

Chapter 8

Investigating Human Consciousness Through Florian Znaniecki's Humanistic Sociology and Memoir Method

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ABSTRACT

In the search for social approaches that could contribute to deepening our understanding of issues related to what has been called the Age of the Anthropocene, the conceptual framework and memoir method of humanistic sociology are well worth considering. According to Znaniecki, memoirs (including letters, autobiographies and diaries), as well as personal statements on specific topics, were very valuable sources of data for humanistic sociological analysis. The humanistic conceptual framework and methods have proved to be well suited to investigating how individuals of different cultural communities, as well as those of the Anglo-Celtic majority, viewed the reality of cultural and linguistic diversity in Australia and how this affected their sense of identity. Examples from Australian research on the issue of individuals' sense of cultural identity are presented and analysed to show how the approach can provide insights into the consciousness of participants.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter revisits Florian Znaniecki's humanistic sociology and memoir method, particularly as it has been used in contemporary educational research. It begins with an outline of Znaniecki's development of this research approach and Smolicz's

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extension of it in Australia. Then follows a discussion of the principle of human consciousness and its accompanying analytical concept of the humanistic co-efficient, together with the method of memoir, or personal statement, collection and analysis. Finally, various examples from Australian studies in education are presented to highlight the use of humanistic sociological concepts and method for the purpose of demonstrating how they might be useful in investigating issues related to the age of the Anthropocene.

Anthropocene was the term coined by Crutzen and Stoermer in 2000 to describe what they regarded as a new geological epoch. The term was chosen to reflect their belief that the earth in all its dimensions - geological, biological, meteorological, as well as social and cultural - had reached the stage of being dominated by human beings. The domination of humans had become so overwhelming that they represented a threat to the earth as a whole and to themselves as its inhabitants (Lovbrand, Beck, Chilvers, Fortsyth, Hedren, Hulme, Vasileiadou, 2015).

Since then, the concept has attracted much debate and controversy, as well as practical initiatives, such as Responses to Environmental and Societal Challenges for our Unstable Earth (RESCUE). The authors mentioned below were all associated with the Task Force established by RESCUE specifically to address the role of social sciences and humanities in discussions on global environmental change (Palsson, Szerszynski, Sorlin, Marks, Avril, Crumley, Weehuizen, 2013). Underlying this approach was the conviction that competing understandings of the entangled relations between natural, social and cultural worlds could lead to important new alternative approaches (Palsson et al., 2013).

For some, the most important task was to identify the key issues that should be the focus of a multidisciplinary approach to the predicted challenges of the Anthropocene age (Palsson et al., 2013). Others have been more concerned to highlight ways in which humanities and social sciences can contribute most effectively to the conceptualization of what the key issues actually are. In their judgment, a pressing analytical task for the social sciences relates to exposing and challenging the underlying cultural and social assumptions that inform how we collectively make sense of and respond to the changing environment (Lovbrand et al., 2015).

Human life on earth depends on the interplay between all the different elements of our planet – the geological, biological, meteorological, social, cultural and human parts. Only one of these, however, has the capacity to be aware of what is happening to the whole system. As Palsson et al. (2013, p. 11) put it, we as human beings, "... are the only part that can be held responsible..." This explains why the humanities and social sciences, as disciplines focused on human beings, need to contribute to research which can provide greater understanding of how far individuals in communities around the world are aware of the key issues in environmental change and how they think the problems should be dealt with.

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