UNIT 11: MAX WEBER: SOCIAL ACTION

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to–

- identify the important contributions of Max Weber to Sociology
- define Social Action and its four Ideal types
- explain subjective understanding of social actions and its importance in Sociology
- discuss natural science and social science
- explain the sociological methodology of Weber.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

A contemporary of Durkheim, Max Weber (1864-1920) was concerned with the development of that dimension which he thought most essential and promising for the furtherance of the science of Sociology.

Karl Emil Maximilian Weber, popularly known as Max Weber, was born in Erfurt, Germany in 1864. He is regarded as one of the founding figures of Sociology. Weber *delineated* the subject matter of Sociology as the

"subjective understanding of social action". Weber stated that the basic unit of society is social action, and social action is motivated by the purpose and will of the actors. In other words, the individuals attribute meanings to their actions, and interact with others in the society. The task of a researcher is to explore and analyse the meanings that the actors attribute to their actions. For this, Weber developed an elaborate methodology for the exploration and analysis of this subjective realm of social action. Weber's contribution to sociological theory was complementary to the kind of analysis that Durkheim developed. In fact, Weber's contribution was a filling in of that dimension which Durkheim left wholly untouched.

In the previous unit we have learnt about George Simmel's contribution to Sociology. In this Unit we will discuss the major contributions of Max Weber to Sociology.

11.3 SUBJECTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL ACTION

As we have already mentioned, to Weber, sociological analysis is "the subjective understanding of social action". This statement implies two basic components:

- Social action
- Subjective meaning of these actions



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Interpretive Sociology considers the individual and his actions as the basic unit of society, as its "atom." The social groups as state, association, and the other groups are the result of interaction of individuals. Hence, the task of Sociology should consist of the study of individual action. Group behaviour can be understood by an analysis of the actions of the participating individuals.

11.3.1 Social Action

Weber focuses not on the collectivity but on the individual. According to Weber, the collectivities such as the state, association, etc., must be treated solely as the results and modes of organization of the particular acts of the individual. Thus, Weber focuses on the individual and his action. He identified that it is the 'social action' of an individual which is the proper object of Social Science and Sociology.

In the words of Weber, *"Action is social in so far as… it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course"*. This definition of Weber highlights basic two components:

- Social action is **oriented to others**. This implies that social interaction occurs between individuals. This paves the way for collectivities and other associational/group behaviour.
- Social action is attributed to meanings. It is defined in terms of the 'meaningfulness' or **meanings that the actors attach to their actions**. The actions are triggered by a definite motive or intention of the actor. This meaning is attributed by the actor. The meanings are subjective in nature. In other words, it is the actor's interpretation of his/her action. Weber regarded '*verstehen'* (understanding at the level of meaning) and *'Ideal Types'* as effective methods to study Social Action.
- **Characteristics of Social Action:** Following are the characteristics of social action as identified by Weber:
  - Social action is motivated by **purpose and will**. It is meaningful behavior.
  - When any behavior is related to some intended purpose, it is termed an action. But, every action is not 'social'. Only those actions qualify as 'social' that **take into account the behaviour of others**. When the action of an individual is somehow influenced or guided by the actions or behavior of other individuals, it is called social action. For example, a solitary prayer is not social. Similarly, an economic action that

does not consider the effect it would have on the behaviour of others is not social.

- Not every type of contact of human beings has a social character. For example, the mere collision of two cyclists on the road is not a social action, but a natural action. But, it would be social action if the cyclists tried to avoid hitting each other, or if they argued after the collision. The mere presence of another actor in a situation does not lead to social action. There must be **interaction** between them. Social action takes the form of interaction.
- Social action is **not identical with the similar actions** of many persons. For example, when it rains almost all the people on the road would run for cover or would put up their umbrellas. Besides, many a time in a crowd, a person usually does what others in the crowd do. This is not social action because it is not the result of any motive or intention.
- Social action may **be oriented to the past, present or the expected future behaviour of others**. Thus, it may be motivated by, for example, revenge for some past event, defence against a present situation, or aggression against an anticipated future attack.

➢ **Types:** By using the Ideal-type methodology, Weber distinguished four 'Ideal Types' of social action: Affectual action, Traditional action, *Wertrational* (value-rational) action*, and Zweckrational* (instrumental/ end-rational) action.



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Ideal Type is a 'model' or an 'abstract', comprising of certain characteristics, to compare and analyse the real world/phenomenon. It is not necessarily the 'best type'.

Of these four types, Weber considers *instrumental* and *value-rational* as actions in the fullest sense, but he also includes

affectual and *traditional* actions in his typology of actions since they are in the borderline of meaningfulness and they motivate individual behaviour.

Now let us discuss four types in details:

- **Affectual/Affective Action:** These are actions simply performed to express an emotion, impulse, and feeling of the actor. The actions spring spontaneously and powerfully from them. Such actions are oriented to others. The hurling of bottles by the spectators at the players in a match as a spontaneous emotional reaction to the players' poor performance in the match is an example of affectual/affective action.
- **Traditional Action:** These are actions that are performed simply because they were performed in the past. Long standing beliefs and customs become ingrained in an individual and become a second nature to him/her. The individual actor need not imagine a goal, or be conscious of a value, or be stimulated by an emotion. The actor just obeys the traditions and acts accordingly. For example, ritualistic actions carried out in places of worship.
- **Wertrational (Value-Rational) Action:** This is rational action in relation to a value. The ends are predetermined (value based), and the actor is unquestionably committed to it. The means are chosen for their efficiency to meet the goal. For example, for a soldier, patriotism is the ultimate value and he may give up his life for it. Here nothing matters but the service of the value, not even the issues of personal success or failure in other dimensions of life.
- **Zweckrational (Instrumental or End-Rational) Action:** This is an action where the actor (a) assesses the utility of a goal, and (b) compares different means to achieve the goal. The actor determines the goal, based on rational deliberation and chooses his means purely in terms of their efficiency to attain the goal. For example, a student applying for a college

education assesses the utility of the course he intends to study, and compares colleges to see which college can offer him the best deal.

Weber clarified that this list of types of social actions are not exhaustive classifications of social actions. These are *Ideal types* and in reality, there may be a combination of several types. Weber's classification of the types of action was mainly aimed at investigating the social evolutionary process.

He concluded that behaviour in modern societies, influenced by the growth of bureaucracy and industrialism, is dominated more by goal-oriented rationality (*Zweckrational*) and less by traditions, values and emotions.

11.3.2 Subjective Meaning of Social Action

Weber held that men oriented their actions to each other **in terms of meaning**. This has the following implications:

- They actively seek to *achieve certain ends* of which they are often aware of. They *employ certain means* while discarding others in their attempt to attain their ends.
- These actions, as we already stated, are *directed at others*. The individuals act in relation to others in accomplishing their purposes.
- The above quality gives a meaning to the actions of the individuals. Social actions are *meaningful actions*.
- Since, it is the individual who deliberates and exercises choices in performing the action, it is *meaningful from the point of view* of the individual actor. Meaning is subjective (pertains to the subject. In this context, it is the actor).
- It is this meaning, i.e. the complex of end-means of social actions (from the view point of the actor and directed at others) that seems to the actor himself (or the observer) an adequate ground for the conduct in question. These *serve as causes of the social action.* In other words, these are the causal motivations behind the action.

- Thus, sociological analysis should involve the exploration and analysis *(interpretation) of the subjective meaning of social actions*. This is what Weber meant by "Subjective understanding of actions". He termed this as **"Verstehen"**, which comprises his key methodological concept. Herein, the researcher should understand the meaning of the action from the viewpoint of the actor. (This perspective is known as the 'emic' approach).

Weber is claimed to be the founder of **"Interpretive Sociology".** The subjective understanding of social action as a component of sociological analysis is an innovation of Weber. This greatly facilitated both the focusing of the sociologist's range of subject matter and nurtured the growth of specialised nomenclature within the social sciences.



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According to Weber, the word "meaning" refers to the actual existing meaning in the given concrete case of a particular actor, or to the average approximate meaning attributable to a given plurality of actors, or secondly to the theoretically conceived pure type of subjective meaning attributed to the hypothetical actor or actors in a given type of action. In no case does it refer to an objectively correct meaning.

11.4 NATURAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Weber had emphasized the subjective understanding of the meaning of social actions. This being the focus of Sociology, this discipline can proceed scientifically. Objectivism, (i.e. the collection and interpretation of data without the researcher's bias or opinion) can be achieved even while interpreting the subjective meaning of social actions.

Weber compared social science with natural science. He pointed out the similarities and differences between these two types of sciences as follows.



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Weber argued that unlike the objects studied in the natural or physical sciences, the objects of social sciences comprise of 'thinking', 'reflexive' beings. Therefore, in social sciences, one should study why the object 'thinks' it behaves in a particular way. This is contrary to the natural sciences, where it is not required to know why, say, an atom or a molecule 'thinks' it behaves in a particular way.

- **Dissimilarity:** There is the basic *difference in the nature of the units* that social science and natural science deal with. In case of natural sciences, observation deals with the external course of events. But with regard to human action, we need to interpret the actions and explore and understand the motives and the internal meanings. Social actions are facts, and can be treated objectively (as Durkheim formulated), but in doing so, the subjective aspect of action needs to be explained.
- **Similarities:** Both these categories of science *seek universally valid generalizations* in the relations between the phenomena they deal with. Social science seeks to search for lawful abstract generalisations about human behaviour, particularly between the causes and the actions. Natural science also seeks to formulate abstract laws among the (natural) phenomena.
- There is *no basic gap in the methods and procedures* used by both these sciences.
- Both these disciplines seek at *objective analysis of the phenomena* they deal with.



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Weber insisted that a value element inevitably enters into the selection of the problem an investigator chooses to probe. There are no intrinsically scientific criteria for the selection

of topics; here, every man follows his own stance and preference which is based on the aspect a person values. This is what Weber calls *Wertbeziehung* i.e. **value-relevance**. We can mention that, for Weber, it is the subjective understanding of social action which is the focus of sociological analysis.

Value relevance is different form **value-neutrality** (hallmark of science). The selection of a topic according to one's preference does not undermine the objectivity of its analysis. Whether analysis and its corresponding statement are objectively true or not, depends on the value free analysis. Value neutrality implies that once the social scientist has chosen the problem in terms of its relevance to his values, he must hold values– his own or those of others– in abeyance, and follow the ethos of science in their role as scientists.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: Are the following True or False?

a) The objects of natural sciences and social sciences are the same. (True/False)

b) Every action is a social action. (True/False)

c) The four types of action given by Weber are actually 'Ideal Types'. (True/False)

d) Weber believed that in modern societies, action and behaviour are influenced more by value-oriented rationality *(Wertrational)*. (True/False)

11.5 SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

Weber held that the grasping of the subjective quality of human behaviour is dependent upon the scientists' ability to interpret the causal meaning of human action. A correct interpretation is arrived at when the overt action and the motives have both been correctly apprehended and, at the same time, their relation has become meaningfully comprehensible. In order that the researcher is able to comprehend and correctly interpret the

subjective meaning of action, Weber developed the following methods and concepts:

- **Sympathetic Introspection:** Sympathetic Introspection constitutes the core approach for the subjective understanding of social actions. "For the verifiable accuracy of interpretation of the meaning of phenomena, it is of great help to put one's self imaginatively in the place of the actor and thus sympathetically to participate in his experience."
- **Social Relationship:** This is patterned human interaction which is intentional, meaningful and symbolic. Six types of social relations termed *"modes of orientation of social action"* have been identified by Weber. These are, as briefly identified by *Larson, usage, custom, rational orientation, fashion, convention (mores) and law.*
- **Typological Analysis:**
  - **Ideal Types:** Weber developed the method of constructing ideal types to enable the researcher to interpret the social actions. Ideal types serve as theoretical models. These are assumed types. If it is to be assumed that individuals are motivated by strictly rational and single ends and follow equally rational means unaffected by emotional factors, then the meaning-action complex forms an ideal type. The actual behaviour of individuals and groups is then studied as a deviation from such ideal-type behaviour.
  - **Historical and Sociological types of causality:** Historical causality seeks to determine the unique circumstances that have given rise to a particular event, for example, the causes of the World War I. Sociological causality seeks to find out the factors that lead to a war or a revolution. It assumes a regular relationship between phenomena.
  - **Comparative Method:** In order to arrive at a generalization regarding human behaviour and the causal relations between behaviour and motives, both among individuals and groups, Weber advocated the comparative method. In this method, the causal relation of behaviour and the subjective meaning are to be interpreted by comparing the various instances of human action.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.2: State whether the following are True or False:

a) Sympathetic introspection is the understanding of the meaning of actions from the viewpoint of the actors. (True/False)

b) Comparison of actual behaviour with ideal types enables a researcher to interpret human behaviour. (True/False)

Q.3: Mention the basic difference between the historical and sociological types of causality of Weber.

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11.6 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF WEBER'S CONTRIBUTIONS

In this section we will critically discuss the contributions of Weber which we have considered in this Unit.

- Weber is considered to be the *founder of Interpretive Sociology*. He was the first sociologist to propound a theoretical framework of studying human actions. Weber insisted on the importance of the studying of the motives of social action. While Durkheim stressed on the objectivity of social facts, its external and super organic dimensions, it was Weber who drew our attention to the subjective dimension of social action. While Durkheim emphasized the superorganic nature of society and its force upon the individuals, Weber focused on the active role of the actor in the social system. Both Durkheim and Weber's analyses are complementary to each other.
- Weber did not negate the Durkheimian approach and his theoretical framework. Rather, he stated that his is one of the many dimensions of social behaviour and *comprises one approach to the study of human behaviour.*

- He highlighted the importance of understanding human behaviour from the *perspective of the actor.* This is also known as the emic approach and constitutes an important approach to understanding social behaviour and planning social change.
- Weber was very rigorous in formulating a *well defined methodology* of comprehending the subjective dimension of social action. For this, he developed several concepts. He explored the social world and brought out models of social behaviour to enable the understanding of the social actions. He also categorized the various types of modes of orientation of social actions to enable the researcher to identify the types of motivation.
- He brought out a *vital difference between social and natural sciences*, at a time when sociology was treated at par with all other sciences. He pointed out that while natural science deals with the natural phenomena which involve only the outer aspects, sociology deals with the inner aspects of the phenomena (social action) it studies. Yet, Weber highlighted that this cannot be considered a ground for the exclusion of sociology from the world of science. *Sociology is a science* as this subjective dimension could be objectively studied. He differentiated between value-preference and value-neutrality, and raised sociology on the pedestal of science. Weber, like Durkheim, is considered to be one of the chief founders of modern sociology.



11.7 LET US SUM UP

- Sociology is concerned with social actions, .i.e. the actions that are directed at others.
- Social actions have to be understood with reference to its subjective meaning. It is subjective as it could be understood only from the viewpoint of the actor.
- Social actions are rational behaviour having an end and a means to achieve the end.

- There are four types of social actions based on the nature of the ends, and the means to achieve those ends. These are traditional, affectual, value-rational and rational-instrumental.
- Weber developed methodology to enable the researcher to interpret the subjective meaning of social actions and to arrive at valid generalizations of social actions.



11.8 FURTHER READING

1) Abraham, Francis and Morgan, J. H. (1985); *Sociological Thought*; Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.
2) Coser, Lewis A. (2004); *Masters of Sociological Thought*; Delhi, Jaipur: Rawat.
3) Hussain, Maqitul; *A Prologue to Five Sociologists*; Dibrugarh: T.L.B. Publication.



11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: a) False, b) False, c) True, d) False

Ans. to Q. No. 2: a) True, b) True

Ans. to Q. No. 3: Historical causality deal with particular events and its causes while sociological causality deal with regular relationship between two general phenomena.



11.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions: (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What is Social Action? What are the different types of Social Action?

Q.2: Distinguish between Traditional and Value Rational Action?

B) Long Questions: (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: Discuss Weber's Theory of Social Action.

Q.2: Discuss the methodology for the exploration and comprehension of the subjective meaning of social actions.

Q.3: Critically discuss Weber's contributions to Sociology.

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