
UNIT 1 THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY*

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- Sociological methods as they are used to observe, interpret and validate data about society;
- Sociological way of looking at reality of everyday life;
- Major concepts of Sociology; and
- Sociology and other disciplines.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will understand what is meant as a sociological perspective. How do sociologists observe and interpret the realities of everyday life, for as sociologists, this is our main concern. Various scholars have given their opinion about the way sociological perspective shapes our understanding of how social relations are formed and perpetuated.

Scholars like Zygmunt Bauman view power as the key driver of social relationships. The various human categories and the actions performed by them, what is otherwise understood as status and role in society, is informed by values that are both created and maintained by those who have power and the resources to propagate these values. The meanings acquired by objects and things are informed by these power hierarchies.

C. W. Mills studied American society and shown the society as self- contained. He shows how values and history shape our views. According to Mills, each society has its own way of imagining itself like the Americans think of themselves

* This Unit is contributed by Prof. (Retd) Subhdra Channa, Delhi University and Vani Xaxa, Research Scholar, JMI

as the world yet they also change under impact of sudden social changes. The sociological imagination helps in contextualizing historical aspects and gives meaning to the internal and external attributes of individual how individual's daily experiences attributes a false consciousness of their social standing. In other words, what people imagine their society to be or themselves as its members, is shaped through a long historical process that creates certain kinds of values that then get embedded in the collective consciousness.

These two scholars can be viewed as examples of how a sociological perspective is in itself subject to a variety of scholarly understandings. There is no one marked way of saying that this is a sociological perspective. Some people like Bauman may emphasize the role played by power in shaping the understanding of how people shape their cognition of what constitutes relationships and social positions and others like Mills may look towards a historical shaping of cognition, where values about society and its relationships are shaped by history and the development of a socially constructed imagination. Thus while Bauman is grounded in empirical reality, Mills is more abstract in his reasoning.

1.2 SOCIOLOGICAL METHODS

Mills (1959) concept of "abstracted empiricism" posits that empirical studies mostly follow a set pattern of collecting data with conventional styles of collecting them, which then are codified. This is a much accepted style which is ritualistically adopted by almost everyone: the set rules of collecting data, analyzing them, codifying them, scaling them, and above all the manner in which these data are manipulated is done in an unquestioningly set pattern. For example, most studies involving the collection and analysis of public opinion, look into the aspect of how public opinion are mapped and collected as data, but they ignore the process of getting the data or the process by which public opinion is formed. There is also an effort to mislead what is to be studied in the whole game of methods. However Mill's work is limited by being confined to the United States only.

His work attributes a certain character to the 'Public' that may be true only for America and remains western centric. Certain key problems like class-consciousness, false consciousness, of conceptions of status, of class, have not been translated, adding to the problem of studying generalizing issues rather than looking into specific areas of studies. Thus sociology has created a repertoire of concepts and methods that remain regional and preclude generalization especially to non-western societies. Thus studies of World War II will discuss and describe social processes that do not include origin and causes.

What is important is that in the abstracted empirical style, what is needed to be studied has not been given consideration, and the emphasis has been on method rather than content of study and also its relevance for being studied.

The Abstracted empiricist is more concerned with the philosophy of science, the Scientific Method, rather than what he studies is all about. Thus the sociologist, who should be concerned with society and its issues becomes more involved with the methods to be used and what can be studied by these methods, in other words the method becomes a limitations. At the same time there is an

effort to extend the sociological method to other fields. Experts in method are not only specialist in social philosophy, but also try to further the specialization within the social science through methodological inhibition, which is in accordance with the institute where this method is put into practice. Paul F. Lazarsfeld has explained how abstracted empiricism can be used as a style of work and regards the “sociologist as the methodologist of all social sciences”.

Thus empiricism becomes the hallmark of sociology as compared to philosophy or epistemology. Rather than thinking about why things happen, sociologists try to focus on what is happening and how it is happening.

Sociology uses its expertise to talk about a particular topic by the use of the sociological method and thus converts knowledge into empirical language. This is done by moving from “history of institutions and ideas to concrete behavior of peoples”. It is also done in terms of relating the study to other areas. Another approach is to study certain social situations, which are repeated. And lastly to give emphasis to contemporary social events.

Emile Durkheim, in his classic work, the Rules of the Sociological Method had said that social facts should be explained by other social facts thus putting the psychological and philosophical as beyond the scope of the sociological method.

Thus sociology remains empirical, tied to specific situations and largely precluding generalizations. Abstracted empiricism tries to overcome the issue of too much specificity and lends a more scientific character to sociology.

1.3 SOCIOLOGY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Mills’ (1959) concept of “The Promise” relates to the trap that people find themselves unable to get rid-off life circumstances. People are caught in the vicious circle of mundane ordinary everyday living which are affected by circumstances beyond their control but which they fail to comprehend. By the concept of ‘trap’, Mills is referring to the social changes that occur which affect the ordinary man — certain external influences which transcend the internal human spaces, and both are inter-related. But it is unfortunate that social beings do not relate the two. They are unable to decipher that happenings in the world outside have a direct effect on the everyday and make them what they are. Thus people in the rural areas of the world were unable to comprehend the changes that were brought about in their lives by the World Wars just as in recent times people do not understand how conflict in a remote part of the world may affect their lives.

Mills gave agency to history as it shapes human beings and their destiny. Thus human agency is limited by where we are born and what happens outside of our immediate social context. Thus the sociological imagination is constructed out of historical circumstances and values that are received. Thus the Americans remain unaware of how they impact other societies. When people come in touch with other societies their ability or willingness is conditioned by information received and not actual circumstances. Thus reason is often overridden by values in the sociology of everyday life.

The social sciences introduce reason through the comparative method. The analyst is one who can see the link between the two, history and the individual. They enable the individual to understand his/her experiences in that particular period and calculate their chances in life by looking at other individual in similar circumstances. Individual's lives are connected to generations and they have a biography within a historical context. And a social person very much contributes to that society in which he or she lives, though every person is being made and formed by the society and this events that shape it. Thus sociological perspective is able to see the widening aspects of these historical limits.

There are certain questions that social analysts ask with regard to society, its components and their inter-relations, their difference in the social order, how the society gets affected by the historical events, the social contexts of the different time periods and how men and women are living in this period. The special ability of the sociologists is to connect the personal to the larger context both historically and in the present circumstances. The work of the sociologist is to provide an explanation for the personal, like a particular social issue like dowry to the larger context, historical and circumstantial that creates and maintains it and by the same analysis the sociologist should be able to predict transformation as well. Thus sociology links personal the structural and beyond.

Bauman (1990) writes on his concept of “Oneself with Others in Everyday Life”— the experiences of being free or unfree are something that we all wish to solve as it continues to remain an enigma to almost all. The aspect of choices attached to the experience of being free or unfree links one to the ability to decide.

As humans we are always part of a group and the tension between the individual and the collective is an ongoing sociological concern.

Sociological Concepts

1) Group

Individuals cannot function outside of the group as they are born in one and are a social human because of it. The very process of being human is provided by the group that gives both identity and the means of existence through socialization. However the individual also has a degree of discomfort as the group is also restraining. Thus a social group is both an enabler and a constrainer. All social knowledge is acquired from the group and goes into the formation of the individual with received values and conditions.

2) Socialization

The group socializes the self so as to be capable of living in society. It helps the individual to cope up with pressures and behave. The primary socializing agents enables the individual to develop the self's intentions and expectations to choose the significant others from the many who come his/her way. It also means that the individual is also excluding some while selecting the other. It also means that the group to which the individual aligns to from the many such groups that exist — the reference group; towing the line of the group. The normative reference groups are those

whom a social person follows and they are there to rectify errors. But they are there effective only if a person gives any relevance to their pressures. There are also comparative reference groups that form the periphery of social existence.

In the secondary socialization, which is later phases of socialization that occur in the life of the individual — it would be a partial shift from what the individual used to be to acquiring new skills and knowledge to keep oneself update with the new changes that have come about in the life of the individual. However the core of personality is usually formed by the primary socialization and remains more or less stable during a lifetime.

3) **In-Group and out-Group**

An individual is the product of contribution many people, known and unknown whose influence go in the making of the person. With some people we interact, communicate with whom we share a bond, an intimacy, but there are others with whom we rarely meet. With the latter we have a functional relations and anything more than that with them would be an intrusion into private space. Thus the introduction of maintaining distance emerges—one with whom a person is close, known and the other with whom a person has only have a specific functional relation.

Even in the groups it depends as to the range of proximity — mental and physical. The sense of fellow feeling depends on individuals to perceive others like themselves who have their own respective objectives and goals. This we-feeling come with empathy and commiseration which brings fellow-humans together. What then can bring the distinct difference in the we-feeling? The difference in the attitude between ‘us’ and ‘them-’, ‘we’ and ‘they’.

In-group and Out-Group

What comes first to mind when we talk of in-group is the family — solidarity, mutual confidence and common bind is something that comes to our mind when we utter the word. All these attributes are characteristics of every member of the family. What follow is mutual help, protection and friendship which brings about a ‘we’ feeling, a community feeling which is home. It could be possible of not having pleasantness all the time but it is that finally by the end of the day, we are together and it gives a feeling of security.

The in-group is small, face-to-face and often a source of primary identity. It is characterized by generalized reciprocity or exchange where there is no measurement of what is given; for example parents do not put a value on what they do for their children and vice-versa. Apart from family, other examples of In-group is of friendship, colleagues at work and a small village community.

There is a distinct line between in-group-out-group in terms of the boundaries that demarcate those who belong from those who do not. Social groups find it important to make their boundaries compact so that society can easily define people and classify them. Thus groups often define themselves on class, gender and ethnic lines and the strong in-group feelings also create the divisive forces in society, keeping people away from each other. This may lead to antagonism

between different groups that may also intersect with axes of inequality. Thus in the West exclusive clubs meant for white and upper class men, excluded the coloured people, the poor and even sometimes women.

Stranger

The stranger is nothing but an unfamiliar person, but who happen to be in the world we live. The stranger is a person who belongs to no known category or group. In more open spaces the concept of the stranger becomes less well defined as in the city. The city is marked by a breakdown of familiar relationships and groups that may also lead to a situation of anomie and moral vacuum. Thus groups maintain social values and norms in spite of also being instrumental in creating differences. Differences themselves may not be wrong as long as diversity is accepted and not made a matter of inequality or stigma.

Together and Apart

Social groups that are functional in maintaining social unity and stability are of the kind that we call a community. A community provides a secure place for the individual which is often also the locus of identity and social well-being. Loss of community leads to a feeling of being rootless that is often the cause of mental anxiety and even anti-social behavior. Yet very strong communities also create a barrier between people. Thus social groups are conducive to both keeping people together and also to keep them apart.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss the sociology in everyday life.

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- 2) Explain the sociological concept of group and socialisation.

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1.4 SOCIOLOGY AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

1.4.1 Mills: Types of Practicality and the Bureaucratic Ethos

The main problem in social sciences is one of objectivity and perspective. The very choice of a social problem to study is one that involves choice that itself may be dictated by a bias. What may seem important to one person may not

hold that much importance for another. This was the reason that post-colonial theory began talking about gender bias and other forms of bias. Moreover it is also important that the manner of approaching a problem may also be different depending upon the internalized values of the analyst and as is often demonstrated, the analysis itself is never fully objective.

Social issues become really pertinent to be studied only when they are studied without any “conflict of values”, a position that is almost impossible to achieve as most people carry unconscious biases that they themselves may not be aware of. Instead of solutions to problems one may be led into intellectual power jostles.

As Hume famously remarked that “we cannot deduce how we ought to act from what we believe is” and nor “can we deduce how anyone else ought to act from how we believe we ought to act”. Openness to accepting a multitude of opinions may also be seen as an aspect of the sociological mode of thinking.

The social scientist works within the given framework of their context, accepting the society as it is. The social scientist is also a member of a society and is socialized into set of norms and values that may be difficult to transcend but which may be possible to recognize. It is only by recognizing these inherent values that one may hope to transcend them, gender bias is one obvious example.

These days’ studies are mostly undertaken to please the power holders and those who control the resources for the conduct of research—military, social workers, big corporations and the prison, and the market for such research is also increasing. There is also research done for ideological reasons, such as to prove or disprove a particular political standpoint, feminism or environmentalism for example.

Thus, it is important for social scientist to be aware of the political meanings of the work. There is an explicit demand for ideological justifications as newer institutions have come about and older ones have lost their power mongering. The social scientist is, if not knowingly, working for the bureaucratic setup of for the upholding of ideological justification. Both types are finally meant to legitimize the institutions as a whole.

The political meanings and administrative uses of social sciences have seen a shift and have been overshadowed by new manipulative methods that can be termed as bureaucratic social science. Such research work may involve funds being provided and facilities made available only to prove something that privileges the funding institution or agency. For example a state bent upon making a dam may sponsor research to prove that the dam has very little negative impact upon the environment. Thus social research may be used as a political and economic tool to legitimize a particular profitable enterprise.

Applied sociologists are concerned about only what specific clients want to know — a shift from public to specific. Thus the use of abstracted empirical research can be made of use if it is under an institution and which has funds to process it. For as the work proceeds, there would be ‘corporate control over the division of labour’. There is a huge set-up of people involved in this — from intellectual administrator to research promoters, to young recruits.

Thus institutions with power can train sociologists with the tools and techniques to do research without the philosophical grounding that makes for ethical and moral evaluation. With all deprivation of the sociological imagination, it becomes all the more important that the need for questioning policies. The issue is that social science should be a 'publicly responsible enterprise' for there are all chances of it being expropriated. There are chances that researchers lose their individuality while working in a bureaucratic setup.

The role of the academic clique introduces works and also maintains its flow of critic. Reputations are created by the help of the cliques who ensure their appearance in social circle. Hence, cliques determine strategies.

The utilization of social scientist for the enhancement of bureaucratic purposes has limited the intellectual and philosophical scope of the discipline.

The control that the bureaucracy has on the values and ideas of precisely anything that can be thought of is also contributive to a control of history. The use of language is also curtailed and prescribed. The bureaucratic control over sociological research is thus counter-productive of intellectual growth as well as against social justice.

1.4.2 Mills: Uses of History

The sociological involvement with history is in looking at the social transformations over time and into the history of social institutions for example a sociologist in India would be interested in the evolution and past of an institution like caste. There is also interest in studying the social life in particular historical epochs, like for example in Victorian England or seventeenth century France. There is no doubt that there are problems in the method used. The task is to keep the records right, though there might be possible that changes brought about are based on biases of certain interests. And so saying that history can be distorted is not wrong. Thus the correctness of historical facts is important. The task of historian is of utmost importance.

The work of the historians are important as it contains all aspects of social sciences, for in all social studies one needs to have an historical viewpoint of the problem or the area. There is always an assumption when historian from one world goes to study another area, there is possible that he begins to compare. But there is need of historical materials even if we are not doing comparative studies. History adds the required depth to sociological analysis and provides a back drop to the current social situations

1.5 IN WHAT WAY SOCIOLOGY LOOKS AT REALITY

1.5.2 Mills: The Human Variety

The historical realities tell us that there is a variety of social systems and social structures and the first and foremost task in comparing them is to keep an unbiased attitude. A sociological perspective puts all societies on the same scale in terms of values and only grades them in structural terms like complexity and demography.

Social scientist has been concerned more about economic and political institutions historically, and these have given helpful insights into the working of society and its institutions. Social structure can be defined differently but the basic understanding it is the “combination of institutions classified according to the functions each performs”. In contemporary terms social structure is seen as a political state. The nation-state dominates the world and life of every man. Contemporary sociology cannot extricate itself from the study of the nation state and how the power of the nation state permeates society.

In studying society, the sociologists also concur with the social anthropologist whose task is also to study society. Economists too study social relationships and contemporary economists are deeply embedded in the social relations and norms and values of society and thus have similar interests as sociologists. The political scientists also study society and its power relationships and in contemporary times there is a lot of convergence between sociology and political science.

It is understood that the variety in social life has enabled the social scientist to divide the work. There is mutuality in disciplines though there might be disagreements, as well as a respect that all disciplines have originated in their own way. Even though there is an increasing acceptance of disciplines overriding each other. There is also an acceptance that disciplines have influences each other.

Bauman: Values and Action

Values originate from culture and the received wisdom of generations. They may change to some extent with wider social interaction but some core values always remain. The shift in values may affect the way in which a person aspires for certain goals; for example one may grow up with putting a high value on education but later in life it may shift towards a higher value towards acquisition of wealth. Some actions are justified automatically by the internalized values and do not involve any attempt at making a choice. Others may be debated as one comes under outside influence.

A person is more likely to be affected and undergo a change in values by someone having more authority, either person or institution; for example a teacher in school or a political institution. The more legitimacy a source has, the greater influence it is likely to have. Legitimacy is bestowed by society.

Traditional values hold a legitimation, which is time-tested. Traditions have a historical context and a text. The acceptance of such values hold more authority than the recent ones who have to prove themselves, and in times of changes the former hold ground firmly. What is at stake is the defense required for new values to make place amidst the traditional values. Persons with charisma can only forge ahead with new values in comparison with ordinary people initiating something new and getting it accepted. The legitimate sources can change over time such as the change from religious preachers to television personalities. Thus Max Weber has identified three types of authorities, the traditional the charismatic and the legal-rational.

The third type – the legal-rational one are those who have the legal rights and a rational and legitimate source to deliver their authority. For example a person

has to prove his or her ability to become a judge in a legal court. But once appointed the opinion of a judge has final authority.

These three types are only analytical constructs and in actual situations may easily overlap producing different kinds of effect.

1.6 OBSERVE, INTERPRET AND VALIDATE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

1.6.1 Bauman: The Sociological Eye

The sociological eye is the proposition put forward by Bauman about developing a sense of analyzing what is going around us with a more critical and evaluative perspective. Once we develop a sociological perspective we tend to get a more rational view of things that happen around us. Thus supposing there are riots, then a sociological perspective would enable us to get to the root causes rather than assigning blame arbitrarily based on our biases; like we will be able to identify causes such as economy and class rather than simply talk in terms of ethnic or racial characters. Thus a sociological perspective enables us to get nearer to the truth.

It can be surmised that sociology teaches us the art of life. It enables us to be rational as well as predictive to some extent. The study of sociology is expected to be scientific as the activities and the products are basically useful to all. It also helps in complete understanding of the object under study.

1.6.2 Mills: Philosophies of Science

There is a confusion regarding the relationship between science and social sciences as the former is supposed to be objective and rigid in its procedure and the latter is supposed to be more open and liberal in its application. However social analysts, using the sociological imagination in the work has avoided any rigid procedures. ‘Method’ has to do, first of all, with how to ask and answer questions with some assurance that the answers are more or less durable. ‘Theory’ has to do, above all, with paying close attention to the words one is using, especially their degree of generality and their logical relations.

One who has mastered method and theory becomes a self-conscious thinker. For a classical social scientist, “methods are methods and theories are theories”; they are not autonomous domain. First hand information about the problem and situation is what makes a scientist a working social scientist. Scientist does reflect on the theory and method used into eh studies. There can be no short-cut understanding of methods or methodology — a sense of the problem and the desire to solve is what is required. There are also efforts in knowing advance methods and scope of close interaction between method and work.

When we talk of empirical verification, one has to talk fact and how to get ideas and facts put together. More important is to know what is it that needs verification and how it is to be done. When compared with grand theory and abstracted empiricism, the former uses the deductive verification method, while for the latter what to verify is not a serious issue. Classical researches uses detailed expositions and macroscopic conceptions by designing small empirical studies.

Social studies have distinct methods of approach and it involves many people in creating, them. Classical social sciences do not need microscopic studies or deduced concepts. It is in the process of study that deduction as well as re-formulation is done.

The problems addressed rests upon the methods, theories and values. And it is a known fact that there are no ready answers to the questions. What is required is an understanding more than a solution. For a effective sociological approach, the problems addressed should include various public issues and should bring out the causal connections between the issue and the social structure. The values that are challenged and the issue at stake, etc. should be taken into consideration. It is at time very unfortunate that there are certain values, which are assumed as imperiled, are not the real ones.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Discuss why sociology as a discipline is scientific.

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2) How does sociology look at reality? Discuss.

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3) How do we observe, interpret and validate sociological perspectives.

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed how we see things through sociological angle. In this regard we have focused the contribution of two prominent sociologists Zygmunt Bauman and C. Wright Mills to understand the various perspectives. We have also discussed various concepts of sociology in everyday life and how we observe, interpret and validate sociological perspectives through sociological methods.

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