite procedures, such as approval by the Parliament or presidential order, etc. They regulate the action patterns by a written form. Once this is established, it cannot vanish or be changed easily as its amendment needs the same definite procedures. The kind of sanction
that should be given against deviance and the process that should follow when a certain sanction is given are also clearly detailed.

Institutional level concerning literacy in the Edo Period would have been the Shogun’s order, if there was any. Although the fact tells us that there should have been pressure to bring about the Samurai class to a 100 percent literacy rate, it is not clear whether there was such formal order or regulation. Literacy was achieved as a custom.

The first definite description of such was so-called Education System Order in 1872 announced by the Grand Council of State soon after the Shogunate System was replaced by a new government system. This Education System Order claimed that there should be no illiterate people in any local area or in any family, and this idea was completed as an Imperial Re- script on Education in 1890. The present-day new school system started in 1947 when the Fundamental Law of Education and the School Education Law were enacted. They prescribed compulsory education up to grade 9, and this is still unrevised.

Social Systems Are Made up of Two Levels

When we consider a social system, for example, an educational system, we should look closely at two levels: the custom level and the institution level. We tend to consider, or compare, only the institution level, as this is easier to look into because there are often documents. Beside the institution level, however, the custom level is playing a greater role and should be paid closer attention to fully understand the social system of a country or a certain period. The custom level goes sometimes against the institution level and this antagonism often brings confusion within society. I propose that we should not forget to look into the institution level, but also the custom level when we observe a social system.

I will now give an example of education in Japan.

In the institution level, the literacy rate was 100 percent between 1872 and 1890 as I showed above, but in the custom level the attendance even in elementary school reached 90 percent later in 1900. Currently, compulsory attendance is up to grade 9 since the 1945 new education law − institution level − in the custom level, however, parents and students are feeling grade 10 to 12 education is de facto compulsory. More than 97 percent attend high school. Besides schools, most students go to juku, which is private lessons in a school style format, which is however officially not counted in curriculums.

To summarize, there are great discrepancies between the custom level and the institution level. In the examples of attendance given above, between 1872 and 1900, the institution level surpassed the custom level, while nowadays the custom level greatly surpassed the institution level.

Here, I am explaining taking only an education and learning system as this has been my field of investigation. I suggest however that both institution level and custom level should be observed to better understand any social system of a country or a period.

Four Determinants of a Social System

Two Axis and Four Dimensions that Determine the Individuals’ Actions

I mentioned that Individual’s action is the very fundamental basis of the social system. What then is the basis of individuals’ decision to select or not to select a particular action? There are two axes to it: “self” versus “environ-
ment” and “value” versus “physical reality.”

These two axes form four dimensions that determine an individual to select or not to select an action.

The dimension made by crossing “self” and “value” is a personality dimension of an individual since personality is a collective expression of individual’s wishes.

The dimension made by crossing “self” and “physical reality” is a biological dimension of an individual. The biological reality of an individual determines what action an individual can take, for example, an individual can act only while he/she is alive. A male person cannot bear a baby. The elderly cannot learn new matters in general as quickly as the young.

The dimension made by crossing “environment” and “value” is role expectations. What other people expect an individual to act determines the person’s real action. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) pointed out even the “Pygmalion Effect” in the educational field. People internalize the expectations of others around them especially of their superiors and behave in the way that they are expected to.

The dimension made by crossing “environment” and “physical reality” is largely related with the economic (in its broader sense) situation of the area a person lives in. Even if an individual wants to do something, unless he/she has environmental conditions that enable the action, he/she may not be able to do it.

In addition each of these four dimensions constitutes itself a system and the content of these four systems or dimensions is constantly being reformed through the influence of the other dimensions.

Four Sub-Systems that Determine the Total Social Systems

I have written about the total social system, including both custom and institution levels. It is a collection or accumulation of individuals’ actions. Therefore, the total social system also should be made-up of four sub-systems, which are the collections of the four dimensions of the individual level.

The collection of personality dimension makes a character of a nation.

The collection of biological dimension makes a demographic pattern of a nation.

The collection of role dimensions appears typically as governmental policy of a country.

The collection of economic dimensions

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Arrows show the direction of influence.
around an individual or in the area an individual is in makes a nature and technique system of a community or a county, which typically extends to an economic system of a country. Techniques are useful utilization of naturally existing characters of physical materials.

I will explain these more in detail by giving examples.

National Character of the Japanese

There are also many sayings that such a nation is such and such. The Germans are ......, the French are ......, the Russians are ......, the Americans are ......, the Japanese are ......, the Mexicans are ...... Many international investigations show that each country's people has different characteristics when they are observed as a collection. I have once summarized the character of the Japanese people in comparison with the North Americans by the word, 1, stability by belonging against stability by functioning, 2, inclusive and overall authority against analytical and restricted authority, 3, an hour unit behavior against 15 minutes unit behavior, 4, understanding culture against expressing culture, 5, 100 percent culture against 80 percent culture (Sekiguchi, 1997, pp. 293–305).

These value system items influence upon the actual performance in educational and learning systems, while the actual performances in educational and learning systems also influence upon the value system items. They are interchangeably influencing upon each other and are constantly restructuring each other.

(Kokudo Kotsusho, 2008, Chart and Table I−1–2–1, Original data are from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research)
Demographic Pattern of the Japanese People

The demographic structure of Japanese people has changed and is changing drastically. I have shown changes in the previous charts.

The parts of the population that are involved in the learning activities have changed drastically according to the change of the demographic pattern. It has naturally affected the ways the learning system was shaped.

Japanese Governmental Policy

In the 1950’s, the target of education was young people, and its aim was to raise the majority of them to become able functional working people. Education of students by teachers was solely the method. By 2000, gradually the idea of life-long learning was introduced. A new law concerning life-long learning (the so-called Lifelong Learning Promotion Law) was enacted in 1990. The necessity of adult learning was proclaimed. The emphasis is then not teaching, but learning, following the needs according to the changes in society. The idea of self-directed learning has been introduced.

My proposal for the concept of learning in the next stage, seeing the increase of elderly citizens, is not to get or add something (new ability, knowledge, technique) but to postpone, by efforts, as late as possible, the time to reach inability and non-functionality. These are the natural fate of human beings when they live long. This idea should be added in the concept of “learning” (Sekiguchi, 2005, pp. 113–114).

Nature/Technique Situation of Japan

Geographically, Japan is surrounded by water. Natural resources and land suitable for agriculture are limited. If I take examples of food, Japan needed intensive cultivating of land to produce food, including deliberate transportation networking within the long north–south stretched borders and also dependence on other countries. This helps determine the content the Japanese should have mastered.

As networking became so complicated, the economic system became highly organized with documentations. They needed high literate skills with everything recorded. To function in this society, people have to be equipped with these skills. Therefore, high level literacy and exactness has been demanded of every individual. Otherwise he/she cannot get a job to survive.

Recently computer skills and surveillance management are necessary as networking has become so complicated. A local community demands to write a report when citizens use a local facility, and I hear a complaint that only those who can write a report with a computer can use a public learning facility, so elderly people are de facto expelled (Ookawa, 2008). This is an extreme case, but economic situations determine what content people should have mastered.

An impressive investigation on education from this approach was Harbison and Myers (1965), who analyzed the relationship between economic development and higher education. I read it in the 1960’s when Japan was an economically under-developed country. They classified Japan in the first class category because
of our higher education enrollment rate. We threw doubt on this, but the following economic development proved this contained actual fact. OECD has been paying close attention to education although it is an organization focused on economic development. This approach is necessary and effective.

These four sub-systems constitute, like four dimensions for individual actions, also systems themselves and influence one another, and are constantly reforming their contents and constructions by one another’s influence.

Proposals

Research nowadays has become beyond individual scholars, but is now conducted by a group of interdisciplinary and/or international researchers. In order to view a social system as a whole, an inclusive framework to control cooperative research has become important. I propose, therefore research framework to look into a total social system of a country or countries, whatever the focusing topic is. I have given here examples of education, but this can be applied to any other field of social systems. It can also be applied to both horizontal (internationally comparative) and vertical (historical and developmental in a country) research.

I suggest the following. Suggestion 1: A total social system should be considered not only on an institution (ex. legal) level but also on a custom level. Suggestion 2: This total social system should be analyzed from four sub-systems: a) characteristics of a nation, b) demographic patterns, c) governmental policy, and d) nature/technique complex that the country has. These sub-systems are made up of two axes: value versus physical reality and self versus environment, and are all inter-influenced upon, including the focusing topic.

References


社会制度を考える枠組み:

日本の教育・学習制度に関する研究経験から

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要 約

近年では、研究のスピードも速くなり、大規模になっているので、共同研究、それも国際的かつ学際的共同研究が盛んである。背景が異なった人々が効果的に共同研究するためにには、研究の枠組みがしっかりとしていないわけではない。本稿は、ある特定の領域の社会制度の比較研究を学際的・国際的に行うに当たっての研究の枠組みを提案するものである。これは同時に歴史的研究にも充当できる。提案の第1は、社会制度の解明には次の２つのレベルを見る必要がある。社会制度は、いかなる領域のものであっても、法的規定に代表されるような論理的・明文化されたインスティチューションレベルと、明文化されていないが確実に現実を構成するカスタムレベルがある。これらはともに、個々の行為者の行動の集積から成立する。第2は、社会制度は、a）国民性、b）人口構造、c）自然・技術・経済、d）政府による政策の4つの象限の影響からの解明が必要である。これらの象限は、個々の行為者の行動を規定するa）パーソナリティシステム、b）生物系としてのシステム、c）構成された環境の経済システム、d）役割期待のシステムの集合体である。これらは、価値対物理的現実、自己対環境という2つの軸の交差によって構成されており、それぞれがシステムを構成すると同時に、相互に影響し合いながら、行為や社会制度に影響を与えている。

Key Words (キーワード)
custom level（カスタムレベル）、economic structure（経済構造）、education/learning system（教育・学習制度）、framework to international and interdisciplinary research（国際的・学際的研究の枠組み）、framework to social system research（社会制度の枠組み）、governmental policy（政策）、institution level（インスティチューションレベル）、Japan（日本）、physical reality（物理的現実）、population structure（人口構造）、role expectation（役割期待）、value（価値）

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