



LESSON 1 MEANING AND DEFINITION OF SOCIOLOGY

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1. MEANING AND DEFINITION OF SOCIOLOGY

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Meaning and Definition of Sociology
- Major Approaches of Sociology

1.1 Introduction to Sociology

Sociology is the study of social life of human beings. Human life is not simple. It varies from time to time and space to space. Human life has a wide range around the entire world. In this context, sociology tries to develop various theories to analyze the social reality of human social life. This Chapter will introduce you to sociology and why it is important for us and how it can shape your perspective to view the world.

Sociology is the youngest social science but it has a long history. It was an outcome of the age of enlightenment and European modernity. Geographical discoveries changed the orientation of thinking patterns. Religion was challenged by intellectuals and divine rule was replaced after the French revolution. The French revolution led to a foundation of a new socio-political order which was based on democratic ethos. Democratic values provide liberty and new production relations emerged during that time. Industrial revolution brought unprecedented changes in society. The old social order collapsed; a new social order was based on capitalistic values which brought numerous changes in society. Society was in a transition phase. Science replaced religious values from society. A new scientific approach led to the foundation of sociology. French scholar Auguste Comte (1798-1857) saw all these situations and he introduced a new science of society, which was known as sociology.

1.2 Meaning of Sociology

Sociology is a hybrid term which is a combination of two languages- Latin and Greek. The word *socius* is a Latin word which means friend, companionship or association. The Greek '*Logos*' means study of. It also means doctrine, discourse or theory. By combination of these words it can be illustrated in the following form:

Socius + logos = Sociology (Study of human associations)



Thus literally, sociology is the study of companionship, meaning social interaction and its resultant relationship exists between companions or groups of human beings.

J. S. Mill Suggested that sociology must be called Ethnology because it is a child of two languages, but most of the scholars were not satisfied with the arguments of **J.S. Mill** and they did not accept proposal of replacing the name of sociology. Sociology is the scientific study of human interactions, social action, social groups, social institutions and all process which affect human social life in collective manner.

1.3 Different Ways to Define Sociology

Since the time of Auguste Comte (1789-1857), who coined the word sociology and Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx etc. had tried to develop it with their views on Sociology. Sociology is very vast academic discipline and it is not possible to give a universal definition. Various scholars have tried to define in their own ways. For our convenience all major definitions can be divided into following groups.

- Sociology as a science of society.
- Sociology as study of social group.
- Sociology as study of Social Interaction and Social Action or Social Relationship.
- Sociology as the study of social institution.
- Sociology as the study of social bonds, social processes, social system, social structure social life, social phenomenon and so on.

Sociology as a Science of Society

In this category scholars have emphasized that society is not a single entity, it includes economic, political, cultural, religious, social activities. So it is must to study the society as a whole in sociology. Every part of society is well connected to each other. Giddings, Ward, Odum, Harton and Hunt and many other have defined sociology as the study of society. Their language may little bit differ but over all emphasis remains on the study of society.

“Sociology is a science of society.” - G.A. Lundberg(1939)

“Sociology is the science which studies society.” – H.W. Odum (1947)

“Sociology attempt to study society scientifically.” – Horton and Hunt (1964)

“Sociology is an Understanding of society.” - Stewart and Glynn(1991)



1.3.2 Sociology as the study of social groups

A small number of writers like H.M. Johnson, Kimball Young and others have followed this pattern and defined it as under:

“Sociology is the science that deals with social groups, their internal forms or modes of organization, the processes that tend to maintain or change these forms of organization and relation between groups.” -H.M. Johnson (1960)

“Sociology deals with the behaviour of man in groups.”- Kimball Young (1942)

1.3.3 Sociology as the study of social actions, interaction or social relationships

Early German thinkers like Max weber, Leopold Von Wieste and George Simmel advocated that sociology should exclusively devote itself to the social actions, social interactions or social relationship. Among contemporary sociologists, Talcott Parsons (1951) has also followed these lines. Some definitions in this category are:

“Sociology is the science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action.”
- Max Weber (1949)

"Sociology is about 'social relationships, the network of relationships; the network of relationships, we call society." - Maclver and Page (1949)

"Sociology may be said to be the study of interactions arising from the association of living beings.
- Gillin and Gillin (1948)

"Sociology is the synthesizing and generalizing science of man in all his social relationships."
-A.W. Green (1952)

"Sociology is the science of human relationships." - Merrill and Eldrige (1952)

“The study of social interaction is central to sociologists” - Gouldner and Gouldner (1963)

“Sociology is the study of systems of action and of their interrelations.”
Alex Inkeles(1964)



1.3.4 Sociology as the study of social institutions

Some of the writers or thinkers have opined that the distinctive unit of sociological study is not whole society, but specifically the relations between the institutions (family, church, school or political party etc.) which compose it. They said that society as a whole is already the unit of analysis in the fields of history and anthropology; as such sociology should limit itself with the study of relations of the institutions only. Main champion of this view is **Durkheim**, who as long ago as 1901, said that sociology "can be defined as the science of institutions" (The Rules of Sociological Method, 1895).

1.3.5 Sociology as the study of social bonds, social processes, social system, social structure, social life, social phenomena and so on

Some writers defined sociology in a very wide perspective using different terminologies such as:

"Sociology is concerned with the study of the social life of man." - Ogburn and Nimkoff (1964)

"Sociology is the study of social processes." - Reuter and Hart (1933)

"Sociology is the study of human beings within their social Contexts." -Smith and Preston (1977)

"Sociology is the study of the basic structure of society. - Weinberg and Shabat (1956)

"Sociology is the science of social phenomena." E.A. Ross (1901)

"Sociology is the science of the structure and functions of social life" - Bennet and Tumin (1946)

"Sociology is the study of human beings with their social context." – R.W. Smith and F.W. Peterson (1977)

"Sociology is a generalising science of socio-cultural phenomenon viewed in their generic forms, types and manifold interconnections." P.A.Sorokin (1947)

" Sociology seeks to discover the principles of cohesion and of order within the social structure, the ways in which it roots and grows within an environment, the moving equilibrium of changing structure and changing environment, the main trends of the incessant change, the forces which determine its direction at any time, the harmonies and conflicts, the adjustments and maladjustments within the structure as they are revealed in the light of human desires, and thus the practical application of means to ends in the creative activities of social man.'

– Maclver.



Sociology is an attempt to account for the origin, growth, structure and activities of society by the operation of physical causes working together in the process of evolution.’
—Giddings

A perusal of the above definitions shows that sociologists differ in their opinions about the subject-matter of Sociology. In short we can say that sociology is the systematic and ordered study of society or social relations.

However, the common idea underlying them all is that Sociology is concerned with human relationships. Its emphasis is on the ‘social’ aspect of these relationships. MacIver has clarified that whatever topic may be included in the subject-matter of sociology, its real subject-matter is social relationships.

The basis of social inter-action or social processes is social relationships. It is on account of such relationships that there is human inter-action. Therefore, if we include social processes or any other matter within the subject-matter of sociology, their study can be carried only in the context of social relationships.

Man becomes a social animal only when he enters into social relationships. The different aspects of social life, viz., political or economic are but the expressions of social relationships.

Therefore in studying sociology we are in fact studying social relationships in one form or the other. Its subject-matter is society rather than the individual though the individual cannot be left utterly out of account.

In studying social relationships, the sociologists attempt to discover the evolution of society, its systems and structures, the development of social institutions and their functions, the customs and rules regulating social relationships, the groups and communities formed by man throughout history, the nature and interdependence of these groups like family, caste, economic groups, religious groups etc., and the phenomenon of social change.

Self-check Questions

State whether the following statements are True or False:

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| 1. Sociology is the product of European Modernity. | True / False |
| 2. Sociology is a hybrid term | True / False |
| 3. Emile Durkheim is known as Academic Father of Sociology. | True / False |
| 4. Sociology is not a science of society. | True / False |



5. The main motive of Sociology to maintain social order.

True / False

Perspectives of Sociology

Social phenomenon is not static in its nature and it is dynamic. Every science analyse the events with their own lenses. Physics, Chemistry, Biology and other discipline analyse the same event with their own view points. In sociology we have also our different view point to analysis the reality of human social life. Our sociological imagination may help us to employ any of a number of theoretical perspectives or approaches in order to study human behaviour. Before going on the major perspectives of sociology let us look at what is sociological perspective.

What is Sociological Perspective?

The perspective of sociology has involves seeing through the outside appearances of people's actions and organisations"(Peter Berger, Invitation to Sociology, 1963). It is the way of looking at the society and the social behaviour-the subject matter of sociology. It goes beyond identifying patterns of social behaviour. It also attempts to provide explanations for such patterns. Thus, the broad societal forces become a central consideration of sociology. Sociologists are not interested in individual personalities, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela or Ravi Shanker, rather they try to identify the shared traits and behaviour and the underlying patterns in those traits and behaviour of millions of human beings. One major goal of sociological perspective is to identify and interpret patterns underlying the recurrent regular aspects of social life and also to investigate the influences on social behaviour.

Now, we will attempt to highlight the main focus of sociological perspective in brief as under:

- (i) Sociology is a scientific endeavour with a strong humanistic bent. The old notion that whether sociology is scientific or humanistic has been replaced by the modern view that it is scientific and humanistic both. As a scientific discipline, it aims at value-free and objective causal analysis of social phenomena. It tries to generate general laws and make predictions. Humanistic perspective, on the other hand, tries to emphasise on Verstehen (understanding) through reflexivity the humanistic ethos and cultural creativity of all forms of social existence rather than on predictions. Such an image of sociology comes close to what Peter Berger (1963) calls "sociology as a form of consciousness".
- (ii) Sociology views society or social relations as structured, constituting a reality that transcends individuals. Like psychology, sociology is not interested in



behaviour of an individual (suicide by a single person) but in the patterns of behaviour (suicide patterns) or the behaviour of group of persons. Sociology is concerned with how the structure of society is created, maintained and changed.

- (iii) Sociology tries to investigate the processes through which society shapes the individual and in turn individuals create the structure of society. In the words of Giddings, "it investigates the connections between what society makes of us and what we make of ourselves".
- (iv) Sociology studies social phenomena from holistic and relational points of View both. This perspective enables sociologists to identify underlying recurrent patterns of and influences on social behaviour.
- (v) Sociology studies human behaviour in group context. For a sociologist, a man/woman and his/her particular act or activity is not important but his/her status and role in which the activity is performed is important.
- (vi) Sociological perspective is neither utopian (what is desirable), nor fatalistic (inevitability of existing state of affairs), but scientific (what it is, how it is and why it is). But at times, it sometimes goes beyond the questions of what, how, why and where and assumes the role of an applied science. Thus, sociological perspective is naturalistic (pure scientific) and interventionist (applied or social engineering) both. Early sociologists were positivists, emphasised its naturalistic character, but modern Sociologists (humanists) argue that sociologists should adopt the role of an interventionist (wherever is necessary) along with his traditional role of a scientist. In the interventionist conception of sociology, the discipline is treated as a problem solving craft. Recently, this approach was much emphasised by Alain Touraine (The Return of the Actor, 1988).
- (vii) Sociological perspective involves the investigation of the problem on micro and macro levels both. At micro level, sociology studies how individuals behave in social situations-at work, at play, at home, or in school, or in small and large groups. It deals with people's everyday interactions (social interactionism, ethno methodological and phenomenological approaches of study). At macro level, sociology focuses on patterns of behaviour and forms of organisation that characterise entire societies (classical and grand theorists' approaches). At this level, sociology deals with large-scale structures (such as bureaucracy), broad social categories, institutions, social systems, and social problems such as war, unemployment, poverty, corruption, and solutions to these problems are sought at the structural or organisational level. In their studies, sociologists utilise both approaches of study, i.e. qualitative (introspective-participant method) and quantitative (statistical, interview and survey techniques).

Sociological perspective is basically divided into two major categories:

Empirical or scientific and Humanistic

- **Empirical or Scientific Perspective**



Sociology basically studies the phenomenon within macro and micro approach. Empirical or Scientific approach comes under the Macro analysis of social structure. Functional and Conflict these are two major perspectives which comes under the Empirical or Scientific Approach. Founding fathers of sociology like Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Emile Durkheim want to make sociology as a science. All they advocate that society should be studies as whole in scientific manner. Societies also pass through some certain rules and laws. We have to observe social phenomenon with help of natural sciences methods Functionalism and Conflict analysis are known as macro analysis of social events.

According to the **functionalist perspective**, also called **functionalism**, each aspect of society is interdependent and contributes to society's functioning as a whole. The government, or state, provides education for the children of the family, which in turn pays taxes on which the state depends to keep itself running. That is, the family is dependent upon the school to help children grow up to have good jobs so that they can raise and support their own families. In the process, the children become law-abiding, taxpaying citizens, who in turn support the state. If all goes well, the parts of society produce order, stability, and productivity. If all does not go well, the parts of society then must adapt to recapture a new order, stability, and productivity. For example, during a financial recession with its high rates of unemployment and inflation, social programs are trimmed or cut. Schools offer fewer programs. Families tighten their budgets. And a new social order, stability, and productivity occur.

Functionalists believe that society is held together by **social consensus**, or cohesion, in which members of the society agree upon, and work together to achieve, what is best for society as a whole. Emile Durkheim suggested that social consensus takes one of two forms:

Mechanical solidarity is a form of social cohesion that arises when people in a society maintain similar values and beliefs and engage in similar types of work. Mechanical solidarity most commonly occurs in traditional, simple societies such as those in which everyone herds cattle or farms. Amish society exemplifies mechanical solidarity.

In contrast, **organic solidarity** is a form of social cohesion that arises when the people in a society are interdependent, but hold to varying values and beliefs and engage in varying types of work. Organic solidarity most commonly occurs in industrialized, complex societies such those in large American cities like New York in the 2000s.

The functionalist perspective achieved its greatest popularity among American sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s. While European functionalists originally focused on explaining the inner workings of social order, American functionalists focused on discovering the functions of human behavior. Among



these American functionalist sociologists is **Robert Merton** (b. 1910), who divides human functions into two types: **manifest functions** are intentional and obvious, while **latent functions** are unintentional and not obvious. The manifest function of attending a church or synagogue, for instance, is to worship as part of a religious community, but its latent function may be to help members learn to discern personal from institutional values. With common sense, manifest functions become easily apparent. Yet this is not necessarily the case for latent functions, which often demand a sociological approach to be revealed. A sociological approach in functionalism is the consideration of the relationship between the functions of smaller parts and the functions of the whole.

Functionalism has received criticism for neglecting the negative functions of an event such as divorce. Critics also claim that the perspective justifies the status quo and complacency on the part of society's members. Functionalism does not encourage people to take an active role in changing their social environment, even when such change may benefit them. Instead, functionalism sees active social change as undesirable because the various parts of society will compensate naturally for any problems that may arise.

The conflict perspective, which originated primarily out of Karl Marx's writings on class struggles, presents society in a different light than do the functionalist. While these latter perspectives focus on the positive aspects of society that contribute to its stability, the **conflict perspective** focuses on the negative, conflicted, and ever-changing nature of society. Unlike functionalists who defend the status quo, avoid social change, and believe people cooperate to effect social order, conflict theorists challenge the status quo, encourage social change (even when this means social revolution), and believe rich and powerful people force social order on the poor and the weak. Conflict theorists, for example, may interpret an "elite" board of regents raising tuition to pay for esoteric new programs that raise the prestige of a local college as self-serving rather than as beneficial for students.

Whereas American sociologists in the 1940s and 1950s generally ignored the conflict perspective in favour of the functionalist, the tumultuous 1960s saw American sociologists gain considerable interest in conflict theory. They also expanded Marx's idea that the key conflict in society was strictly economic. Today, conflict theorists find social conflict between any groups in which the potential for inequality exists: racial, gender, religious, political, economic, and so on. Conflict theorists note that unequal groups usually have conflicting values and agendas, causing them to compete against one another. This constant competition between groups forms the basis for the ever-changing nature of society.

Critics of the conflict perspective point to its overly negative view of society. The theory ultimately attributes humanitarian efforts, altruism, democracy, civil



rights, and other positive aspects of society to capitalistic designs to control the masses, not to inherent interests in preserving society and social order.

Humanistic Perspective

Humanistic perspective in sociology analyse the social events at micro level. Its rejects premises of functional and conflict perspective and argued that natural sciences methods can not suitable for human beings, because human behaviour varies time to time and space to space. We cannot apply same method to study social events in same manner. Cultural specificity cannot be ignored. Social interaction is base of this category.

The **symbolic interactionist perspective**, also known as **symbolic interactionism**, directs sociologists to consider the symbols and details of everyday life, what these symbols mean, and how people interact with each other. Although symbolic interactionism traces its origins to Max Weber's assertion that individuals act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their world, the American philosopher **George H. Mead** (1863–1931) introduced this perspective to American sociology in the 1920s.

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, people attach meanings to symbols, and then they act according to their subjective interpretation of these symbols. Verbal conversations, in which spoken words serve as the predominant symbols, make this subjective interpretation especially evident. The words have a certain meaning for the “sender,” and, during effective communication, they hopefully have the same meaning for the “receiver.” In other terms, words are not static “things”; they require intention and interpretation. Conversation is an interaction of symbols between individuals who constantly interpret the world around them. Of course, anything can serve as a symbol as long as it refers to something beyond itself. Written music serves as an example. The black dots and lines become more than mere marks on the page; they refer to notes organized in such a way as to make musical sense. Thus, symbolic interactionists give serious thought to how people act, and then seek to determine what meanings individuals assign to their own actions and symbols, as well as to those of others.

Consider applying symbolic interactionism to the American institution of marriage. Symbols may include wedding bands, vows of life-long commitment, a white bridal dress, a wedding cake, a Church ceremony, and flowers and music. American society attaches general meanings to these symbols, but individuals also maintain their own perceptions of what these and other symbols mean. For example, one of the spouses may see their circular wedding rings as symbolizing “never ending love,” while the other may see them as a mere financial expense. Much faulty communication can result from differences in the perception of the same events and symbols. Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology also comes under humanistic perspective.



Sociology and common Sense

Many a time, it is charged that sociology is nothing but sheer common sense in the garb of jugglery of words or bombastic expression used in the name of science. It is often said that whatever sociologists say, we already have at least a bit of knowledge of it or we may have experienced it at some juncture of our life. Some people opined that it is just our popular wisdom couched in metaphoric language. This notion is not correct. Such knowledge, while sometimes accurate, is not always reliable because it rests on commonly held beliefs rather than systematic analysis of facts. It was once considered common sense to accept that the earth was flat or the sun revolves round the earth. Such notions still remain with us even today. These questions were raised by many early thinkers such as Pythagoras, Aristotle and many others. For thousands of years people's common sense has made them believe that big objects are faster than small ones, that stone and iron are perfectly solid materials, that the desire for children is instinctive, that the institutions of caste and joint family or the custom of dowry will automatically wither away with the spread of education, that the high caste or white people are more talented than the low caste or black people, etc. But when these statements were investigated scientifically, it was found that they were not true. These common sense statements based on popular wisdom illustrate our point that common sense knowledge is not always true. Many common sense Conclusions are based on guesses, ignorance, prejudices, mistaken interpretations and haphazard trial and error learning. On the other hand, scientific observations are based on verifiable evidence or systematic body of proofs. Like other scientists, sociologists' perspective of looking at social phenomena is different from the layman or common sense perspective. Sociologist sees the society through the trained eyes of a scientist. Sociologists do not accept something as a fact because 'everyone knows it. Sociological perspective Consists of objectivity, empiricism, precision, ethical neutrality and verifiability. Sociologists gather facts scientifically in order to describe understand and predict any social phenomenon. Sociologists look at the world critically and do not take things for granted based on traditional beliefs and practices.

Summing Up

In this lesson you will study meaning and definition of sociology. Sociology is the science of society as a whole perspective. Definitions of sociology are divided into five categories as below:

- Sociology as a science of society.
- Sociology as study of social group.



- Sociology as study of Social Interaction and Social Action or Social Relationship.
- Sociology as the study of social institution.
- Sociology as the study of social bonds, social processes, social system, social structure social life, social phenomenon and so on.

In the next section you have study various perspective of sociology. It can be divided into two categories Empirical or scientific and Humanistic. Empirical perspective use methods of natural sciences to analyze the social phenomenon at macro level. On the other hand humanistic perspective rejects the notions of scientific perspectives. It advocates that human social life is complex and we cannot judge social events with natural parameters. Human reality is too much differing from nature so reality should be analyzed at micro level.

In the last section of lesson it is deal that sociology is differing from common sense, because sociology uses certain methods to analyze the reality.

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