

Classical Sociological Theory
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Weber's Methodology of the Social sciences

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Weber's Methodology of the Social Sciences

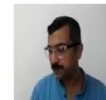


Welcome back to the next class. In this class we will focus on Weber's methodology of social sciences. I must have mentioned in the previous class, that weber is credited with making a very important intervention in the development of methodology for social sciences especially that of sociology along with his substantive contributions to other fields.

Weber's intervention to methodological debate, his very forceful argument that sociology cannot be seen as a science like physics or chemistry became extremely influential and so he is rightly credited as a person who change the very positivist orientation of sociology and as a very important champion of this anti positivist turn that sociology undertook in the early 20th century.

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- Credited to have rescued sociology from the positivist orientation
- Foregrounded the distinction of human action as being different from mere behavior where the intention of the actor is vital
- Hence, mere observation and data collection will not be sufficient unless the researcher enters into the realm of meanings attached by the actor to their actions.
- Phenomenological theories on sociology greatly indebted to Weber
- Relevance of values, humans as active players in the social unlike the depiction of Durkheim



Weber is credited with to have rescued sociology from the positivist orientation. We have discussed it several times earlier, sociology was conceived of as a science which Auguste Comte called sociology as social physics. Durkheim wanted to construct a sociology exactly modeled after science.

From that kind of an orientation of sociology wanting to be seen and known as science, Weber argued that sociology need not be seen as a science. He did not consider it as a weakness of the discipline rather he argued that the social reality that you are dealing with is more complex than the natural reality or natural phenomena. It requires more diverse kind of approach and not strictly a scientific approach.

He foregrounded the distinction of human action as being different from mere behavior where the intention of the actor is vital. He argued that, you cannot really study, for example, when two molecules interact something happens, and we never bothered about. We do not really care about, under what circumstances? Of course you talk about the physical circumstances.

But you never think about the intentions of these molecules when they interact with each other or a major natural phenomenon, like a volcanic eruption or explosion of a supernova takes place. A scientist does not have to really worry about what this supernova was thinking about when it was about to explode, or about a black hole or about any of such kind of natural phenomenon that you think about.

A scientist does not have to really think about the motive behind a particular action or an incident, they are mere incidences, mere processes that are happening on the basis of natural laws. But in the case of human society, it is much more extremely complicated. Animal society itself is complicated, but human society is much more complicated because we simply do not behave as per certain pre-programmed genetic codes.

These genetics is important and that is why there are very specific genetic predisposition to people's behaviors and actions and everything. We have our natural instincts, our biological instincts. We have our idea, our emotions of freedom, of fear, of happiness, hunger, sexual urge everything is there. But we human being's life is more complicated because we have trained ourselves, we are trained to deal with these emotions. These emotions are important. These ideas are important, because these intensions are important. They simply do not behave like some of the lower order animals behave, on the basis of certain stimulus and behavior. Anyway there are quite lot of animal psychology which clinical psychology which tries to explain behavior of animals on this particular basis, people or animals behave on the basis of certain stimulus.

It becomes predictable that if you give this particular stimulus, the animal will come up with this particular stimulus. Stimulus and response kind of scenario, but we cannot apply that to human society. You know that because we human beings respond very differently to different kind of stimuli. We do not do it in a same manner. Hence mere observation and data collection will not be sufficient unless the researcher enters into the realms of meanings attached by the actor to their actions.

This is the point that are have been repeatedly labeling about. Unless you enter into the realm of the meanings of the actors and try to understand why he or she does it, it does not make any sense to the observer. One of the usual examples that I used to give is that if you go to a temple, you will see the priest dropping the offerings to the hands of the devotees from a distance.

He will not place it in the hands of a devotee and he will not touch the devotee. He will ensure that or even the devotees will ensure that they do not want to touch the priest. In most of the temples, of course there are exceptions where devotees are allowed even to touch the idol. But in most of the temples the priest stay at a distance and simply throw these offerings to the hands of the devotees.

For somebody who does not understand the cultural underpinnings of this particular action, it is very difficult to interpret this whole scenario or they might interpret it in very differently. But unless you get into the realms of meanings a shared set of meanings, a shared both by the priest as well as by the devotees, by everybody who is present, that the priest is supposedly at a much higher state of ritual purity because he is touching the idol. Idol is nothing but the place where the god resides.

The priest is supposed to be at the highest state of ritual purity and devotees are at much lower state of ritual purity and through touch pollution can pass from the devotee to that of the priest. So, that should not happen and that's why this physical distance is maintained. This means you are getting into the realms of ideas. You are getting into the realms of meanings.

Here, what Weber argues is something extremely important. In another example, you see a husband beating up his wife. So, unless you try to understand why does this husband do that? Why does he think that it is right on his part? Under what kind of cultural context that he tries to derive the legitimacy for his action. You will not be able to see why that kind of a scenario exist.

This leads to what is became later known as the phenomenological theories on sociology greatly indebted to Weber. It emerged as an extremely important branch of knowledge, branch of social theory or philosophical theory known as phenomenology that you are getting into the realm of meanings, you are getting into the realm of meanings which are important for social sciences.

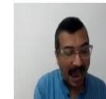
Now, relevance of values, humans as active players in the social unlike the depiction of Durkheim. Weber quite disagreed with Durkheim in terms of the ideas about how active human beings are in the construction of social reality. I mentioned in the previous class that Durkheim had a very negative or had a very pessimistic understanding about the agency of human beings.

He believed that human beings cannot really do much about changing the society rather they have to simply obey the society in which they live. Because he argued that the social facts are so overbearing they are so overarching that human beings will have to simply accept that but Weber does not agree with that. Weber and a host of other scholars who follow these phenomenological theories.

They believed that human beings are capable of fashioning. They are able to create the kind of society in which they live. The social is actively created and human beings actively take part in the creation of the social around them. This is a very important different direction that Weber provides to the discipline of sociology.

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- In 1904, Weber posed a fundamental question: “In what sense are there ‘objectively valid truths’ in those disciplines concerned with social and cultural phenomena?”
- First, his depiction of the problem of values in sociological research is shown. This was the central methodological issue for Weber; if sociology were to be a true science of society, he believed, it has to be objective.
- Second, he thought every science required a conceptual map, an inventory of the key concepts describing the phenomenon being studied, and he began to develop such a system of concepts, labeling them “ideal types”.



In 1904, Weber posed a fundamental question: “In what sense are there ‘objectively valid truths’ in those disciplines concerned with social and cultural phenomena?” This is a fundamental question, and on what basis, what sense are there objectively valid truths in disciplines that are concerned with social and cultural phenomena. How can you say that this is the truth about society? This is the truth about economy or this is the truth about the political phenomena.

This is the truth because its very term truth, objectively valid truth is a very difficult claim. It is very difficult claim, it is very difficult to establish the proof for that claim, that it is objective, it is truth. For a religious leader, this hardly matters, because they only need to claim that, nobody will ask him question and even if somebody asked them the evidence, they will revert back to their theology to explain, to provide evidences it becomes kind of a circuitry kind of an argument.

First this depiction of the problem of values in sociological research is shown. This was the central methodological issue for Weber, if sociology were to be a true science of society, he believed it has to be objective. He brought in this whole idea of values in society and he agreed

that sociology has to be an objective science but this objectivity must be in terms of keeping the research objective, not that it is not concerned with the subjective values. It has to be objectively concerned with the subjective values of the actors.

Second, he thought that every science requires a conceptual map, an inventory of the key concepts are describing the phenomenon being studied and he began to develop such a system of concepts labeling them as ideal types. Ideal type is a very important methodological tool popularized by Weber. Weber argued that when you try to study a particular social phenomenon, you must have a kind of conceptual category, you must have a conceptual construct to study about it.

Ideal type is, we are discussing that, I think we will discuss it later. Ideal type is a kind of a concept, which we think that is kind of a perfect concept about a social phenomenon, and you know that this ideal type never exist. This perfect scenario never exist, but that helps you to compare a kind of an empirical example with that. Maybe for example, an ideal type of student. What is an ideal type of student?

You know different people will come with different ideas that he or she has to be studious and then has to be frugal, they have to be highly disciplined, motivated, hardworking etc. If we put all these qualities into one entity that becomes the ideal type. But you know that in reality, it is very difficult to find a student who fulfills all such kind of characters. So, this ideal type helps you to compare an existing example with that of this construct and then see what the kind of a difference is.

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- Weber argued that sociological inquiry should be objective, or, to use his term, *value-free*. That researchers' personal values and economic interests should not affect the process of social scientific analysis.
- In Weber's eye, sociology should not be a moral science. It is not possible to state scientifically which norms, values, or patterns of action are correct or best, but, rather, it is only possible to describe them objectively.
- "what ought to be," the sphere of values, and "what is," the sphere of science. Normative and positive.



Weber argued that sociological inquiry should be objective, or, to use his term, value-free, that researchers' personal values and economic interests should not affect the process of social scientific analysis. This I mentioned even in the previous class. So, a social scientist is a product of a society, he or she is a product of a particular cultural context, a particular political and economic context.

A person when he or she grows up as an individual, he or she also imbibes lot of values, ideas, ideological possessions like anybody else. From such a position, he or she tries to go and study another society. He or she should try their maximum level best now to get influenced by their own personal values. So, the personal values and economic interests should not affect the process of social scientific analysis.

In Weber's eyes, sociology should not be a moral science. It is not possible to state scientifically which norm, values or patterns of action are correct or best, but rather it is only possible to describe them objectively. This is yet another very important point. He is very clear that you have to keep away from the world of morality and especially you need to keep in mind that he was talking in the context of the European context there, where, the influence of Catholic Church was so much influential in every discipline and its pedagogy.

You need to keep this moral aspect away, it is not possible to state scientifically which norms or values or patterns of action are correct or best. It is very difficult to say that and remember

Durkheim has a different position, he has no issue in describing certain thing as pathological. We saw that in the previous classes. Durkheim calls, labels certain things as good, certain things as bad, certain things as pathological, where Weber does not do that.

So, increasing divorce rates, is it good or bad? It is very difficult question. For a person from a religious background it's is easy to say that increasing divorce rates are really bad, society has become corrupt, everybody has become so selfish and its everything is gone that kind of a lamentation we can be seen from a religious leader. But for a social scientist it is a much more complicated scenario.

Increased divorce rate is an illustration of a host of other very positive formations, very positive dynamics on various ways. What ought to be the sphere of values and what is the sphere of science normative and positive. What ought to be is the sphere of values, how should you lead, what should be the position of women in society? What should people do? This normative and positive is very different.

What ought to be is the sphere of values and what is this sphere of science. So, sociology as a science Weber argues must be concerned with the whole question of, the whole question of what is the question of positive. The first and foremost objective of a sociologist is to analyze the kind of existing scenario, not to a prescribe solutions or policies out of hand.

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- The new science reflects an ongoing historical process in which magic and other forms of inherited wisdom become less acceptable as means for explaining events. Weber referred to this change as the process of rationalization. In a "rationalized discipline," values should not affect the research process. But they remain relevant.



The new science reflects an ongoing historical process in which magic and other forms of inherited wisdom become less acceptable as means of explaining events. Weber referred to this change as the process of rationalization. In a “rationalized discipline,” values should not affect the research process, but they remain relevant. The new science reflects an ongoing historical process in which magic and other forms of inherited wisdom become less acceptable as means of explaining events.

I mentioned that in several of the previous classes. We do not really look forward to supernatural explanations. We are not convinced about the say wishes of god, god wanted to create that is why it is created or we do not believe in supernatural forces, we do not believe in magic being a force that can alter our life or that of the world. We know that all these stories are stories created when people were ignorant about the exact functioning of the universe. All these are the products of human imagination.

This realization Weber calls it as the process of rationalization you try to reason it out. You do not attribute the reason to some other higher entities and then think that this world or any supernatural force must have decided to think in a particular manner and then let us accept it. Now, we realize that human rationality, human intellect can be used to make sense of your own society.

You can make a sense of, you can use your senses to understand the society around you, the world around you, the solar system around you, and the universe around you. You can use your rationality and intellect to understand the history. You can reshape the present and you can refashion the past and this process he calls it as the process of rationalization. In a rationalized discipline values should not affect research process but they remain relevant.

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- Weber rejected the search for general laws in favor of historical theories that provide an “interpretive understanding of social action and . . . a causal explanation of its course and consequences.” A search for universal laws necessarily excludes from consideration important and unique historical events.



• “For the knowledge of historical phenomena in their concreteness, the most general laws, because they are most devoid of content are also the least valuable. The more comprehensive the validity—or scope—of a term, the more it leads us away from the richness of reality since in order to include the common elements of the largest possible number of phenomena, it must necessarily be as abstract as possible and hence devoid of content. In the [social] sciences, the knowledge of the universal or general is never valuable in itself.”



Weber rejected the search for general laws in favor of historical theories that provide an “interpretive understanding of social action and a causal explanation of its course and consequences.” A search for universal law necessarily excludes from consideration important and unique historical events. This is another important point, we know that earlier social scientist they were so preoccupied in formulating larger laws.

So, that is why we have Comte talking about law of three stages, that every society must pass through from theological to meta physical to positive, he presented as if it is something similar to a law of gravity or law of relativity or any such kind of laws that you will find in Natural Sciences. Weber argues against it and categorically argued that you cannot have any social laws.

You cannot have any laws in social science as accurate as they are in the Natural Sciences. Why it is? Because the, but rather he wanted to favor the historical theories that provide interpretive understandings of social action and a causal explanation for its courses are consequences and so mentioned the history plays an extremely important role in defining, in shaping certain societies in different manner.

This historical context is extremely important when we talk about historical phenomenon. It is also about the social history, economic history, political history, and geography and what not. So, if you want to create a larger theory at all-encompassing theory and overarching theory then

you lose out all these peculiarities, we will lose out all this specificities and that becomes a futile exercise according to Weber. I am quoting a very important passage from Weber.

“For the knowledge of historical phenomena in their concreteness, the most general laws, because they are most devoid of content are also the least valuable.” The more you make the laws appear as general, they are most devoid of content, because you know that the history of Indian subcontinent is entirely different from the history of Europe, which is entirely different from the history of America or that of Africa. So, if you want to create a law that encompasses all these different continents then you finally end up in creating a very huge theory, but which becomes very hollow.

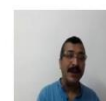
“The more comprehensive the validity for scope of a term, the more it leads us away from their richness of reality, since in order to include the common elements of the largest possible number of phenomenon, it must necessarily be an abstract as possible and hence devoid of content. In the social sciences, the knowledge of the universal or general is never valuable in itself.”

This is an extremely important point, and a fundamental difference between natural sciences and social sciences, a fundamental point of difference which makes this social science more complex and complicated than that of the natural science.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:28)

Ideal Types

- To study social phenomena, Weber argued that it is necessary to have a description of the key elements of phenomena. The goal is to describe forms of action and patterns of social organization while seeking to identify the historical causes of these forms and patterns.
- An ideal type or pure type summarizes the basic properties of social phenomena, which, in turn, can help the search for its historical causes.
- An ideal-type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found anywhere in reality.



He comes back to this idea of ideal type, we just briefly mentioned earlier. So, to study social phenomenon Weber argued that it is necessary to have a description of the key element of a phenomena. The goal is to describe, forms of actions and patterns of social organizations while seeking to identify the historical causes of these forms and patterns.

If you want to study a particular phenomenon, you need to necessarily have a description of the key elements of the phenomenon. You need to identify what are its most important prominent features and you need to describe them, for example, you know Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy is very famous and popular which we will discuss it in the next week.

In Weberian ideal type, you get a complete picture of a perfect form of bureaucracy, you will see how bureaucracy must be in its ideal type. I hope that you are familiar with this term, I gave you the example of an ideal type of a student or ideal type of a teacher, ideal type of a politician, ideal type of a school, and ideal type of a university.

So, these are all conceptual constructs where you want to over emphasize on certain features, what you think as something extremely important. An ideal type or pure type summarizes the basic properties of social phenomena, which in turn can help the search for its historical causes. These constructs are not historical processes, but rather they are historical constructs. So, this ideal type will help you to trace out the historical evolution of these concepts.

This is the definition of ideal type, I just thought I will mention it here for your benefit. An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less, present and occasionally absent, concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct.

It is a conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found anywhere in reality. So, as I give you this example of an ideal type of a student, such a perfect student never exist in reality, you will never find such a perfect student, or complete student who will not have any negative things about it, which is, he or she is not lacking in anything, that perfection is something impossible to find anywhere. But such a mental construct as Weber says, is something very important in social science analysis

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- *Historical Ideal Types*: Historical events can be described by analytically accentuating their key components. For example, in Weber's famous analysis of "the spirit of capitalism," he drew up a list of the features of this belief system. Once the essence or pure form of this belief system is highlighted, it then becomes possible to seek the causes for the emergences of this distinctive historical event



He talks about two, three types of ideal type. One is this historical ideal type, historical event can be described by analytically accentuating their key components for example in Weber's famous analysis of the spirit of capitalism, he drew up a list of features of this belief system, once the essence or pure form of this belief system is highlighted then it becomes possible to seek the causes of the emergence of this distinctive historical event.

He says that you can create an ideal type for a historical development trying to understand, trying to identify the most important feature or quality of that particular time and then try to understand how it evolved over a period of time and he uses this example, of the script of capitalism. We will discuss this in more detail, I think we will spend at least one or two sessions to try to understand this, his argument about this very popular book, "The Spirit of Capitalism" to understand the ethics and the spirit of capitalism. So, there he analyzes the reason for the emergence of capitalism, which he talks about as the spirit of capitalism, where he has employed this use of historical ideal type.

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- *General Ideal Types*: he wanted to make generalizations about generic social phenomena. This desire led him to formulate ideal types of phenomena that are always present in human action. These ideal types do not describe historical events, but rather, they accentuate certain key properties of actors, action, and social organization in general.



- His ideal types of social action

- These types of action classify behavior by visualizing its four "pure forms." Although Weber knew that actual situations would not perfectly reflect these concepts, they provide a common reference point for comparison. That is, a variety of empirical cases can be systematically compared with one another and with the ideal type, in this case, the types of social action.



Second one, he talks about this general ideal type, where he wanted to make generalizations about generic social phenomena, this desire led him to formulate ideal types of phenomena that are always present in human action. These ideal types do not describe historic events, but rather they accentuate certain key properties of actors, actions, and social organizations in general. So, it is not about the historical things, it is about contemporary society.

His ideal types of social actions, we will see that again, in the coming classes, he talks about three major types of social actions, actions which are informed by certain kind of values. So, they are all, you know ideal types. We know that people simply do not, for example when he talks about traditional social action, he is talking about how the loyalty towards tradition or commitment towards tradition becomes the most important force behind people's actions.

But we know that to segregate that, or to de-limit a particular action and then to say that it is purely from a traditional point of view, is very difficult. These types of actions classify behavior by visualizing its four pure forms. Although, Weber knew that these actual situations would not perfectly reflect these concepts, they provided a common reference points of comparison.

That is, a variety of empirical cases can be systematically compared with one another and with the ideal type, in this case, the type of social action. So, he talks about charismatic, he talks about value, different kind of value orientations, he talks about, traditional action. He talks about value

or rational action. He talks about instrumental rational action. So, we will discuss it in the coming class more detail.

But keep it in mind that each of these constructs are examples of this ideal type constructs and he knows that these pure forms do not exist. But more or less, you will be able to categorize all forms of human actions into these three or four categories, so that you will be able to compare. For example, you will be able to compare actions which are motivated by instrumental rational action with that of value rational action.

Why do some people do certain things in a very stupid manner, seemingly stupid manner, why do people sacrifice their own life for a particular cause and that action is very different from why certain people do things in a very calculative manner trying to maximize the benefit and pleasure for them. Human actions, the way in which people act, why do people act in different ways, what kind of reasons people attribute to their own action.

They are all, very different, very diverse but Weber argued that we will be able to classify, we will be able to come up with larger classifications based on these ideal, typical constructs, so that you will be able to classify human actions into different categories. Let us stop here. And we will continue with this discussion on Weber in the upcoming classes. Thank you.