Falling Asleep and Waking Up: Social Determination of Sleep

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The aim of this brief essay is to sketch research possibilities of sociological systems theory concerning sleep as a social phenomenon. To call sleep a social phenomenon implies asking a specific type of question: How does sleep appear in social contexts? A sociological view rules out the bodily functions and presuppositions of sleep and takes them for granted. To be sure, this doesn't preclude a look at how social life may disturb, change or settle corporeal activities and if (and how) it might have an impact on the biochemistry of sleeping. You don't sleep well upon impending dismissal. We keep this secondary question in reserve and will first try to get an idea of how this (non-) activity most of the vertebrates indulge in is practiced and observed in social reality.

Sociological systems theory asserts an unsurmountable chasm between organisms, consciousness and social systems *as to their fundamental operation*. The latter is the decisive constraint. Those systems may be structurally coupled somehow and causal and other influences crosscutting them cannot be denied. But the main question remains how each of them sustains its identity without dissolving into its environment thus becoming indistinguishable. It follows from this assertion that the first specification regards the systems reference with respect to which sleep is going to be examined. You get very different answers either you go for the immune system of a human body or the societal system of religion. As for sociology a social systems reference obtains. The fundamental operation reproducing and being reproduced by social systems is communication. One could specify further with respect to society or one of its functional systems or organization and interaction respectively. But I will try to keep the discussion on the level of self-similar structures for all social systems, i.e. the level of social systems in general.

Those systems theoretical ideas lead to a tangible consequence regarding sleep: sleep cannot be a social operation. Social systems do not sleep (imagery excluded). Formal organizations, seminars or the legal system don't have beds and homes and if all the members of a seminar fell asleep at once it wouldn't be the seminar sleeping. A social system communicates or it doesn't. Hence we have to look at sleep with reference to the problem of reproduction of communication.

So it can't be the act of sleeping itself which is crucial in this respect. Rather it is the salient fact that one who sleeps cannot participate in communication. However, absent persons and

ties still do have an impact on present situations. Sleep poses an interesting variation on this well-known sociological intricacy. Anyone who sleeps in present of others is a "present absent" and will have a different structural impact on the ongoing communication than an "absent absent". He or she might wake up any time or might just pretend sleeping. Communication reckons this expectation. This is a case where the perception of others' sleeping impinges upon communication (by variances of sound, tone, and volume but also of meaning and information). But sleep can also be observed by communication explicitly. Communication refers to sleep. This is sleep as a theme. Professional (especially medicine) and scientific (biological, psychological etc.) settings come to mind but referring to sleep is furthermore an excellent take-off for the induction of communication in the morning—be it at work or between spouses—though making such a reference requires some acquaintance.

The basic form of sleep in communicative contexts comes up as the distinction between falling asleep and waking up. Communication doesn't bother whether people go to bed or take a nap because it is an established social expectation that anybody who falls asleep will wake up, too. Sleep is a redundant environmental state communication has learned to expect during its co-evolution with consciousness. Psychic systems and their bodies respectively are getting tired and have always been getting tired. Any observable structures of communication are thus adapted to the exigency of sleeping yet. Communication, therefore, renders itself independent from sleep. In case it just breaks off, switches to other participants, or continues somewhere else. Incidentally this produces a kind of dispersed unrest indispensable for the reproduction of social systems. In waking up individuals first of all recognize in a subtle way that social life has continued in the meantime, but they don't know how. This produces contingency and efforts at control.

The sociological question should focus on how the distinction of falling asleep/waking up is being tuned socially. Tuning depends on distinction, else nothing can be tuned. Social systems clove the object "sleep" which appears as an environmental constant into the two states of falling asleep and waking up and use these for a social tuning of sleep. This leads to a historical or contextual sociological analysis (or both) of how this distinction is parameterised in social life. Moreover it includes a study of the forms of imputation of social meaning to sleep, regardless of any meaning consciousness might ascribe to sleep. Social determination of sleep is the overall theme. Work and context are the chief modulators of meaning for sleep in social systems.

Sleep might be considered as sacred or profane, as a refreshing need or a plague, as right on time or inept. This is historically and contextually variable and requires case studies of past and present, tribal and industrial societies. The organization and meaning of work, however, seems to be the chief modulator of sleep habits at present. One cannot ignore the fact that work contexts are primarily designed in and by formal organizations of all kinds (schools, hospitals, factories, administration etc.). Coming late to work looking dozy is hardly acclaimed by superiors and co-workers; above all if this instance vitiates performance and output (there are a lot of exceptions though, depending on context). Some studies on work under capitalism pick up the

subject (e.g. social construction of pastime and sluggishness), but as far as I know more formal, molecular, and operational approaches especially with reference to sleep are lacking.

Social meaning attached to sleep is determined by temporal, factual, and social components. Temporally sleep is put under the regime of horology. We live in a time in which the glimpse on the watch engenders all kinds of activities and decisions but falling asleep/waking up in particular. Or think of check clocks in factories. Sidereal cycles play no role anymore but it is worth examining in which contexts they still (or again) play a role. Besides this might help assessing tendencies of upcoming "holistic" medical treatments and of business yoga and the like.

The factual component of meaning embraces above all the locales and accoutrements of sleep (special rooms, beds, pillows, pyjamas etc.). In this respect studying the influence of the hygiene "movement" in the nineteenth century could be of interest. We also cherish a particular atmosphere in places we sleep (fresh air, temperature, icons, pictures, curtains, silence, quietude etc.). Last but not least sleep rituals open up another whole new research area which provides further possibilities of meaning analysis.

In fact all meaning "dimensions" refer to *social* meaning. This is harking back to the first theoretical decision on focusing the systems reference to social systems. Apparently the social re-enters meaning providing an especially social aspect of meaning. Sleep is socially determined and shapes social relations and meaning itself. This is the case when you think of dormitories, i.e. many people sleeping together in one room. Special requirements and safeguarding for observing behavior are needed and implemented. In addition there seems to be a close relation to discipline contexts (e.g. military, boarding schools). Another point is degree of intimacy. A dyad sleeping in one bed presupposes and points to some sort of intimacy. Requisite intimacy, however, can also be generated artificially, by drinking too much alcohol for example.

All these research directions in turn depend on contextualization. It does matter whether someone is observed sleeping in a seminar, in a theatre, in a train, at home or in a hotel. Snoring or not is an extra parameter. In which kinds of social situations is sleep tolerated and in which ones not? Anyway, every context spins off different meaning structures and meaning cohesion for sleep and induces different possibilities for connection of further communication and switching opportunities. Attention to different cultural circumstances is needed additionally.

Far from being exhaustive, these are some research possibilities proposed by a sociological systems theory. This form of theorizing dreadfully narrows the view. It makes one determine and stick to the specific operation the reproduction of which poses the main problem. But this allows for potential in getting painstaking methodological control.