

Sociological Diagnostics and Sociological Examination as Instruments of Social Changes in Russian Society

Yury Grigoryevich Volkov^{1*}, Igor Aleksandrovich Guskov¹, Valery Vasilyevich Kasyanov², Vladimir Aleksandrovich Kirik¹ and Aleksandr Eduardovich Stradze³

¹Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russia

²Kuban State University, Krasnodar, Russia

³Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia; infoipk@sfnu.ru

Abstract

Background/Objectives: The public function of sociological diagnostics and sociological examination is stabilization of the economic and social order. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** The methodological basis of the study was formed by the principles of multidimensional research aimed at holistic understanding of social reality and conceptualization of scientific knowledge on the meta-theoretical level as well as by the cognitive strategy of the neoclassical model of scientific research. To explore the scope of the research, we used the methodology of a structural-functional approach. **Findings:** Sociological examination is not a sociological study by itself as its objectives are generally set by the activities of government authorities and other social institutions, public interests of citizens and objectives of the social policy. This means that the examination includes a sociological study carried out according to the logic of the tasks implementation. The examination should comply with three conditions: to form the rationale for the existing social and legal norms to develop evaluation criteria for the authorities' activities and to determine the degree of negative effects in different areas of public life. For example, developing the rating of Russian governors, it is necessary to include not only the parameters of economic growth, but also indicators such as the development of social infrastructure, the density of school, nursery schools, medical institutions, the average annual income of people living in a particular region. One can use specific indicators such as unemployment rate, the degree of social inclusion, social awareness, the quality of cooperation between the regional authorities and public organizations. **Applications/Improvements:** Russian society is seriously concerned about possible collapse and de-modernization, that's why it is necessary to create a new social project, different from that one based on the communist doctrine.

Keywords: Public Function, Sociological Diagnostics, Sociological Examination, Sociological Model, Social Project

1. Introduction

It is believed that the public function of sociological diagnostics and sociological examination is stabilization of the economic and social order, that the Russian society is serious concerned about possible collapse and de-modernization, and that it is necessary to create a new social project, different from that one based on the communist doctrine. The sociological diagnostics emerged as

early as the 1960s–1970s, despite the fact that the national sociological scientific school of thought was under constant, low or high, political pressure. At present moment, the society is considering the concept of a social project which combines the ideas of re-modernization and social stability. Sociological monitoring may include diagnostics and examination levels, being the preparatory and projective stages of the research, respectively.

*Author for correspondence

2. Literature Review

The theoretical aspects of the research methodology were first investigated in the works by M. Weber¹, E. Durkheim², K. Mannheim³, H.-G. Gadamer⁴, A. Schutz⁵, M. Heidegger⁶, T. Parsons⁷, P. Bourdieu⁸, N. Luhmann⁹, etc. The papers by M. Weber, K. Mannheim, R. Merton¹⁰, J. S. Mill¹¹, V. Pareto¹² consider methodological issues dealing with the validity of scientific knowledge. New social reality of the Russian society and the methodology applied to its study are presented in the works of Yu A. Zubok, M. K. Gorshkov, Zh.T. Toshchenko¹³, V.A. Yadov.¹⁴

3. Methodology

The methodological basis of the study was formed by the principles of multidimensional research aimed at holistic understanding of social reality and conceptualization of scientific knowledge on the meta-theoretical level as well as by the cognitive strategy of the neoclassical model of scientific research. Working on this article, the authors relied on general sociological theories by Max Weber¹, Emile Durkheim¹⁵, Talcott Parsons⁷, Pitirim Sorokin¹⁶, etc., as well as on the middle-range theories by Charles Cooley¹⁷ and Robert Merton¹⁸. To explore the scope of the research, the authors used the methodology of a structural-functional approach, which considers it, firstly, in terms of social functions performed, and, secondly, in terms of structural characteristics.

4. Findings

Russian sociological science, for example Zh. T. Toshchenko¹³, states that there are new trends in the development of Russian sociology. Firstly, this occurred due to the fact that sociology has entered the field of management. In this context the sociological diagnostics acquires the managerial aspect, i.e. it provides sociological information to the management bodies. Secondly, the dissemination of sociological information through the media increases the importance of sociological diagnostics as a significant argument in the political struggle, economic competition, when promoting certain products and services.

Zh T. Toshchenko states that some news concepts have emerged over the analyzed period, for example, such as the knowledge society, turbulent society, sociology of life. However, he notes that that many issues are considered with a certain structuralist bias that reduces the predictive

function of sociology. Defining new subject matters of research and searching for new methodologies require sociological examination, representing the socio-critical and socio-projective functions of sociology. It becomes an incredibly important issue to reduce the functional illiteracy of the Russian society, which manifests itself in the inability to think systematically, make analytical conclusions, adopting the patterns of mosaic thinking.

Sociological diagnostics detects a discrepancy between tasks the society has to solve and real socio-economic and socio-psychological conditions. The examination, being an assessment procedure aimed at forecasting and designing social processes, is implemented in the context of new social phenomena. Zh. T. Toshchenko emphasizes that when ranking the urgent problems, the most important are the civil and political relations, ethnic and religious issues, modification of forms and methods of social, political and economic protests.

Thus, the sociological diagnosis is seen as a set of empirical and applied procedures to obtain industry-specific knowledge, while the sociological examination is a procedure associated with the sociological community giving a scientifically-based evaluation of the current situation and related consequences of managerial decisions. It should be noted that since the development trend of Russian sociology as an independent social science, implies the coherence of macro and micro sociological theory, subjective and objective approaches to the understanding of the social reality, the correlation between activities and circumstances becomes the basic principle for sociological procedures¹³.

Sociological diagnostics as a method of defining, evaluating and analyzing the current state of social facilities aims at clear understanding of the objectives and limits of the implementation of social diagnosis. However, one should keep in mind the final outcome. Sociological diagnosis can be limited to a practical recommendation or become the basis for social programming and social planning.

Researchers working in the field of social management¹⁹ note that social diagnostics as a form of studying the formation process of the particular system grants a sociologist with a status of a social doctor diagnosing a disease while its treatment is assigned to people actually working in this field.

With this in mind, the social diagnosis is understood as practically oriented sociological knowledge, reconstructing the state of the object with a particular goal of stabilizing or changing it. Methods applied (systematic,

normative and situational) are based on the principles of classical sociology as they provide a description and analysis of structural and institutional parameters of the activities of the object studied.

At the same time, it is also possible to apply the situational method (individualization), which defines the state of the social object as a unique, non-recurring one and which determines the specific features of its functioning. The following approach criticizes the normativism. At the same time, it results in a rising problem of selecting the research methodology. In other words, a sociologist should give up the belief in a universal sociological methodology and work with the object of study according to the logic of its development and functioning.

From our perspective, these include the methods of social micro-level such as the framing theory, social role method and the method of social interaction. It is believed that the studied objects of the sociological analysis may have informal social norms and attitudes and a researcher, as A. I. Prigozhin²⁰ states, should recognize these norms and specific features, describing the situation by the methods of qualitative analysis.

First of all, the sociological diagnostics has a socio-cognitive function, which implies increasing public awareness of the sociological processes and phenomena occurring in it. In the situation of a poorly developed social competence, which leads to a massive cognitive dissonance when assessing and analyzing social phenomena, the role of sociology is reduced to the diagnostic function, which enables to determine what is significant or insignificant, the main and side lines of the social development. Ultimately, the public attitudes in the Russian society show that people care about the type of society they live in and the socially just and rational society is seen by the majority as the social ideal.

The socio-cognitive function of the diagnostics enables the society and sociologists to find connections between two seemingly contradictory concepts: “justice”, related to the mentality, traditions, archetypes and “soundness” defined by rationally constructed public relations. The socio-cognitive function is also linked with its derivative function: the function of social control which is extremely important in terms of management of emergency situations and increasing social risks.

Socio-diagnostic knowledge makes different groups of population capable of social control without substituting the relevant state authorities. Considering the prospects for the strengthening of the civil society in Russia, we

should name the justifiability and forms of social control as one of its prerequisites. The emphasis on human rights organizations may be to some extent explained by the fact that the social control in the Russian society is monopolized by organizations focused on receiving grants, on the other hand – the knowledge of administrative and legal mechanisms only makes it impossible to adequately assess the results and consequences of decisions taken in the state and public policy.

The structure of the sociological diagnostics is important from the position of methodology, because it determines the effectiveness of a particular sociological method. Except for the situational diagnostics, which we cannot positively call a sociological one, the system diagnostics allows obtaining new knowledge and performs a function of pre-expert assessment. The structure of sociological diagnostics includes a model of a phenomenon described, the tools for explaining the studied social facts and procedures and the interpretation of the results of the diagnostics.

The problem of modeling in the social diagnostics is determined by our understanding what a model is. We define a model as a simplified, if we can put it this way, packaged knowledge, carrying certain limited information about the object (phenomenon) which reflects its various properties. The model can be viewed as a special form of information encoding. Unlike traditional coding, when we know all initial information and translate it into another language, the model, whatever language it may use, also codes the information people have not previously had. We can say that the model contains potential knowledge that people who are studying it can obtain, present and use for their practical needs²¹.

If we consider the model referentially, that is comparing it to some real fact or phenomenon beyond its description, we should exclude the possibility of self-reference, in other words, a model cannot represent itself. A model only resembles or looks like an object, being constructed in such a way that its qualities and properties are in accord with the purpose of the sociological diagnostics. Despite the ambiguity of the concept “model”, there are effective theoretical limitations which stem from the fact that the model is understood as an analogue of an object and the object is seen as an object. In the sociological diagnostics, a model is used as an analogue of the object, if the purpose of the diagnostics is only explaining, describing and stating processes or phenomena. As an example, the model is used in the normativist variant of the sociological diagnostics, which aims at constructing

the system of efficient operation and development of the diagnosed object.

The difference between analogical and exemplary models lies in the fact that the analogical model is not intended for expanding knowledge and provides a schematic outline of the qualities and properties studied by sociology. The exemplary model represents an ideal sample. And since its purpose is not only to identify the blocking factors, but also development factors of the studied system, the encoding form represents the ideal samples and certain parameters which meet /fail to meet the development standards. That is why modeling, being the first level of the sociological diagnostics is linked to the normative and systematic methods of research.

The modern system analysis that became most popular in the 1950–1960s²² is connected with the postulate of the integrity of the system subjected to the sociological diagnostics. Therefore, the priority tasks in modeling are to describe the studied social phenomenon according with focus on its elements and to clearly identify the links between the elements of the system. Here a researcher takes into account the degree of emergence which implies that the system properties do not equal the properties of the system elements.

When using the method of system analysis to study the models, we need to describe how the system functions, its objectives and current feedback. An example of such a model is a situation in the economy, associated with inflation expectations when the feedback influences the functioning of the system (economic life), the diagnostics is carried out by measuring inflation expectations as a factor of change in the economy. In this regard, we should remember that in the sociological diagnostics modeling is linked with the issue of coherence, compatibility of different ways of coding sociological information.

It is clear that when studying processes in the consumer market or political expectations (calculating a political rating), the sociological diagnostics cannot fully operate the codes used for the social and organizational diagnostics. The latter expresses it in the language of marketing behavior, while the second one is concerned with the electoral preferences and political expectations; the organizational diagnostics is associated with the concepts of organizational structure and structural relationships.

In the sociological diagnostics modeling is associated with difficulties when describing what we call unstable social conditions. According to L. E. Blyakher²³, the social situation in Russia in the last decade, consistently described

as a gap, break, chaos, calls for adopting methodological basis for studying crisis situations with the criteria appropriate for them. To achieve this, one must include the category of social risks, pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis states of social institutions. In any case, a researcher should use a formula, according to which expectations and projects are compared to the outcome, unaffected by catastrophic changes in these circumstances.

From this perspective, models cannot be interpreted as targets of restructuring diagnosed conditions. It is necessary to describe and identify the changes in the environment that have destructive consequences. We can say that modeling requires a classification of studied social changes in the state of objects and phenomena. The qualitative analysis of the constructed model is the most important and crucial step in modeling. Models considered in Russian sociological science include three types of correspondence to the social world and the ways how a model describes the world. That is why considering the apparatus used in modeling and the conceptual apparatus of the modeled theory, the theory and the social world, it is necessary to emphasize the crucial role of these steps: formulating the problem, defining the subject matter and scope of the study, defining its goals and objectives, clarifying and interpreting the objectives of the study and finding, conducting preliminary systematic analysis of the subject matter, developing working hypotheses¹⁴.

Thus, modeling in the sociological diagnostics is determined by the criteria of meaning (structure) of the object studied and the target criterion (defining goals and objectives of the research). Models are classified according to the natural or formal language used, thus, one may talk about a substantive or formal model of research, respectively.

The sociological examination is understood as the study of some object, phenomenon or a fact through application of special methods, resulting in the presentation of a reasoned conclusion. The difficulty in defining the sociological examination stems from the fact that, on the one hand, the concept “sociological” used promotes the theoretical understanding, on the other hand – the sociological examination is a type of social examination and it claims to be its most efficient form of implementation.

The concept of “sociological examination” in sociology has been used in a number of theoretical works and is associated with such authors as E. Durkheim (studying the phenomenon of suicide), M. Weber (the phenomenon of bureaucracy), K. Mannheim (assessment of social

inequalities in social development); Russian sociology acquires the expert status in the context of developing social functions of sociology.

5. Discussion

It should be stressed that when sociological knowledge is perceived according to the marketing potential of sociological services, it is possible to say that the expert status is granted to customers. Typically, those are the representatives of authorities, while sociologists represent the group of suppliers of qualitative sociological information but are not directly involved in the management process. That is why sociological examination should be defined as a procedure of implementation of sociological knowledge for social control, programming and planning. Sociological examination, therefore, is a form of getting knowledge about the phenomena, objects, processes, in order to modify and update the system and to identify the main trends of functioning and development on the basis of the social forecasting.

It is also possible to say that the sociological examination can play the role of developing knowledge. It develops recommendations for the management of social processes, but what is more important – it enables the increase in the new knowledge in the field of social management. This situation in research is explained by the fact that the experts, the sociological community, representing the third interested party in carrying out the examination (the other two are the customer and the body organizing it); this party is the least dependent on the objective evaluation and intentions as they are not restricted by group and corporate interests.

The need for the sociological examination occurs during what is called a situation of uncertainty and incompleteness or intentions: uncertainty as to the methods and ways of solving certain problems, the consequences their solution have for various groups of population, the impact of various social and cultural conditions; incompleteness – what resource will be used for the implementation of a particular managerial decision. The situation of intentions manifests itself by the extent to which decisions on the implementation of a specific solution may rely on sociological arguments or the authority of experts, providing independent evaluation.

Stating these circumstances, we can mention the third situation – a situation when the sociological examination is requested. A sociological examination may be

conducted by small enthusiastic groups of professionals, but it is quite different when experts become a self-referential social group and they are addressed as people who have earned certain social influence.

When representing expert opinions and assessment, the sociological community can risk its reputation if, first, the results of the sociological examination are used to support the ideas contradicting the interests of the society and the state goals; secondly, if it reduces independence from interested parties. The sociological examination definitely includes the elements and conditions ensuring objectivity, independence and regularity.

Compliance with these requirements determines structural and external challenges for the sociological examination. The intralogical, intrascientific challenges include following the sociological tradition, minimizing the input of borrowed concepts, imbalance of substantial and formal procedures and expertise implementation. The external ones are a sufficient level of legitimation of sociological examination in the public consciousness, the credibility of the results, sociological knowledge and practices, as well as of the public activities of sociologists.

Perhaps the desire to be a household word, to become fashionable contradicts the traditions of the expert community which operates, distancing itself from the political and social situation. Sociological examination has certain specific features, compared to other types of examination, in terms of content, formal and functional criteria. As for the content criterion, the expert assessments and judgments are based on sociological tools, although it is possible to use additional, explanatory procedures and the knowledge of related sciences (social statistics, social psychology, anthropology). According to the formal criterion, the sociological examination is characterized by high and sufficient degree of formalizability of the results, algorithmization, which makes it possible to express it through the language of mathematics. As for the functional parameters, the sociological examination is different from other forms of social examination due to its high explanatory and prognostic potential.

Assuming that these conditions are crucial elements of expert activity, it is also important to differentiate between expert knowledge and expert evaluation. The expert knowledge uses the examination resource for its own purposes, which means that a sociologist does not need to translate this into a language understandable to people with a little knowledge of sociology, while expert evaluation is a practical expression of the expert

knowledge which should be interpreted for the interested parties and it correlates with the current level of social competence, the emphasis being laid in accordance with the social request to the examination.

The criterion of coherence is crucial for the examination, which means the consistency with other types of expert evaluation. Only in this context the sociological examination may have impact on the society. Expert evaluation is also subjective as it represents an independent choice of methodology by an expert as well as the degree of social commitment. The sociological examination performs the functions outwardly similar to the social diagnostics: social control, social evaluation, social regulation. Social prognostic function of the sociological examination represents its difference from the sociological diagnosis, which stems from the fact that the expert knowledge describes the current situation with a projection for the future. At the same time, the functions of the sociological examination previously considered by us have a slightly different content.

The socio-control function has a broader impact as it is associated not only with practical recommendations, but also aims at the development of managerial decisions, that is controlling the bodies responsible for managerial or other decisions taken. Socio-regulating function defines a certain order and meeting interests of the parties and enables the algorithmization of the interaction between different management structures. The socio-explanatory function of the sociological examination expresses, firstly, the level of the interpretation of the social reality in the framework of competition between different sociological theories; using the model of sociological examination enables researchers to give a better explanation of what we might call the theoretical analogue of the studied reality.

Functional parameters of the sociological examination ensure solving a dual task: to reduce social uncertainty and to stimulate social creativity. It should be noted that expert knowledge becomes a powerful argument in grounding both creative and civic position. What is really surprising is not the fact that some line may prevail, but that the sociological knowledge may have a line which is not comparable with any of parallel ones.

We mean that the discussion about using structural-functional analysis or structural-activist approach facilitates synthetic research, whose purpose is to make the Social Resource theory a part of the expert knowledge. It is this theory that has been used recently to explain various phenomena since it allows most thorough

and adequate investigation of specific features of certain groups and strata, those who have experienced the social changes.

It is possible to say that since the beginning of the 2000s the production of expert knowledge supporting the third "special" path of Russia's development has become the primary task. Here we should remember the expert opinions on what common ground and meeting points one can work out in the context of the two opposing, incompatible positions of the social consciousness¹³.

The sociological examination should also increase the social potential of knowledge, provide a wider access to the world's culture and increase the social status of sociology through reinterpretation of personal research experience. The period of social anarchism in the Russian society had an impact not only on the Russians' behavioral strategies, but also led to the situation when sociology was understood as the sociology of liberty, while it is crucial to understand sociology as a science of social order.

It is characteristic that Russian intellectuals' choice of the United States, Switzerland, Sweden and Germany as a standard of normality has resulted in the situation when sociology was widely used to denounce normality²⁴. Emphasis on normality instead of critical analysis and historical intuition only led to destructive social intentions, whereas the expert knowledge on the criteria of functionality is the knowledge that strengthens the intellectual resources of the social order.

There are methodological grounds for this argument as the examination includes criteria for distinguishing between chaos and normality on the basis of the expert evaluation. It's another matter that the evaluation may vary greatly. There are also counter-arguments, according to which the examination definitely reflects certain specific features and is a part of the whole²⁴, which demonstrate the ambiguity of opinions in the expert community. In this regard, it is important to note that Russia has not overcome the problem of the expert's working for the government authorities or taking an independent position. We agree with the opinion that forming a clique of experts remains an inevitable outcome of this situation.

This raises the risk of becoming dependent on other experts and being restricted by the team opinions. In this situation, working out certain consolidated position becomes subject to inevitable value-ideological interpretation of its holder, i.e. expert opinions are used to make judgments about the personality, not a person's qualification²⁴.

In this situation it may seem necessary to achieve a consensus among the experts on splitting the team effort aimed at performing specific sociological procedures and the expert evaluation which, in order to avoid transfer to the personal level, should use the matching criterion. In other words, the expert community evaluates the expert's achievements when assessing the expert's standing. In this case, there is a risk of personnel stagnation (non-admission of newcomers), the desire to monopolize the particular area of the expert knowledge.

Assuming that sociological examination cannot be the restricted to a narrow circle of specialists and possesses certain influence and authority potential, defining competencies is an inherent characteristic of the sociological examination. This means that it is possible to avoid bias and subjective assessment when one applies the criteria of coherence of the examination, its compatibility with the theoretical ground of the researcher, how actively the variety of modern theoretical approaches is used. In other words, the examination demonstrates the level of sociological erudition and analytic skills.

6. Conclusion

Sociological examination is not a sociological study by itself as its objectives are generally set by the activities of government authorities and other social institutions, public interests of citizens and objectives of the social policy. Actually, this means that the examination includes a sociological study carried out according to the logic of the tasks implementation.

The examination should comply with three conditions: to form the rationale for the existing social and legal norms, to develop evaluation criteria for the authorities' activities and to determine the degree of negative effects in different areas of public life. For example, developing the rating of Russian governors, it is necessary to include not only the parameters of economic growth, but also indicators such as the development of social infrastructure, the density of school, nursery schools, medical institutions, the average annual income of people living in a particular region. Also, one can use specific indicators such as unemployment rate, crime, the degree of social inclusion, social awareness, the quality of cooperation between the regional authorities and public organizations. Thus,

it is possible to conclude that the social diagnostics and examination may be used to solve practical tasks, but this requires a consistent conceptual rationale for the problem studied.

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