



Weekly Question Discussion (Sociology) (Chapter – 2 Paper – 1)

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Is sociology a value-free science? Discuss.

Answer

- Structure
 - What is Science?
 - What is Value Freedom?
 - Sociology as a value-free science
 - Why it is not
 - Conclude

What is Science?

- Science can be defined as – “use of systematic methods of empirical investigation, the analysis of data, theoretical thinking and logical assessment of arguments to develop a body of knowledge about a particular subject matter.”

To qualify as a science, for any discipline, certain criteria can be like:

Litmus test of Science

- Inter-subjective reliability
- Objective and Value-free
- Quantifiability
- Universal testability and Theoretical Orientation

Value freedom

- Values play a direct role when they provide direct motivation to accept or reject a theory.
- They play an indirect role when they play a role in evaluating the consequences of accepting or rejecting a claim, thus influencing what will count as sufficient evidence to accept or reject.
- This idea revolves around the question of whether or not it is possible for sociologists to study the social world in a way that does not allow the values held by the researcher to influence the outcome of their research.
- In a sense, therefore, it is not a question of whether or not the sociologist has values (since, by definition, all human beings develop some kind of value system).
- Science is also not value-free, but can be protected from the effects of values if scientists take steps to mitigate the influence of inappropriate values.
 - One step is to distinguish between direct and indirect roles of values
 - Another is the articulation of guidelines for individual scientists.

Sociology as a value-free science

- Values are an integral part of a research.
- They are present in the:
 - Selection of an object of analysis

- In the way it is approached
- In the questions asked
- In the selection of data
- In the interpretation of data
- In the answers that are given.
- In that sense, no science is value-free.
- It is, rather, a question of the extent to which such personal values either do or do not influence the production of knowledge about either society as a whole, or particular aspects of that society.
- In this sense, the concept of value-freedom relates to the question of whether or not the sociologist can be personally objective about their research.
- Comte writes that Sociology has key features of Science which are:
 - Perspective
 - Methods of study
 - Subject matter, etc.

Further, Sociology can be assessed on the broader framework of science as follows:

- Inter-subjective reliability
 - It is the extent to which other researchers are able to reach the same results if they were to replicate one's study.
 - Sociology has concepts which have universal meanings irrespective of who is the investigator. Example: Family, Religion.
- Objective and Value-free
 - This is also possible to a great degree. According to Weber, objectivity is possible through methods like, 'Verstehen' and 'Ideal types'.
 - Durkheim suggested 'indirect experimentation to prove empirical validity of social theories.
- Generalizations and theoretical orientation
 - It is also possible to a certain extent.

Example: Durkheim's theory of religion and Parsons' theory of social system claimed to be universal theory, incest taboo, etc.

- Quantifiability
 - Social phenomenon can be observed albeit directly/indirectly-Durkheim's social facts and Weber's Ideal types.
 - Sociology employs scientific methods like scales of sociometer, schedules, questionnaire, interview, case history, comparison, etc.

Why Sociology is not a science?

- Sociology has certain limitations compared to natural sciences in terms of empiricism, testability, universal

theories and absolute objectivity.

- MAX WEBER – difference in subject matter (human beings have consciousness). So sociology is a science in itself.
- Natural sciences go for statement of facts while social sciences go for statements of value.
- Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert (neo kantians) introduced concepts of nomothetic (based on facts/ empiricism/ tendency to generalize) and idiographic (based on tendency to specify/ subjective interpretations/ suited to humanities).
- So methodology, approach towards knowledge and theorizing is different for social science.
- Erving Goffman and GH Mead used different approach to understand social phenomenon.
- However, it suffers from certain limitations as follows:
 - Difficult to be empirical
 - Difficulty in being inductive and universal
 - Human beings have consciousness (non-positivism)
 - Difficulty in achieving objectivity and value-neutrality.

Conclude

- But if seen as method of enquiry, sociology fulfils the conditions of it being a science.
- In Sociology, scientific method is not bound by the empirical nature of study, but is more concerned with methodology. Hence, it can't become like a natural science but it is like social science.
- Stuart Chaze said, "Science is science whether it is sociology or biology".
- Thus, Sociology as a Science can, be seen through the following lens: -
 - Methodology (positivism/non positivism)
 - Spirit (critical)
 - Purpose (to know the truth)
 - Consequences (curiosity and solving the problem)
- Max Weber argued that while complete value-freedom was not possible (since, by definition, all human actors possess values and all human interaction is based upon value-judgments), he did argue that it was possible for sociologists to be personally objective in their research.