

Sociology as Science

P-I T-2

Sociology

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Science, scientific method and critique

Science refers to the application of objective methods of investigation, reasoning and logic to develop a body of knowledge about given phenomena. There are three goals of science. The first is to explain why something happens. The second is to make generalizations, that is, to go beyond the individual cases and make statements that apply to a collectivity. The third is to predict, to specify, what will happen in future, in the light of the available stock of knowledge.

Thus, science refers to a systematic body of certified and changing knowledge which is based upon observable and verifiable facts and the methods used to acquire this knowledge. So, the term science is used both for the knowledge as well the methods that are used to acquire this knowledge.

Like all scientists, sociologists must study the specific in order to understand the general. The true concern of the geologist is not the peculiarity of the rock he holds in his hand, the concern of the botanist is not the fate of the flower he finds in the field, the concern of the sociologist is not the specific event he observes and records. All science is concerned with the order and pattern of its subject matter – what it is that rocks or flowers or persons or societies have in common. One of the ways scientists move from the specific to the general is through statistical averaging. A chemist who observes the reactions of millions of atoms cannot predict with certainty the behaviour of any single hydrogen atom, but he can say with assurance that most hydrogen atoms behave in a certain way. Similarly, although a sociologist can never predict the political opinion of any particular blue-collar worker, he can say that most members of a given socio-economic class have political opinions of a certain kind.

Sociology is a scientific discipline. It is a science in the sense that it involves objective and systematic methods of investigation and evaluation of social reality in the light of empirical evidence and interpretation. But, it cannot be directly modeled on the patterns of natural sciences, because human behaviour is different from the world of nature. Among other differences, the subject matter of natural sciences is relatively static and unchanging whereas human behaviour as the subject matter of sociology is flexible and dynamic. Whereas, the natural phenomena can be put under controlled observation, it may not be possible to do the same regarding the subject matter of sociology. This is because all social phenomena and social institutions like family, marriage, caste, etc. are constantly changing even while they are being studied. In sociological research, it is difficult to be completely value-free. Moreover, the research situation itself becomes a social situation where the researcher confronts another human being and gets involved in a process of interaction. This makes it difficult to be objective. Good

social scientists keep these limitations in mind and try to be as objective as possible. For that purpose, different research tools are used, and data are checked and crosschecked.

To sum up, it may be said that any discipline is considered to be scientific when it is *empirical, theoretical, cumulative* and *value-neutral*. Please note that these characteristics are also considered as the basic postulates of scientific method. Against this yardstick, let us examine the status of sociology as a science:

- (a) Sociology is empirical: It is based on observation and reasoning, not on supernatural/ speculative revelations, and its results are not speculative. In the early stages of their creative work, all scientists speculate, of course, but ideally at least, they submit their speculations to the test of fact before announcing them as scientific discoveries. All aspects of sociological knowledge are subject to evaluation made about social behaviour or can be put to test for empirical evidence.
- (b) Sociology is theoretical: It attempts to summarize complex observations in abstract logically related propositions which purport to explain causal relationships in the subject matter. Its main aim is to interpret and to inter-relate sociological data in order to explain the nature of social phenomena and to produce hypotheses whose final validity can be checked by further empirical research.
- (c) Sociology is cumulative: Sociological theories are built upon one another, extending and refining the older ones and producing the new ones. As such, theoretical integration becomes a goal in the construction of sociological formulations. Thus, sociology is cumulative.
- (d) Sociology is non-ethical or value-neutral: Sociologists do not ask whether particular social actions are good or bad; they seek merely to explain them. It addresses issues. Study of human relations is the prime consideration in sociology. In this context, **Morris Ginsberg** observes that ethical problems should be dealt with neutrality. Objectivity and rationality based on a thorough knowledge of a situation alone can ensure scientific status to the discipline of sociology.

In all these respects, sociology is far from having reached perfection; but progress is being steadily made. Hence, sociology can at best be described as a social science.

As discussed earlier, science is a body of verified knowledge about physical or social reality. The method used to acquire this kind of knowledge is called **scientific method**. The general guideline for all scientific research is the scientific method. Although it is possible to outline the series of steps that comprise this method, its real importance is not as a body of rules but as an attitude toward the work of observation and generalization. It has often been said that many scientific discoveries are due to a lucky accident; Galvani, for example, discovered that nerves transmit electrical impulses when one of his assistants left a freshly dissected frog on the lab table near an unrelated experiment in electrical conduction. But it is not the element of chance that should be stressed in such an occurrence, the key element was Galvani's trained powers of observation, his ability to derive a possible explanation for what he saw, his knowledge of the way to test that explanation. While Galvani's assistant, who also observed this lucky accident, dismissed it as a curious coincidence, Galvani the scientist saw the implications of the coincidence.

How can one learn to observe and generalize in a scientific manner? The following steps serve as general guidelines when applying the scientific method in sociological research.

First, make a careful statement of the problem to be investigated and frame a hypothesis. A sociologist begins by defining precisely what it is he wants to know. He generally states the problem so that it fits into existing theoretical frameworks and is related to the relevant findings of previous research. Stating the problem in this manner insures that knowledge will be cumulative and that one researcher's findings can be easily utilized by others. The problem must also be formulated as a verifiable **hypothesis**, one that can be tested before it is accepted or rejected. Many provocative hypotheses can never be tested. For example, one might hypothesize that God exists, but no one has found a way to test this hypothesis. Scientists must modify the original hypothesis to one they can test, such as: the majority of adult Americans believe that God exists. Please note that a hypothesis is nothing but a tentative statement asserting a relationship between certain facts (or variables). You will learn more about hypothesis in our later discussion.

In sociological research the application of this first step in the scientific method can be illustrated by the case of a researcher who suspects an association between urban residence and mental illness. The researcher would begin by identifying certain defining qualities of a city: How big is it? What are its social characteristics? How does it differ from a nearby suburb? With a definition in mind, he looks for the aspects of a city that might be associated with mental illness: population size and density, quality of housing, prevalence of low-income

groups, availability of recreational facilities. After examining existing theories and research findings in this area, he would frame a hypothesis stating a suspected or tentative relationship between some specific urban characteristic and mental illness. For example, he might hypothesize that the incidence of mental illness increases in proportion to the size of the city, with the largest cities having the highest rates of mental illness.

In the search for ways that these **variables** (characteristics that are present in varying amounts or degrees) could be measured, the hypothesis might be further refined. The researcher might choose to limit his study to those patients actually hospitalized with a diagnosis of mental illness, thus eliminating all those mentally ill urban residents who have not been diagnosed and are not being treated. Although this refinement makes the hypothesis easier to test, it also introduces an additional problem: the number of institutions that can diagnose and treat mental illness. Thus, the rates of mental illness might appear higher in some cities simply because they have more facilities to treat the mentally ill, whereas in other cities a large percentage of the mentally ill population go untreated. Each choice of a specific measure brings with it new possibilities of error and bias, yet the general hypothesis must be reduced to specifics if it is to be tested at all.

Second, develop a research design. A **research design** is a plan for the collection, analysis, and evaluation of data; it involves deciding how facts are to be selected, how they are to be evaluated and classified, and how they are to be analyzed to uncover relationships and patterns that bear on the original hypothesis. The major goal of the research design is to insure that the evidence gathered to test a hypothesis will be trustworthy, and that extraneous factors that might falsify the results will be controlled. Please note that **extraneous variables** are undesirable variables that influence the relationship between the variables that an experimenter is examining. In other words, extraneous variables are the variables which though not a part of the study yet are capable enough to influence the outcome of the study. These variables are undesirable because they add error to an experiment. A major goal in research design is to decrease or control the influence of extraneous variables as much as possible. The classic **controlled experiment** in a laboratory is the ideal scientific research design. It is an experiment designed in advance and conducted under conditions in which it is possible to control all relevant factors while measuring the effect on an experimentally induced variable. In a controlled experiment the subjects are divided into two groups. The variable whose effect is to be tested, or the **independent variable**, is then introduced into one group, called the **experimental group**, while it is withheld from the other group, called the **control group**. The two groups are subsequently compared to determine whether there are any significant differences between them regarding the variable that is expected to change, or the **dependent variable**. On the basis of

this comparison, the original hypothesis, which proposes a specific relationship between the independent and dependent variables, can be confirmed or rejected.

The use of the controlled experiment can best be illustrated by cancer research. Suppose one wishes to test the hypothesis that nicotine causes cancer in mice. A number of mice can be randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Those in the experimental group are then given a dose of nicotine (the independent variable) while those in the control group are not. Everything else about the two groups is held constant. If the incidence of cancer (the dependent variable) is subsequently found to be higher in the experimental than in the control group, a cause-and-effect relationship between nicotine and cancer in mice may be assumed. It is seldom possible to test sociological hypotheses under controlled laboratory conditions. The typical social research design is therefore developed with this limitation in mind.

Third, collect data in accordance with the research design. One way for obtaining information about human behaviour and social life is to observe the way people actually behave: how they act in a given situation, what they do on a daily and regular basis. This constitutes the *objective reality*. Accurate and objective observation by trained observers is a fundamental distinguishing feature of all the sciences. Another way is to ask people about their actions, attitudes, and beliefs. Their answers help to reveal the *subjective reality* – the meanings and thoughts, or “reasons,” that lie behind a person’s behaviour. Subjective reality distinguishes the social sciences from the natural sciences, which deal only with objective reality, that which can be seen to happen.

Some sociologists, however, question whether subjective reality can be accurately analyzed scientifically and prefer to concentrate exclusively on the observation of objective reality. They maintain that the only valid evidence for scientific purposes is what they can observe about human behaviour, not what people tell them. Such scholars are called as *‘positivists’*. In sociology, positivism is generally associated with the view that there is an objective world which is capable of being understood in objective and scientific terms. The founders of sociology, be it Comte, Spencer or Durkheim, all advocated positivist approach to study social life. Though, this approach had its own limitations and was later criticized by the scholars belonging to the anti-positivist tradition. You will read about this in more detail in our subsequent discussion on ‘Positivism and its critique’.

The fourth step in the scientific method is to analyze the data and draw conclusions. It is at this step that the initial hypothesis is accepted or rejected and the conclusions of the research are related to the existing body of theory, perhaps

modifying it to take account of the new findings. The findings are usually presented as articles in scholarly journals, monographs, or books. The accuracy and significance of scientific findings are assessed in terms of their validity and reliability. **Validity** refers to the correspondence between what a scientific investigation or technique purports to measure and what it actually measures. An example of this kind of assessment is the current challenge by many social scientists of the validity of IQ tests. These scientists question whether the tests really measure innate human intelligence or something else. **Reliability** refers to the degree to which a scientific test or measurement is consistent and accurate. There is less doubt about the reliability of IQ tests; although they may not measure intelligence, they seem to measure some particular characteristic consistently. To determine reliability, replication, the repetition of an experiment a number of times, is done to see if the same results are obtained.

By no means do all, or even most, sociological research investigations closely follow this outline of the scientific method. Many sociologists are simply interested in accurate descriptions, others do not develop precise hypotheses or elaborate research designs, and most do not formally go through the step of either accepting or rejecting a hypothesis. Nevertheless, this model of the scientific method is highly influential as a guideline for both planning research and evaluating research findings. It represents the ideal that all scientists seek to attain.

Sociology is Simple
Sociology is Scoring
provided that you
Study Sociology Systematically

Major theoretical strands of research methodology

Positivism and its critique

Non-positivist methodologies

(Dear Candidate, since the above mentioned topics are conceptually interrelated, we have discussed these topics in an interlinked argument. This discussion would also help you to understand the underlying theme of *methodological debate* running through these topics and write an analytical answer.)

(Dear Candidate, this is the most important section in sociology. Kindly read it thoroughly. Read it as many times as possible. I guarantee that once you understand this section, you will start playing with sociology as most of the debates in sociological theory center around the arguments discussed in this section.)

Sociological imagination

Sociology is generally defined as ‘the science of society’. Sociology offers a view of the world that we live in and helps us to explain and predict social situations, behaviours and actions. **C. Wright Mills** used the term ‘*the sociological imagination*’ to demonstrate how sociological theories help us to see familiar situations in new ways or give us insights into unfamiliar situations and social worlds.

When sociologists have looked at society, they have often started from a key idea: ‘if things do not have to be as they are, then surely they could be better?’ Sociological knowledge shows us that societies can be structured in different ways, and it shows us that change and transformation are part of human living. So, if social change is not only possible but also inevitable, can sociology help us to make sense of it, and can it help to build a better society?

The trouble is that people often disagree violently about what is ‘better’ – and sociologists have no special authority to tell people the correct values to live by. Sociologists now understand this and no longer try to dictate remedies for the social ills they diagnose (unlike Emile Durkheim, one of the first and greatest sociologists, who tried to do just that). Instead, they try to ask interesting questions about why people behave in the ways they do, and what the possibilities and

consequences of their actions might be. Learning from such analysis can put people in a stronger position to shape their own future.

Unlike any other discipline, sociology provides us with a form of self-consciousness, an awareness that our personal experiences are often caused by structural or social forces. Sociology is the systematic study of individuals, groups, and social structures. A sociologist examines the relationships between individuals and society, which includes such social institutions as the family, the military, the economy, and education. As a social science, sociology offers an objective and systematic approach to understanding the causes of social problems. From a sociological perspective, problems and their solutions don't just involve individuals; they also have a great deal to do with the social structures in our society.

According to Mills, the sociological imagination can help us distinguish between personal troubles and public issues. **The sociological imagination is the ability to link our personal lives and experiences with our social world.** Mills describes how personal troubles occur within the "character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relationships with others", whereas public issues are a "public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened". As a result, the individual, or those in contact with that individual, can resolve a trouble, but the resolution of an issue requires public debate about what values are being threatened and the source of such a threat. In other words, according to Mills, an individual may be able to solve a trouble, but a public issue can only be resolved by society and its social structures.

Let's consider unemployment. One man unemployed is his own personal trouble. Resolving his unemployment involves reviewing his current situation, reassessing his skills, considering his job opportunities, and submitting his resumes or job applications to employers. Once he has a new job, his personal trouble is over. However, what happens when your city or state experiences high levels of unemployment? This affects not just one person, rather, thousands or millions. A personal trouble has been transformed into a public issue. This is the case not just because of how many people it affects; something becomes an issue because of the public values it threatens. Unemployment threatens our sense of economic security. It challenges our belief that everyone can work hard to succeed. Unemployment raises questions about society's obligation to help those without a job.

The sociological imagination challenges the claim that the problem is "natural" or based on individual failures, instead reminding us how the problem is rooted in society, in our social structures themselves. The sociological imagination

emphasizes the structural bases of social problems, making us aware of the economic, political, and social structures that govern employment and unemployment trends. Individuals may have *agency*, the ability to make their own choices, but their actions and even their choices may be constrained by the realities of the social structure.

Sociology, thus, is uniquely able to connect personal experiences to larger social issues by applying the sociological imagination.

According to **Jeanne Ballantine** and **Keith Roberts** (2012), sociologists examine the software and hardware of society. A society consists of individuals who live together in a specific geographic area, who interact with each other, and who cooperate for the attainment of common goals. The **software** is our culture. Each society has a culture that serves as a system of guidelines for living. A culture includes *norms* (rules of behaviour shared by members of society and rooted in a value system), *values* (shared judgments about what is desirable or undesirable, right or wrong, good or bad), and *beliefs* (ideas about life, the way society works, and where one fits in). The **hardware** comprises the enduring social structures that bring order to our lives. This includes the positions or *statuses* that we occupy in society (student, employee) and the social *groups* to which we belong and identify with (our family, our community, our workplace). *Social institutions* are the most complex hardware. Social institutions such as the family, religion, or education, are relatively permanent social units of roles, rules, relationships, and organized activities devoted to meeting human needs and to directing and controlling human behaviour.

How to develop a Sociological Perspective?

Most of us see the world around us through our individual experiences. How we see our place in the world and the decisions we make accordingly are colored by these experiences. For example, did you experience discrimination because of your caste, race or religion? Are you unemployed? Did you face identity crisis at some point of time in your life? These are personal problems, but they have their origins in social situations. Although individuals may have various ways of dealing with these problems, there is a social context to each that takes them out of the purely personal into the larger social world. If you do not examine your personal problem in relation to social forces, you miss an opportunity to address the problem in an effective way. If you do not reflect on the problems of others, even if you don't experience them yourself, you also miss an important component of sociological thinking. Your own experience may or may not seem unique, or may or may not look like the experiences of others. Either way, you must reach beyond your comfort zone to think sociologically. It is important to

understand that everything you experience personally has a social context that is bigger than you, and sociology can help you gain that perspective.

C. Wright Mills in his famous book *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) helps us explore the connections between our individual experiences and the larger social world. Mills demonstrates how sociology can help us tie our personal problems to social circumstances and events. To use the sociological imagination, Mills asks us to look at how structural changes in society impact our individual lives and the lives of others. Developing a global view of history will help us see the context in which we must make decisions that may be life altering. If we cannot do that, we will likely have the experience that our “private lives are a series of traps”. These traps may seem inescapable, and our own fault, because of our inability to perceive the greater circumstances that shape our lives. Mills challenges our tendency to see our lives as purely psychological experiences overwhelmed by forces out of our control. Thus sociology enables us to step out of our personal cocoons and connect our personal lives to larger social structures and historical trends. This process helps us understand that individuals alone are not entirely responsible for the circumstances of their lives. When we understand the role social forces play in our lives, we get closer to being able to influence those social forces in hopes of bettering our own lives and those of others.

What is theory?

Before we begin to look at the importance of social theory, we should ask the question: ‘What are we theorizing about?’ Sociologists often take ‘society’ for granted, assuming that the object of their study is obvious. However, I would like to draw your attention to some features of society that are important when looking at social theory. Society consists of the social institutions and social relationships that we inhabit in a dense and intense way. However, these institutions and relationships are both concrete and abstract at the same time.

For example, consider the institution of the monarchy. Some people will have met the monarch of their country personally and some courtiers may have an ongoing relationship with the king or queen on a daily basis. Others will have only an abstract relationship with their monarch – that is, they are subjects of the monarch but have had no direct interaction with him or her. The relationships, though abstract, is nonetheless real in its effects – for example the taxes given by the subjects support the monarch in his or her duties.

The monarchy is also an institution and not just a person. While individual kings and queens come and go, the institution of the monarchy persists in the form of the functions it performs and its focus for identity for the subjects of the

monarch. Note, however, that a monarchy is not necessarily a permanent feature of society – the institution can be overthrown and lose its role as a locus of loyalty. This, the institution of the monarchy exists as an abstract concept, fulfilling constitutional and emotional elements of society. **It is the abstract nature of much of society and our experiences of it that leads to the need for social theory.**

A second feature of society that is important for theorizing is that it is **patterned**. That is, society and our lives within it demonstrate regularities and routines that are open to theorizing by sociologists. These patterns vary from the simple and individual, such as the ebb and flow of activity between day and night, so that there is a more dense web of interactions during daylight hours. However, regularities also appear beyond the surface level of human activity. For example, it can be shown that educational attainment demonstrates enduring patterns, such that certain social groups (the working class and some ethnic minorities) persistently underperform in examinations. Sociological theory seeks to explain both the surface and the deep patterns of social behavior.

A **theory** is a set of ideas that claims to explain how something works. A sociological theory is therefore a set of ideas that claims to explain how society or aspects of society work.

Theory is first defined as ‘**a generalized statement about a social phenomenon**’. What this means is that sociologists seek to go beyond the simple description of single events to a different level of analysis. Theoretical statements therefore cover a number of similar events and describe the similarities between them and why any differences might occur. To use our example of educational attainment, sociologists might look to the statistics of achievement over a number of years and produce theoretical statements about the persistence of group differences and also why the differences might change over time.

This leads to a second feature of theory that is important, namely that theory seeks to explain social phenomena, producing supported reasons why such differences exist and why changes might be occurring. The purpose of explaining social phenomena is to be able to predict future patterns and influence social policies that might effect beneficial changes to the patterns. In terms of educational underachievement, if we know why some groups perform less well, then we might be able to produce circumstances in which they are supported to perform better. It is worth noting at this point that this is not necessarily an easy thing to do, and this is because society differs from natural circumstances in two important respects. First, human beings have free will and change their behaviour according to their preferences, ideologies or even whims. Second, societies do not remain

static, but change over time and in unpredictable ways, so that establishing universal laws that would hold true for all societies and for all time is impossible.

A third aspect of theory is that theoretical statements should be able to be checked by others who are not responsible for developing them. This is because sociologists, as human beings, are affected by their own presuppositions and biases. In developing their theories, sociologists exhibit systematic ways of thinking that constitute perspectives, which inform and shape their theoretical work. Therefore it is important that the evidence that sociologists use to support their theoretical statements can be checked independently, and this is where methodology comes into play.

Thus, in essence, theory is nothing more than sociologists' generalizations about "real" social interactions and the everyday practices of social life. For example, the fact that women rather than men do the bulk of housework and child care in our society is explained, in part, by the concept of patriarchy, meaning the rule of the father or oldest male, and the cultural assumption that housework is not real work. Taken together, the concept and the assumption provide a basis for a theory about gender relations. Theorizing is and always has been a part of everyone's way of thinking. Every time you try to guess why a group of people act in a particular way, you are theorizing about a social phenomenon on the basis of your own knowledge of reality. Sociologists do much the same thing, with a bit more formality.

Sociology is generally defined as 'the science of society'. But in order to arrive at a more precise definition we need to have an idea of what we mean by society. Society, in general, consists in the complicated network of social relationships by which every human being is interconnected with his fellowmen. Not every relationship of man with man is social. Thus, if two persons are walking in the same garden independently of each other, their relationship of co-existence, of being at the same time in the same place, or even the circumstance that their attention may be turned to the same object, do not belong to the social order. But as soon as they become aware of each other or exchange greetings the element of sociality arises. Sociality or society is radically a mental phenomenon.

A social relationship, therefore, implies reciprocal awareness between two or more men, and the sense of their having something in common. Reciprocal recognition, direct or indirect, and "commonness" are the characteristic features of every social relationship. This reciprocal and mutual recognition, with its accompanying feeling of 'commonness' may be the 'consciousness of kind' spoken of by Giddings, the 'we-feeling' of Cooley, or a 'common propensity' of W.I. Thomas.

But this sense of community or oneness does not exclude diversity or variation. Society also implies difference. Moreover, at the basis of the most fundamental institution of every society, the family, there is a manifold ground of differentiation as regards sex, psychology and even economic function. Social life in its developed form consists of a system of reciprocal actions, of a give-and-take, which goes beyond the sphere of purely selfish interests. There is in it an indefinite interplay of likeness and difference, of co-operation and conflict, of agreement and dissent, apart from which society cannot be understood; but over and above all this, likeness, 'commonness,' and co-operation are the foundation of society.

If social relationships constitute the essence of society, it would seem that this term may be applied to include all social phenomena or all dealings of man with man, enduring or unstable, organized. Logically this would be so; for we have society wherever social relationships are to be found, but in practice the name of 'social groups' or 'groupings' is given to those more or less stable unions which admit of a varied degree of cohesiveness; while the term '**society**' is reserved for '**a collection of individuals held together by certain enduring relationships in the pursuance of common ends**'. Hence the elements of unity, plurality, stability and community are the characteristic notes of society in this strict sense.

The subject matter of social theory

The essential subject matter of social theory is human **society** and the social activities that go on there. Social theorists are not particularly interested in animal behaviour (this is what zoologists do), nor are they specifically interested in the environmental and atmospheric conditions in which human social action takes place (that would be called geography). They might not be terribly interested in the clinical aspects of the human mind and individual features of personality (this is the terrain of psychiatry and psychology). For social theorists, the challenge is to develop coherent knowledge of human social action as it takes place in the context of other social actors and their actions, and with the help or hindrance of the social practices and institutions that surround them.

For social theorists and sociologists, it is the social context of action that matters not the predispositions of any particular individual. It is patterns of social interaction between social actors and how these are affected by social contexts that is the focus of their attention. Social theory is all about identifying and describing the elements that make up social interaction (social actors, contexts, practices), and developing sensible propositions about the dynamic processes that take place between them.

To understand what sociological theory is, we must distinguish it from other explanations of social life. For example, religious explanations point to faith and revelation to justify their assertions. In contrast, sociological theory or explanation relies on evidence from the senses and from the social world itself to arrive at its conclusions. A shooting or bombing in a suburban school might be explained religiously as a result of original sin or as the devil's work. A sociological explanation, however, might point to the influence of the media, lack of parental supervision, and the accessibility of weapons.

Sociology and ideology

Another important distinction is between sociological theory and ideology. **Ideology** may be referred to as a system of ideas held by the members of a group or society that tends to explain and legitimize their beliefs and actions. Ideology involves value judgements about what is good or bad, right or wrong, better or worse. As you will see in the following sections, many social theorists also have ideologies, although they may not state them explicitly. General categories of social ideology, as in politics and other aspects of social life, include liberal, conservative, and radical. A theorist who argues, for example, that society is held together by agreement on the rules and by our mutual need for one another is very likely basing her or his theory on the conservative ideology that "what is, is good."

The sociological theorist is often like the architect who is in the planning stages. The sociological theorist may start with an idea, or theory, about the nature of society and social behaviour and proceed to construct in relatively abstract, symbolic terms some sort of model that can explain social life. That is, the sociologist may theorize **deductively**, proceeding from the general to the particular. Alternatively, the sociologist may observe some interesting but puzzling feature, derive a general explanation, or theory, about this particular social puzzle. The theory formulated by this procedure is arrived at **inductively**.

Whether theorizing deductively or inductively, the sociological theorist is attempting to provide a comprehensive yet simple and elegant explanation of society and the causes of social behaviours. But given the complexity of society and the human failings of sociologists, no theory is ever a perfect explanation. The sociological theorist may modify or even reject a theory if it fails to provide a plausible, coherent explanation of the social world. The search is then on for a better theory, one that will explain more about the social world. This search, in turn, will produce new problems in need of theoretical explanation and interpretation. Obviously this process takes time – perhaps decades or, if more than one theorist is drawn into the search, centuries. And as the search continues,

sociologists' understanding of the problems and the explanations continuously evolve.

As stated earlier, ideology is commonly thought of as a set of ideas that justifies judgements about good or bad, superior or inferior, better or worse. Furthermore, when applied to individuals or groups, ideology is thought to assert or legitimize the power of some group over another. But we all make ideological judgements in our everyday lives, and not all of these judgements are deliberate attempts to assert or maintain power over others in a direct, confrontational, prejudicial manner.

Karl Mannheim characterized the difference between these two aspects of ideology as the difference between particular and total ideologies. **Particular ideologies** involve systems of knowledge that deform or conceal facts. For example, the assertion by the major tobacco companies that smoking does not affect health is an example of a particular ideology – a more or less deliberate distortion of facts to advantage the companies. **Total ideologies** are systems of knowledge tied to the social or historical place and time of the individuals who espouse them, irrespective of good or bad intentions. The belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race as the basis for the organization of social relations is an example of a total ideology.

Whether particular or total, ideology is *not* theory. However, as a knowledge system, an ideology can present problems for sociological theory. Sociologists, like anyone else, may not be aware that their views are based on the biases or the ideologies of their time or place. Sociologists – like politicians, pundits, and ordinary citizens – tend to espouse views that are conservative, liberal, or radical. Separating sociological knowledge from personal ideological positions is a problem that you will confront in reading about many of the theorists in the following sections.

Ideological content does not necessarily make a theory wrong. When the ideological content can be disentangled from the theory, the theory may still have some merit as an explanation. In addition, sociologists are well aware of the dangers of ideological content and will usually adopt some procedure to either eliminate or at least minimize the difficulties ideology presents.

The problem of ideologies within sociology is, according to Ralf Dahrendorf, endemic to the sociological project. From the beginning, sociology had “two intentions.” It was supposed to help us to understand society by using objective, “scientific” methods; at the same time, it was supposed to help individuals achieve “freedom and self-fulfillment”. Dahrendorf suggests that

sociology has often paid for the scientific ambition to be objective by ignoring its intention to help people. In doing so, it becomes a “thoroughly inhuman, amoral science”. Dahrendorf’s judgement on scientific objectivity is rather overdrawn, but sociologists must keep in mind that statistical data, for example, always need theoretical interpretation to make them relevant to nonsociologists. At the same time, sociologists must recognize that the second intention, to emancipate human beings, requires empirical data to justify theoretical and ethical claims and recommendations.

In the debate over the role of ideology in sociology, Max Weber stated that objectivity was an “impossible obligation” but one that sociologists must assume. Dear Candidate, let’s examine here the relationship between this “impossible obligation” and the subject matter of sociology. The problem is in good part a result of the fact that sociologists themselves are both subjects and objects of sociology. As subjects (sociological theorists), they aspire to a detached or objective view of society; as objects (human beings), they are rooted in a particular society and have personal beliefs about it.

The subjects and objects of sociological scrutiny are never static and may well undergo changes as a result of sociological interest. For example, if the human “objects” of sociological interest know that they are being observed, then they are likely to adapt their behaviour to fit what they assume the observer is interested in. More generally, as you will see, historical time and place as well as race, class, and gender have influenced how sociologists have theorized about society. The things investigated by researchers in the natural sciences are similarly changeable, but the natural scientist is generally not both the subject and object of the investigation.

Many sociologists mitigate the subject-object dilemma by taking the position that, as far as possible, they must declare their evaluative stance on the issues or situations being investigated. More recently, some sociologists have taken the position that trying to remain objective is not only impossible but also undesirable. From the very beginning, sociologists have sought “to participate in social change, not merely to record it in a ‘scientific fashion’”. Even in the most rigorously scientific sociological circles, the investigator’s ethical viewpoints have always been a factor.

Important:

Dear Candidate, the term 'action' has a specific meaning in sociological literature. Let me clarify this. When we talk of the 'behaviour' of an individual or an object, we basically imply the manner in which an individual or an object responds to a particular situation or stimulus. Such behaviour could either be simply a mechanical response of an object or a meaningful response of an individual to a particular situation or stimulus. For example, an object falling on ground is simply reacting (mechanically, automatically, without thought) to the law of gravitation. But human beings don't always react in a similar manner. Unlike matter, human beings are endowed with consciousness. They can think and attribute meanings to their physical or socio-cultural surroundings.

Max Weber argues that individuals are capable of attributing a subjective meaning to their behaviour. Action, thus, is a meaningful behaviour. And when 'action' is oriented towards other individuals, it is called **social action**. Weber conceived of sociology as a comprehensive science of 'social action' which constitutes the basic unit of social life. Weber defined social action as '*the meaningful behaviour oriented towards other individuals*'. Presence of meanings as well as other individuals is equally important for any behaviour to qualify as social action. Dear Candidate, please note that an isolated social act does not exist in real social life. Only at the analytical level can one conceptualize an isolated social act. What exists in reality is an on-going chain of reciprocal social actions, which we call social interaction. Further, the actions which are not oriented towards others are outside the purview of sociology.

Action and structure

This and the next theme (the micro-macro debate) are really to do with the kinds of *strategies* that social theorists have come up with in trying to understand the nature of social action in social contexts and practices. They are part of the tool kit of social theory as much as they are part of its subject matter. The first of these strategies is to question the extent to which social actors are free to act according to their own goals and desires, and the extent to which the range of actions available to them is already determined by social practices and institutions. The action-structure debate is one of the longest running puzzles of social theory and we shall have a good deal to say about it in the following chapters.

The dilemma faced by social theorists here is that while there is a strong desire to believe that social actors really are able to act autonomously, to be individuals and to enjoy free expression, nearly all of the resources required to achieve these things come from outside the individual, that is, from society.

We should not therefore underestimate the extent to which social context imposes itself on social actors as they seek out the resources they need and want. At the very least, social actors have to negotiate with others, and find ways of tackling the institutions and practices of society, in order to fulfill their aspirations. To the extent that social actors learn to frame their expectations within the limits of what can be achieved, this frame becomes a structure that limits their action. Some social theorists take this line even further and argue that the desires and expectations of social actors are entirely imposed upon them by the social structure; that social actors do little more than act out roles and behaviours that have already been set out for them by society.

Regarding the actual words ‘action’ and ‘structure’, although the notion of social action is relatively unproblematic since it obviously refers to people doing things and the results of these doings – action requires an actor and some kind of performative event – the notion of ‘social structure’ is more complicated and has been used extensively by social theorists and sociologists and in a number of different ways. We will be exploring these in subsequent chapters but to get started it is useful to think of social structures simply as those aspects of the social context over which individuals have no direct control. Some structures are relatively obvious, almost tangible, while others are less so. Most social structures combine both kinds of elements. For example, ‘the economic structure’, that is, the overall system of practical arrangements for producing things in a society, is structural in the sense that there are physical institutions and organizations, actual buildings and places of work, plus obvious patterns of activity and routines of work, many of which have developed into a legal framework of rules and regulations. Less obvious, and yet just as necessary, the economic structure also includes patterns of ideas, beliefs and expectations about how the economic affairs of society should be run. The behaviour of everyone in that society is profoundly affected by the economic structure and yet no particular individual has control over it.

Social structures can sometimes be thought of as the habits and routines that social actors get into as they go about the business of organizing their survival. It might be difficult to say exactly when a particular routine became established, or which social actor or group of social actors first started using it, but once established it tends to control behaviour to the extent that alternative routines do not develop. Critical social theorists argue that this benign conception is naive because social structures always benefit some social actors at the expense of others. The trick is to make it appear that a particular structure occurs naturally when in fact it has been deliberately introduced to confer an advantage. The capacity to impose or introduce new structural features in society is a very important form of power since it dramatically affects the conditions under which social actors act.

Anthony Giddens has tried to resolve the **agency-structure debate** with his concept of **structuration**. Giddens argues that although we are all influenced by the social contexts in which we find ourselves, none of us is completely determined in our behaviour by those contexts. We possess, and create, our own individuality. It is the business of sociology to investigate the connections between what society makes of us and what we make of ourselves and society. Our activities both structure – give shape to – the social world around us and, at the same time, are structured by that social world. The concept of social structure is an important one in sociology. It refers to the fact that the social contexts of our lives do not consist of random assortments of events or actions; they are structured, or patterned, in distinct ways. There are regularities in the ways we behave and in the relationships we have with one another. But social structure is not like a physical structure, such as a building, which exists independently of human actions. Human societies are always in the process of structuration. They are reconstructed at every moment by the very ‘building blocks’ that compose it - human beings like you and me. For example, consider the case of coffee. A cup of coffee does not automatically arrive in your hands. You choose to go to a particular coffee shop and you choose whether to drink a latte or an espresso. As you make these decisions, along with millions of other people, you shape the market for coffee and affect the lives of coffee producers living perhaps thousands of miles away on the other side of the world.

Micro and macro analysis

The second strategy we should make ourselves familiar with early on is to do with the *scale* or *level of detail* that social theorists choose to concentrate on. This issue is closely linked to the action-structure dilemma, because, generally speaking, the more one concentrates on the structural causes of social action, the more one is likely to analyse things at a fairly general, large-scale or **macro** level. Correspondingly, those who are mainly interested in the fine detail of social action, have to look at things at a more precise, small-scale and **micro** level.

In other words, **macrosociology** is the analysis of large-scale social systems, like the political system or the economic order. It also includes the analysis of long-term processes of change, such as the development of industrialism. While the study of everyday behaviour in situations of face-to-face interaction is usually called **microsociology**.

Of course things are a little more complicated than this since it is perfectly reasonable to make observations about social phenomena at a fairly general level, and then to fill in some of the details by adopting a micro-level approach.

At first glance, it might seem that micro-analysis and macro-analysis are distinct from one another. In fact, the two are closely connected. Macro-analysis is essential if we are to understand the institutional background of daily life. The ways in which people live their everyday lives are greatly affected by the broader institutional framework, as is obvious when the daily cycle of activities of a culture like that of the medieval period is compared with life in an industrialized urban environment. Micro-studies are in turn necessary for illuminating broad institutional patterns. Face-to-face interaction is clearly the main basis of all forms of social organization, no matter how large scale. Suppose we are studying a business corporation. We could understand much about its activities simply by looking at face-to-face behaviour. We could analyse, for example, the interaction of directors in the boardroom, people working in the various offices, or the workers on the factory floor. We would not build up a picture of the whole corporation in this way, since some of its business is transacted through printed materials, letters, the telephone and computers. Yet we could certainly contribute significantly to understanding how the organization works.

Of course, people do not live their lives as isolated individuals, nor are their lives completely determined by national states. Sociology tells us that our everyday life is lived in families, social groups, communities and neighbourhoods. At this level – the meso (or ‘middle’) level of society – it is possible to see the influences and effects of both micro- and macro-level phenomena. Many sociological studies of specific local communities deal with the macrosociological impact of huge social changes, such as industrialization and economic globalization. But they also explore the way that individuals, groups and social movements cope with such changes and attempt to turn them to their advantage. For example, when the UK government decided to reduce the role of coal in its energy policy in the 1980s, the impact was disastrous for many traditional mining communities, as people’s livelihoods were threatened by large-scale unemployment. Mining communities initially organized to protest against the policy, but, when this eventually failed, many individual miners retrained to find work in other industries. Such studies of the community-level of social life can provide a window through which to observe and understand the interaction of micro- and macro-levels of society and much applied work in sociology takes place at this *meso* level of social reality. In later chapters, we will see further examples of how interaction in micro-contexts affects larger social processes, and how macro-systems in turn influence more confined settings of social life.

Dear Candidate, as a student of sociology, the sensible thing is to accept that both micro and macroanalysis have a role to play in social theory, and any final decision comes down as much as anything to personal preference on the part of the

theorist. Some theorists, such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Anthony Giddens, prefer to develop their ideas at a macro, society-wide scale. Others, such as Max Weber, George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, develop their ideas very much at ground level. Like everyone else in modern Western industrial society, social theorists and sociologists have to become specialists and this usually means becoming an expert in one style, approach or strategy and less so in others.

Major theoretical strands of research methodology

Sociologists approach the study of human society in different ways. They can look at the “big picture” of society to see how it operates. This is a macro view focusing on the large social phenomena of society such as social institutions and inequality. Sociologists can also take a micro view, zeroing in on the immediate social situations in which people interact with one another. From these two views, sociologists have developed various theoretical perspectives, each a set of general assumptions about the nature of society.

To help understand the beginners, these major theoretical strands could broadly be classified into two major approaches in sociology. These are the **Structural approach** (also called as macro sociology) and the **Social Action approach** (also called as the interpretive, anti/non-positive or micro sociology). Structural and social action approaches to the study and research of society exhibit two major differences. One involves how they conceive of society, the social world itself. In other words, they completely disagree on the question of what society is. The second question follows from the first. It concerns the question of how we are to conduct our research into the social world. That is, because structural and social action sociology have very different ideas of what society in fact is, they also have very different ideas about research method which are most appropriate to the conduct of research into social life. This is why we can say that how we conceive of society cannot be separated from the question of how we should proceed in our study of it. Dear Candidate, you must understand this point very clearly because this links the theoretical perspectives with the research methodology. It will become more clear as we proceed with our discussion.

Let us now discuss these two major theoretical strands, and the various sociological perspectives and approaches that fall under their respective domain.

Structural approach is a macro-sociological analysis, with a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole. Structural approach analyses the way society as a whole fits together. Structural theory sees society as a system of relationships that creates the structure of the society in which we live. It is this structure that determines our lives and characters. Structured sets of social relationships are the 'reality' that lie below the appearance of 'the free individual'.

Important: Social structure refers to the pattern of interrelations between individuals. Every society has a social structure, a complex of major institutions, groups, and arrangements, relating to status and power. In a society individuals interact with one another for the fulfilment of their needs. In this process, they occupy certain status and roles in social life with accompanying rights and obligations. Their social behaviour is patterned and gets associated with certain norms and values which provide them guidance in social interaction. There emerge various social units, such as groups, community, association and institutions in society as a product of social intercourse in human life. In this scenario, social structure is conceived as the pattern of inter-related statuses and roles found in a society, constituting a relatively stable set of social relations. It is the organized pattern of the inter-related rights and obligations of persons and groups in a system of interaction.

In order to systematically understand the structure of a society, let us first assume the structure of a building. The structure of a human society is similar to the structure of a building. The structure of any given building primarily has three components viz. (i) the building material such as bricks, mortars, beams and pillars, (ii) all these are arranged in a definite order and are placed in relationship to one another, and (iii) all these put together make a building one unit. The same three sets of features can be used to describe the structure of a society as well. A human society also consists of (i) males and females, adults and children, various occupational and religious groups and so on, (ii) the interrelationship between various parts (such as relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children and between various groups), and (iii) all the parts of the society are put together to work as a unit.

Philip Jones in his *Theory and Method in Sociology* (1987) argues that the structuralist sociologists look at society as 'a structure of (cultural) rules', guiding our behaviour and telling us how to behave appropriately in any given situation and what to expect in terms of the behaviour of others. Thus, the structural sociology is based on the premise that society comes before individuals. This general idea – that sociologists should study the way society impacts on individual behaviour – represents the main way structuralist sociologists differ from social action sociologists.

Further, with these assumptions about the social reality, the structural theorists argue that there can be a sociology which is a science. In other words, sociology can be a science of society just as, for example, nuclear physics is the science of the structure of matter – of atoms, neutrons, electrons, and so on. Structural theorists conceive society as an objective phenomenon, a ‘thing’. In other words, just as natural sciences study the structure and composition of matter, sociology too can identify and objectively study the social structure and its various constituents such as shared norms, values, attitudes and beliefs, etc. Hence the structural theorists argue that the study of the social world can be modeled on the study of natural phenomena and the scientific methodology of natural sciences can be adopted to study the social phenomena. Thus, we can conclude that structural approaches are **positivist** in nature.

Dear Candidate, different social scientists look at the nature of human behavior from different viewpoints. These views have influenced both the type of data sociologists have collected and the methods they have employed to collect the data.

Views of human behaviour can be roughly divided into those that emphasise external factors and those that stress internal factors. The former approach sees behaviour as being influenced by the structure of society, which is objective and exists outside the individual’s consciousness. The latter approach places more emphasis upon the subjective states of individuals: their feelings, the meanings they attach to events, and the motives they have for behaving in particular ways. From this point of view, the way that people respond to external factors is shaped by the way that the individual interprets them.

The use of this ‘dichotomy’ (a sharply defined division) is somewhat artificial. In practice, most sociologists make use of the insights provided by both approaches when carrying out research and interpreting the results. There are also a number of variations on each approach. For example, as a later section will show, phenomenologists differ in their approach from other sociologists who emphasise the importance of internal influences upon human behaviour.

Many of the founders of sociology believed it would be possible to create a science of society based upon the same principles and procedures as the natural sciences, like chemistry and biology, even though the natural sciences often deal with inanimate matter and so are not concerned with feelings, emotions and other subjective states. The most influential attempt to apply natural science methodology to sociology is known as **positivism**.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who is credited with inventing the term 'sociology' and regarded as one of the founders of the discipline, maintained that the application of the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences would produce a 'positive science of society'. He believed that this would reveal that the evolution of society followed 'invariable laws'. It would show that the behaviour of man was governed by principles of cause and effect which were just as invariable as the behaviour of matter, the subject of the natural sciences.

In terms of sociology, the positive approach makes the following assumptions. The behaviour of man, like the behaviour of matter, can be objectively measured. Just as the behaviour of matter can be quantified by measures such as weight, temperature and pressure, methods of objective measurement can be devised for human behaviour. Such measurement is essential to explain behaviour. For example, in order to explain the reaction of a particular chemical to heat, it is necessary to provide exact measurements of temperature, weight and so on. With the aid of such measurements it will be possible to observe accurately the behaviour of matter and produce a statement of cause and effect. This statement might read $A \times B = C$, where A is a quantity of matter, B a degree of heat and C a volume of gas. Once it has been shown that the matter in question always reacts in the same way under fixed conditions, a theory can be devised to explain its behaviour.

From a positivist viewpoint, such methods and assumptions are applicable to human behaviour. Observations of behaviour based on objective measurement will make it possible to produce statements of cause and effect. Theories may then be devised to explain observed behaviour. This emphasis on the objective measurement of human social behaviour forces the positivist scholars to rely more on the **quantitative methods** while conducting research. You will read more on 'Quantitative methods' in our subsequent discussion on Research Methods and Analysis.

The positivist approach in sociology places particular emphasis on behaviour that can be directly observed. It argues that factors which are not directly observable, such as meanings, feelings and purposes, are not particularly important and can be misleading. For example, if the majority of adult members of society enter into marriage and produce children, these facts can be observed and quantified. They therefore form reliable data. However, the range of meanings that members of society give to these activities – their reasons for marriage and procreation – are not directly observable. Even if they could be accurately measured, they might well divert attention from the real cause of behaviour. One person might believe they entered marriage because they were lonely, another because they were in love, a third because it was the 'thing to do', and a fourth

because they wished to have children. Reliance on this type of data for explanation assumes that individuals know the reasons for marriage. This can obscure the real cause of their behaviour.

The positivists' emphasis on observable 'facts' is due largely to the belief that human behaviour can be explained in much the same way as the behaviour of matter. Natural scientists do not inquire into the meanings and purposes of matter for the obvious reason of their absence. Atoms and molecules do not act in terms of meanings, they simply react to external stimuli. Thus if heat, an external stimulus, is applied to matter, that matter will react. The job of the natural scientist is to observe, measure, and then explain that reaction.

The positivist approach to human behaviour applies a similar logic. People react to external stimuli and their behaviour can be explained in terms of this reaction. For example, they enter into marriage and produce children in response to the demands of society. Society requires such behaviour for its survival and its members simply respond to this requirement. The meanings and purposes they attach to this behaviour are largely inconsequential.

Thus, it has often been argued that the **structural theory** (also called as **systems theory**) in sociology adopts a positivist approach. Once behaviour is seen as a response to some external stimulus, such as economic forces or the requirements of the social system, the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences appear appropriate to the study of humans. Marxism has often been regarded as a positivist approach since it can be argued that it sees human behaviour as a reaction to the stimulus of the economic infrastructure. Functionalism has been viewed in a similar light. The behaviour of members of society can be seen as a response to the functional prerequisites of the social system.

Dear Candidate, these views of the structural or systems theory represent a considerable oversimplification. However, it is probably fair to say that the structural or systems theory is closer to a positivist approach.

In sociology, there are two main structural or system approaches:

- i. Consensus theory (Functionalism)
- ii. Conflict theory (Marxism, Feminism, etc.)

Consensus Theory: Functionalism

Functional analysis also known as functionalism and structural-functionalism is rooted in the origin of sociology. It is prominent in the work of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), two of the founding fathers of the discipline. It was developed by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and refined by Talcott Parsons (1902-79).

Functionalism was the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology during the 1940s and 1950s. From the mid 1960s onwards, its popularity steadily declined due partly to damaging criticism and partly to competing perspectives which appeared to provide superior explanations.

The key points of the functionalist perspective may be summarized by a comparison drawn from biology. If a biologist wanted to know how an organism such as the human body worked, he might begin by examining the various parts such as the brain, lungs, heart and liver. However, if he simply analysed the parts in isolation from each other, he would be unable to explain how life was maintained. To do this, he would have to examine the parts in relation to each other since they work together to maintain the organism. Thus he would analyze the relationship between the heart, lungs, brain and so on to understand how they operated and appreciate their importance. From this viewpoint, any part of the organism must be seen in terms of the organism as a whole. Functionalism adopts a similar perspective. The various parts of society are seen to be interrelated and taken together, they form a complete system. To understand any part of society, such as the family or religion, the part must be seen in relation to society as a whole. Thus where a biologist will examine a part of the body, such as the heart, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the human organism, the functionalist will examine a part of society, such as the family, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the social system.

Functionalism begins with the observation that behaviour in society is structured. The concepts of **status** and **role** are integral to the understanding of social structure of a given society. While status refers to a position occupied by an individual in a group or society, role is the expected behaviour of an individual who holds a certain status. Status is usually defined as the rank or position of a person in a group, or of a group in relation to other group. In fact, some sociologists prefer to use the term 'position' instead of status. Role is the behaviour expected of one who holds a particular status. Each person may hold a number of statuses and be expected to fill roles appropriate to them. In a sense, status and role are two aspects of the same phenomenon. A status is a set of privileges and duties;

a role is the acting out of this set of duties and privileges. Ralph Linton has referred to role as the dynamic aspect of status.

This means that relationships between members of society are organized in terms of rules that stipulate how people are expected to behave. Rules can be formal (for example, laws) or informal (for example, norms). **Norms** refer to the commonly accepted standards of behaviour in a social group or society. Norms are specific guides to action, which tell you, for example, how you are expected to dress and behave at a party or at a funeral. Norms are associated with particular roles in society. Thus, one's role obligations in a social group are defined by that group's social norms. Social relationships are patterned and recurrent because of the existence of rules which are ultimately based on cultural values.

Values are socially accepted standards of desirability. In other words, a value is a belief that something is good and desirable. It defines what is important and worthwhile. Values differ from society to society and culture to culture. For example, in West, the dominant values are individualism and materialism which are this-worldly in nature. While in India, *moksha* had been a long cherished goal of human life which is other-worldly in nature. Values provide general guidelines for behaviour. Values are translated into more specific directives in terms of norms. The value of privacy produces a range of norms, such as those that stipulate that you should knock before entering a room and that you should ask people's permission before photographing them.

The **structure** of society can be seen as the sum total of normative behaviour – the sum total of social relationships, which are governed by norms. The main parts of society, its institutions, such as the family, the economy, the educational and political systems are major aspects of the social structure. Thus, an institution can be seen as a structure made up of interconnected roles or interrelated norms. For example, the family is made up of the interconnected roles of husband, father, wife, mother, son and daughter. Social relationships within the family are structured in terms of a set of related norms.

Having established the existence of a social structure, functionalist analysis turns to a consideration of how that structure functions. This involves an examination of the relationship between the different parts of the structure and their relationship to society as a whole. From this examination, the functions of institutions are discovered. At its simplest, **function** means effect. Thus, the function of the family is the effect it has on other parts of the social structure and on society as a whole. In practice the term function is usually used to indicate the contribution an institution makes to the maintenance and survival of the social system. Thus a major function of the family is the socialization of new members of

society. This represents an important contribution to the maintenance of society since order, stability and cooperation largely depend on learned, shared norms and values.

In determining the function of various parts of the social structure, functionalists are guided by the following ideas. Societies have certain basic needs or requirements which must be met if they are to survive. These requirements are sometimes known as **functional prerequisites**. For example, a means of producing food and shelter may be seen as a functional prerequisite since without them members of society could not survive. A system for socializing new members of society may also be regarded as a functional prerequisite since without culture social life would not be possible. Having assumed a number of basic requirements for the survival of society, the next step is to look at the parts of the social structure to see how they meet such functional prerequisites. Thus a major function of the economic system is the production of food and shelter. An important function of the family is the socialization of new members of society.

From a functionalist perspective, society is regarded as a system. A system is an entity made up of interconnected and interrelated parts. From this viewpoint, it follows that each part will in some way affect every other part and the system as a whole. It also follows that if the system is to survive, its various parts must have some degree of fit or compatibility. Thus a functional prerequisite of society involves a minimal degree of integration between the parts. Many functionalists argue that this integration is based largely on '**value consensus**', that is on agreement about values by members of society. Thus if the major values of society are expressed in the various parts of the social structure, those parts will be integrated. For example, it can be argued that the value of materialism integrates many parts of the social structure in Western industrial society. The economic system produces a large range of goods and ever increasing productivity is regarded as an important goal. The educational system is partly concerned with producing the skills and expertise to expand production and increase its efficiency. The family is an important unit of consumption with its steadily increasing demand for consumer durables such as washing machines, televisions and three-piece suits. The political system is partly concerned with improving material living standards and raising productivity. To the extent that these parts of the social structure are based on the same value, they may be said to be integrated.

One of the main concerns of functionalist theory is to explain how social life is possible. The theory assumes that a certain degree of order and stability are essential for the survival of social systems. Functionalism is therefore concerned with society. Many functionalists see shared values as the key to this explanation. **Thus value consensus integrates the various parts of society.** It forms the basis

of social unity or social solidarity since individuals will tend to identify and feel kinship with those who share the same values as themselves. Value consensus provides the foundation for cooperation since common values produce common goals. Members of society will tend to cooperate in pursuit of goals which they share. Having attributed such importance to value consensus, many functionalists then focus on the question of how this consensus is maintained. Indeed the American sociologist Talcott Parsons has stated that the main task of sociology is to examine 'the institutionalization of patterns of value orientation in the social system'. Emphasis is therefore placed on the process of socialization whereby values are internalized and transmitted from one generation to the next. In this respect, the family is regarded as a vital part of the social structure. Once learned, values must be maintained. In particular those who deviate from society's values must be brought back into line. Thus the mechanisms of social control are seen as essential to the maintenance of social order.

In summary, society, from a functionalist perspective, is a system made up of interrelated parts. The social system has certain basic needs which must be met if it is to survive. These needs are known as functional prerequisites. The function of any part of society is its contribution to maintenance of society. The major functions of social institutions are those which help to meet the functional prerequisites of society. Since society is a system, there must be some degree of integration between its parts. A minimal degree of integration is therefore a functional prerequisite of society. Many functionalists maintain that the order and stability they see as essential for the maintenance of the social system are largely provided by value consensus. An investigation of the source of value consensus is therefore a major concern of functionalist analysis.

However, with their concern for investigating how functional prerequisites are met, functionalists have concentrated on functions rather than dysfunctions. This emphasis has resulted in many institutions being seen as beneficial and useful to society. Indeed some institutions, such as the family, religion, and social stratification, have been seen as not only beneficial but indispensable. This view has led critics to argue that **functionalism has a built in conservative bias** which supports the status quo. The argument that certain social arrangements are beneficial or indispensable provides support for their retention and rejects proposals for radical change.

Conflict Theory:

Although functionalists emphasise the importance of value consensus in society, they do recognise that conflict can occur. However, they see conflict as being the result of temporary disturbances in the social system. These disturbances are usually quickly corrected as society evolves. Functionalists accept that social groups can have differences of interest, but believe these are of minor importance compared to the interests that all social groups share in common. They believe that all social groups benefit if their society runs smoothly and prospers.

Conflict theories differ from functionalism in that they hold that there are fundamental differences of interest between social groups. These differences result in conflict being a common and persistent feature of society, and not a temporary aberration. There are a number of different conflict perspectives and their supporters tend to disagree about the precise nature, causes and extent of conflict. For the sake of simplicity, in this section we will concentrate upon two conflict theories: **Marxism** and **Feminism**. Other conflict theories, such as the influential conflict theory of Max Weber, will be discussed later.

Marxism

The conflict perspective produces a portrait of society strikingly different from that offered by functionalism. Whereas functionalism emphasizes society's stability, the conflict perspective portrays society as always changing and always marked by conflict. Functionalists tend to focus on social order, to view social change as harmful, and to assume that the social order is based largely on people's willing cooperation. In contrast, proponents of the conflict perspective are inclined to concentrate on social conflict, to see social change as beneficial, and to assume that the social order is forcibly imposed by the powerful on the weak. They criticize the status quo.

The conflict theorists stress inequalities and regard society as a system made of individual and groups which are competing for scarce resources. These groups may form alliances or co-operate with one another, but underneath the surface harmony lies a basic competitive struggle to gain control over scarce resources. Conflict theorists also focus on macro level. In modern society, Karl Marx (1818-83) focused on struggle between the bourgeoisie (capitalists, owners of production) and proletariat (those who worked for the owners), but today's conflict theorists have expanded this perspective to include smaller groups and even basic relationships.

The conflict perspective originated largely from Karl Marx's writings on class conflict between capitalists and the proletariat. For decades, U.S. sociologists tended to ignore Marx and the conflict perspective because the functionalist perspective dominated their view of society. Since the turbulent 1960s, however, the conflict perspective has gained popularity. Generally, conflict is now defined more broadly. Whereas Marx believed that conflict between *economic* classes was the key force in society, conflict theorists today define social conflict to mean conflict between any *unequal* groups or societies. Thus, they examine conflict between whites and blacks, men and women, one religious group and another, one society and another, and so on. They emphasize that groups or societies have conflicting interests and values and compete with each other for scarce resources. The more powerful groups gain more than the less powerful, but the former continue to seek more wealth and power, while the latter continue to struggle for more resources. Because of this perpetual competition, society or the world is always changing.

The conflict perspective leads sociologists to ask such questions as: which groups are more powerful and which are more weak? How do powerful groups benefit from the existing social order, and how are weaker groups hurt? Consider, for example, how the conflict perspective can shed light on prostitution. According to this perspective, prostitution reflects the unequal social positions of men and women. In prostitution, members of a dominant group, men, benefit from the exploitation of a weaker group, women. This exploitation is made possible by the existence of a social order in which women are subordinate to men. If the sexes were treated equally – with women having full access to and being equally paid for more respectable types of work as men – women would be unlikely to become prostitutes. Prostitution further reinforces the general dominance of men over women because it helps perpetuate the sexist idea that women are inferior beings who can be used as mere objects for pleasure. In short, prostitution reflects and reinforces the power of one group over another. (You will read more on Marx and his ideas in our discussion on Sociological Thinkers.)

Feminism

There are several different versions of feminism, but most share a number of features in common. Like Marxists, feminists tend to see society as divided into different social groups. Unlike Marxists, they see the major division as being between men and women rather than between different classes. Like Marxists, they tend to see society as characterised by exploitation. Unlike Marxists, they see the exploitation of women by men as the most important source of exploitation, rather than that of the working class by the ruling class.

Many feminists characterise contemporary societies as patriarchal; that is, men dominate them. For example, feminists have argued that men have most of the power in families, that they tend to be employed in better-paid and higher-status jobs than women, and that they tend to monopolise positions of political power. The ultimate aim of these types of feminism is to end men's domination and to rid society of the exploitation of women. Such feminists advance a range of explanations for, and solutions to, the exploitation of women. However, they all believe that the development of society can be explained and that progress towards an improved future is possible.

Some feminist writers (sometimes called **difference feminists**) disagree that all women are equally oppressed and disadvantaged in contemporary societies. They believe that it is important to recognise the different experiences and problems faced by various groups of women. For example, they do not believe that all husbands oppress their wives, that women are equally disadvantaged in all types of work, or that looking after children is necessarily oppressive to women. They emphasise the differences between women of different ages, class backgrounds and ethnic groups. Like other feminists, they believe that the oppression of women exists, but they do not see it as affecting all women to the same extent and in the same way. For example, a wealthy white woman in a rich capitalist country is in a very different position from a poor black woman living in an impoverished part of Africa. Since their problems are different, they would require very different solutions.

Despite their disagreements, feminists tend to agree that, at least until recently, sociology has neglected women. Certainly until the 1970s, men largely wrote sociology about men. There were relatively few studies of women, and issues of particular concern to women (such as housework and women's health) were rarely studied. A number of feminists criticise what they call **malestream** sociology. By this they mean mainstream, male-dominated sociology. They have attacked not just what male sociologists study, but also how they carry out their studies. For example, they have suggested that feminist sociology should get away from rigid 'scientific' methods and should adopt more sympathetic approaches. These can involve working in partnership with those being studied rather than treating them as simply the passive providers of data. As feminist scholarship has developed it has started to examine numerous aspects of social life from feminist viewpoints. Many of the resulting studies will be examined in later chapters.

Dear Candidate, until now we have discussed the Structural approach (also called as Systems approach), one of the two major strands in sociological theory. While discussing structural approach, we have discussed two main structural approaches in sociology, viz. Consensus theory (Functionalism) and Conflict theory (Marxism and Feminism). We have also discussed that how these structural approaches are largely positivist in nature. Now, let us discuss the other major strand in sociological theory, that is, the Social Action approach.

As a student of sociology, you must remember that not all sociological perspectives base their analysis upon an examination of the structure of society as a whole. Rather than seeing human behaviour as being largely determined by society, they see society as being the product of human activity. They stress the meaningfulness of human behaviour, denying that it is primarily determined by the structure of society. These approaches are known as social action theory. Max Weber was the first sociologist to advocate a social action approach. In contemporary sociology there are two main varieties of this type of sociology. These are **Symbolic Interactionism** and **Ethnomethodology**. However, before we discuss these approaches in detail, let us first try to understand the general assumptions about social reality that underlie the social action approach.

Social action approach (also called as the interpretive, anti/non-positive or micro sociology) in sociology rejects many of the assumptions of positivism. Social action theorists argue that the subject matter of the social and natural sciences is fundamentally different. As a result the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences are inappropriate to the study of man. The natural sciences deal with matter. To understand and explain the behaviour of matter it is sufficient to observe it from the outside. Atoms and molecules do not have consciousness. They do not have meanings and purposes which direct their behaviour. Matter simply reacts 'unconsciously' to external stimuli; in scientific language it behaves. As a result the natural scientist is able to observe, measure, and impose an external logic on that behaviour in order to explain it. He has no need to explore the internal logic of the consciousness of matter simply because it does not exist.

Unlike matter, humans have **consciousness** – thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions and an awareness of being. Because of this, humans' actions are **meaningful**: humans define situations and give meaning to their actions and those of others. As a result, they do not merely react to external stimuli, they do not simply behave – they act. Imagine the response of early humans to fire caused by volcanoes or spontaneous combustion. They did not simply react in a uniform manner to the experience of fire. They attached a range of meanings to it and these meanings directed their actions. For example, they defined fire as a means of warmth and used it to ward off wild animals; and as a means of transforming

substance and employed it for cooking and hardening the points of wooden spears. Humans do not just react to fire, they act upon it in terms of the meanings they give to it. If action stems from subjective meanings, it follows that the sociologist must discover those meanings in order to understand action. Sociologists cannot simply observe action from the outside and impose an external logic upon it. They must interpret the internal logic which directs the actions of the actor.

Max Weber (1864-1920) was one of the first sociologists to outline this perspective in detail. He argued that sociological explanations of actions should begin with observing and interpreting the subjective 'states of minds' of people. Interactionism adopts a similar approach with particular emphasis on the process of interaction. Where positivists emphasize facts and cause-and-effect relationships, interactionists emphasize insight and understanding. Since it is not possible to get inside the heads of actors, the discovery of meaning must be based on interpretation and intuition. For this reason, objective measurement is not possible and the exactitude of the natural science cannot be duplicated. Since meanings are constantly negotiated in ongoing interaction process it is not possible to establish simple cause-and-effect relationships. Thus some sociologists argue that sociology is limited to an interpretation of social action and hence the social action approaches are also sometimes referred to as 'interpretive sociology'.

Nevertheless, both Weber and the interactionists did think it was possible to produce causal explanations of human behaviour, so long as an understanding of meanings formed part of those explanations. Some sociologists, particularly phenomenologists, take the argument further claim that it is impossible for sociologists to find the causes of human action.

Interactionism (also known as Symbolic Interactionism)

Functionalism and Marxism have a number of characteristics in common. First, they offer a general explanation of society as a whole, and as a result are sometimes known as macro theories. Second, they regard society as a system; hence they are sometimes referred to as system theories. Third, they tend to see human behaviour as shaped by the system. In terms of Talcott Parsons's version of functionalism, behaviour is largely directed by the norms and values of the social system. From a Marxist viewpoint, behaviour is ultimately determined by the economic infrastructure. Some versions of feminism have similar characteristics in that they explain how society works in terms of the existence of a patriarchal system and explain the behaviour of males and females in terms of that system. (Other feminist theories are very different and share some features in common with interactionism.)

Interactionism differs from functionalism, Marxism and most feminist theories in that it focuses on small-scale interaction rather than society as a whole. It usually rejects the notion of a social system. As a result it does not regard human action as a response or reaction to the system. Interactionists believe that it is possible to analyse society systematically and that it is possible to improve society. However, improvements have to be made on a smaller scale and in a more piecemeal way than implied by macro or system theories.

As its name suggests, interactionism is concerned with **interaction**, which means action between individuals. The interactionist perspective seeks to understand this process. It begins from the assumption that action is meaningful to those involved. It therefore follows that an understanding of action requires an interpretation of the meanings that the actors give to their activities.

Picture a man and a woman in a room and the man lighting a candle. This action is open to a number of interpretations. The couple may simply require light because a fuse has blown or a power cut has occurred. Or they may be involved in some form of ritual in which the lighted candle has a religious significance. Alternatively, the man or woman may be trying to create a more intimate atmosphere as a prelude to a sexual encounter. Finally, the couple may be celebrating a birthday, a wedding anniversary or some other red-letter day. In each case a different meaning is attached to the act of lighting a candle. To understand the act, it is therefore necessary to discover the meaning held by the actors.

Meanings are not fixed entities. As the above example shows, they depend in part on the context of the interaction. Meanings are also created, developed, modified and changed within the actual process of interaction. A student entering a new class may initially define the situation as threatening and even hostile. This definition may be confirmed, modified or changed depending on the student's perception of the interaction that takes place in the classroom. The student may come to perceive the teacher and fellow students as friendly and understanding and so change his or her assessment of the situation. The way in which actors define situations has important consequences. It represents their reality in terms of which they structure their actions. For example, if the student maintains a definition of the classroom as threatening and hostile, he may say little and speak only when spoken to. Conversely, if the definition changed, there would probably be a corresponding change in the student's actions in that context.

The actions of the student in the above example will depend in part on his interpretation of the way others see him. For this reason, many interactionists place particular emphasis on the idea of the **self**. They suggest that individuals develop a **self-concept**, a picture of themselves, which has an important influence on their

actions. A self-concept develops from interaction processes, since it is in large part a reflection of the reactions of others towards the individual: hence the term **looking glass self**, coined by Charles Cooley (1864-1929). Actors tend to act in terms of their self-concept. Thus, if they are consistently defined as disreputable or respectable, servile or arrogant, they will tend to see themselves in this light and act accordingly.

Since interactionists are concerned with definitions of situation and self, they are also concerned with the process by which those definitions are constructed. For example, how does an individual come to be defined in a certain way? The answer to this question involves an investigation of the **construction of meaning** in interaction processes. This requires an analysis of the way actors interpret the language, gestures, appearance and manner of others and their interpretation of the context in which the interaction takes place.

The definition of an individual as a delinquent is an example. Research has indicated that the police are more likely to perceive an act as delinquent if it occurs in a low income inner-city area. The context will influence the action of the police, since they typically define the inner city as a 'bad area'. Once arrested, a male youth is more likely to be defined as a juvenile delinquent if his manner is interpreted as aggressive and uncooperative, if his appearance is seen as unconventional or slovenly, if his speech is defined as ungrammatical or slang, and if his posture gives the impression of disrespect for authority, or arrogance. Thus, the black American youth from the inner-city ghetto with his cool, arrogant manner and colourful clothes is more likely to be defined as a delinquent than the white 'all-American girl' from the tree-lined suburbs.

Definitions of individuals as certain kinds of persons are not, however, simply based on preconceptions that actors bring to interaction situations. For example, the police will not automatically define black juveniles involved in a fight as delinquent and white juveniles involved in a similar activity as non-delinquent. A process of negotiation occurs from which the definition emerges. Often negotiations will reinforce preconceptions, but not necessarily. The young blacks may be able to convince the police officer that the fight was a friendly brawl that did not involve intent to injure or steal. In this way they may successfully promote images of themselves as high-spirited teenagers rather than as malicious delinquents. Definitions and meanings are therefore constructed in interaction situations by a process of **negotiation**.

The idea of negotiation is also applied to the concept of role. Like functionalists, interactionists employ the concept of role, but they adopt a somewhat different perspective. Functionalists imply that roles are provided by the

social system, and individuals enact their roles as if they were reading off a script that contains explicit directions for their behaviour. Interactionists argue that roles are often unclear, ambiguous and vague. This lack of clarity provides actors with considerable room for negotiation, manoeuvre, improvisation and creative action. At most, roles provide very general guidelines for action. What matters is how they are employed in interaction situations.

For example, two individuals enter marriage with a vague idea about the roles of husband and wife. Their interaction will not be constrained by these roles. Their definition of what constitutes a husband, a wife and a marital relationship will be negotiated and continually renegotiated. It will be fluid rather than fixed, changeable rather than static. Thus, from an interactionist perspective, roles, like meanings and definitions of the situation, are negotiated in interaction processes. While interactionists admit the existence of roles, they regard them as vague and imprecise and therefore as open to negotiation. From an interactionist perspective, action proceeds from negotiated meanings that are constructed in ongoing interaction situations.

Short note

Cooley and the Looking-glass Self

Just how does a person arrive at a notion of the kind of person he or she is? This concept of self is developed through a gradual and complicated process which continues throughout life. The concept is an image that builds only with the help of others. Suppose a girl is told by her parents and relatives how pretty she looks. If this is repeated often enough, consistently enough, and by enough different people, she eventually comes to feel and act like a beautiful person. There is convincing research evidence that beautiful people actually are treated more indulgently and are seen as more intelligent, altruistic, and admirable than other people. But even a pretty girl will never really believe that she is pretty if, beginning early in life, her parents act disappointed and apologetic over her and treat her as unattractive. *A person's self-image need bear no relation to the objective facts.* A very ordinary child whose efforts are appreciated and rewarded will develop a feeling of acceptance and self-confidence, while a truly brilliant child whose efforts are frequently defined as failures may become obsessed with feelings of incompetence, and its abilities can be practically paralyzed. It is through the responses of others that a child decides whether it is intelligent or stupid, attractive or homely, lovable or unlovable, righteous or sinful, worthy or worthless. This "self" which is discovered through the reactions of others has been labeled the "looking-glass self" by Cooley, who carefully analyzed this aspect of self-discovery.

There are three steps in the process of building the looking-glass self: (1) our perception of how we look to others, (2) our perception of their judgment of how we look, and (3) our feelings about these judgments. Thus, we are constantly revising our perception of how we look. Suppose that whenever you enter a room and approach a small knot of people, they promptly stop talking and melt away. Would this experience, repeated many times, affect your feelings about yourself? Or, if whenever you appear, a conversational group quickly forms around you, how does this attention affect your self-feelings?

Just as the picture in the mirror gives us an image of our physical self, similarly our *perception of the reactions of others* gives us an image of our social self. We “know”, for instance, that we are talented in some respects and less talented in others. The knowledge came to us from the reactions of other persons. The little child whose first crude artistic efforts are sharply criticized soon concludes that it lacks artistic talent, while the child whose efforts win praise from parents comes to believe in its abilities. As the child matures, others will also give a reaction which may differ from that of its parents, for the social looking glass is one which is constantly before us.

Please note that it is the perception of the judgments of others which is the active factor in the self-image forming process. We may misjudge the reactions of others. It may be that the compliment which we take at face value is mere flattery; a scolding may have been caused by the boss's headache rather than by our own errors. Thus the looking glass image which we perceive may easily differ from the image others have actually formed of us. Several research efforts have sought empirical evidence of the correlation between a person's perception of the judgments of others and the actual judgments they have made of the person. These studies find considerable variation between the individual's perception of how others picture him or her and the picture they actually hold. **This supports the idea that it is our perception of the feelings of others toward us, and not their true feelings, which shapes our self-concept.**

Short note

Mead and the “Generalized Other”

The process of internalizing the attitudes of others has been aptly described by George Herbert Mead who developed the concept of the *generalized other*. This generalized other is a composite of the expectations one believes others hold toward one. When one says, “Everyone expects me to . . .”, one is using the concept of the generalized other.

Awareness of the generalized other is developed through the processes of **role taking** and **role playing**. *Role taking* is an attempt by an individual actor to act out the behavior that would be expected of a person who actually held the role one is “taking” by imaginatively placing himself in the position of that person. In children’s play, there is much role taking, as they “play house” (“You be the mama and I’ll be the papa and you be the little baby”), play cops and robbers, or play with dolls. *Role playing*, on the other hand, is acting out the behavior of a role one actually holds (as when the boy and girl become father and mother), whereas in role taking one only pretends to hold the role.

According to Mead, the notion of self is not inborn, it is learned during childhood. Mead sees two main stages in its development: **Play stage** and **Game stage**. In Play stage, child learns by imitation – that is, by imitatively acting out the role of others – for example, the child may play at being mother or father, a doctor or a nurse. In doing so he becomes aware that there is a difference between himself and the role that he is playing. Thus the idea of a self is developed as the child takes the role of a make-believe other. Please note that at this stage the ‘other’ is chosen **particularistically** since the child lacks the ability to generalize or think in abstract terms – thus, child may start by imitating his father, mother, doctor or some similarly related individual. Then comes the game stage (4 to 5 years and beyond) where the role behavior becomes consistent and purposeful and the child has the ability to sense the role of the other players. For example, to play baseball, each player must understand his or her own role as well as the role of all the other players. Thus, through child play one develops an ability to see one’s own behavior in its relation to others and to sense the reaction of other persons involved.

It is through this awareness of others’ roles, feelings, and values that the generalized other takes form in our minds. It is thus a composite of the roles which other people play and of the expectations they have toward us. It can roughly be equated with the expectations of the community, or at least of those segments of the community in which one moves. By repeatedly “taking the role of the generalized other,” one develops a concept of the self – of the kind of person one is. A failure to develop this ability to adopt another’s point of view (to take the role of another) seems to cripple personality development.

[A detailed discussion on Symbolic Interactionism (G.H. Mead) would be covered under the Topic 4 of Paper I, i.e., Sociological Thinkers.]

As stated earlier, both Weber and the interactionists did think it was possible to produce causal explanations of human behaviour, so long as an understanding of meanings formed part of those explanations. In other words, both believed in the possibility of arriving at limited generalizations in social sciences. But, some sociologists, particularly **phenomenologists**, take the argument further and claim that it is impossible for sociologists to find the causes of human action.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a branch of European philosophy which was first developed by **Edmund Husserl** (1859-1938), and which was developed along more sociological lines by **Alfred Schutz** (1899-1959). Schutz was a pupil of Husserl's who moved to the USA after the rise of fascism in Europe. Phenomenology differs from the social action approaches that have been examined so far in that it denies the possibility of explaining social action as such. Its emphasis is upon the internal workings of the human mind and the way that humans classify and make sense of the world around them. It is not concerned with the causal explanation of human behaviour in the same way as other perspectives. Phenomenologists try to understand the meaning of phenomena or things, rather than explaining how they came into existence. It is a radical constructionist perspective, which sees knowledge as a social construct.

According to phenomenologists, individuals only come into contact with the outside world through their senses: touch, smell, hearing, sight and taste. It is not possible to know about the outside world except through these senses. Simply possessing senses, though, is not enough for a person to be able to make any sense out of the world. If humans took their sense experiences at face value, they would be confronted by an unintelligible mass of impressions – of colours, lights, sounds, smells, feelings and tastes – that were meaningless. In order to overcome this problem, humans begin to organise the world around them into phenomena; they **classify** their sense experiences into things that appear to have common characteristics. For example, a distinction may be made between animate and inanimate objects. Dividing animate objects into mammals and non-mammals may refine this distinction. Mammals may be divided into different species and species subdivided into different breeds. Thus humans have a series of shorthand ways of classifying and understanding the world external to their own consciousness.

Husserl did not believe that this process was in any sense objective; the classification of phenomena was entirely a product of the human mind, and could not be evaluated in terms of whether it was true or false. He did not deny the existence of physical objects beyond and outside the human mind, but he

argued that, since people could only come into contact with them through their senses, they could never be sure about their true nature. Thus, in trying to secure knowledge, humans had to 'bracket' reality and common-sense beliefs: that is, put them, as it were, inside brackets and forget about whether they were true or false. Once they had done this, they could turn their attention to a phenomenological understanding of the world. Husserl argued that, in order to understand social life, phenomenologists should study the way that humans placed the external world into categories by distinguishing particular phenomena. In doing so it would be possible to understand the meaning of a phenomenon by discovering its essence. What Husserl meant by this was that the researcher could find the distinguishing features (the essence) of a group of things (or phenomena) that humans classed together. Thus, for example, it might be found that a distinguishing feature – part of the essence – of a boat was that it could float. Similarly, Atkinson's work on suicide shows how he tried to understand the nature of the phenomenon suicide by investigating how coroners distinguished it from other types of death.

Alfred Schutz – the phenomenology of the social world

The general approach adopted by phenomenology is a type of philosophy of knowledge, rather than a sociological perspective. Alfred Schutz was the first to try to explain how phenomenology could be applied to develop insights into the social world. Schutz's main contribution was to insist that the way that humans classified and attached meaning to the outside world was not a purely individual process. Humans developed what he called 'typifications' – the concepts attached to classes of things that are experienced. Thus, a 'bank manager', a 'football match', 'dusting' and 'a tree' are examples of typifications. These typifications are not unique to each person, but are shared by members of a society. They are passed on to children through learning a language, reading books or speaking to other people. By the use of typifications, people are able to communicate with others on the basis of the assumption that they see the world in the same way. Gradually, a member of society builds up a stock of what Schutz called 'common-sense knowledge', which is shared with other members of society and allows humans to live and communicate together.

Schutz believed such knowledge was essential to accomplish practical tasks in everyday life. For example, he described the way in which a simple act such as posting a letter rests upon common-sense knowledge and the existence of shared typifications. The person posting the letter assumes another person (a postal worker whom they may never have met) will be able to recognise the piece of paper with writing on it as a letter, and will deliver it to the address on the envelope. The person also assumes the recipient of the letter – again someone they

might not have met – will have common-sense knowledge similar to their own, and will therefore be able to understand the message, and react in an appropriate way.

Although Schutz stresses that knowledge is shared, he does not think it is fixed and unchanging. Indeed, commonsense knowledge is constantly modified in the course of human interaction. Schutz acknowledged that each individual has a unique biography, and interprets and experiences the world in a slightly different way; but the existence of a stock of common-sense knowledge allows humans to understand, at least partly, each other's actions. In doing so, they convince themselves that there are regular and ordered patterns in the world, and in social life. From this point of view, humans create between themselves the illusion that there is stability and order in society, when in reality there is simply a jumble of individual experiences that have no clear shape or form.

Thus, for phenomenologists, it is impossible to measure objectively any aspect of human behaviour. Humans make sense of the world by categorising it. Through language they distinguish between different types of objects, events, actions and people. For instance, some actions are defined as criminal and others are not; similarly, some people are defined as criminals while others are seen as law-abiding.

The process of **categorisation** is subjective: it depends upon the opinions of the observer. Statistics are simply the product of the opinions of those who produce them. Thus the police and the courts produce crime statistics, and they represent no more than the opinions of the individuals involved. If sociologists produce their own statistics, these too are the result of subjective opinions – in this case the opinions of sociologists.

Phenomenologists believe that it is impossible to produce factual data and that it is therefore impossible to produce and check causal explanations. The most that sociologists can hope to do is to understand the meaning that individuals give to particular phenomena. Phenomenologists do not try to establish what causes crime; instead they try to discover how certain events come to be defined as crimes and how certain people come to be defined as criminal. Phenomenologists therefore examine the way that police officers reach decisions about whether to arrest and charge suspects. In doing so, they hope to establish the meanings attached to the words 'crime' and 'criminal' by the police. The end product of phenomenological research is an understanding of the meanings employed by members of society in their everyday life.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology is the most recent of all the theoretical perspectives discussed so far. The term was coined by the American sociologist **Harold Garfinkel** (1917-2011) who is generally regarded as its founder. Garfinkel's book, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, which provided the initial framework for the perspective was published in 1967.

Roughly translated ethnomethodology means the study of the methods used by people. It is concerned with examining the methods and procedures employed by members of society to construct, account for and give meaning to their social world. Ethnomethodologists draw heavily on the European tradition of phenomenological philosophy and in particular acknowledge a debt to the ideas of the philosopher–sociologist Alfred Schutz (1899-1959).

Many ethnomethodologists begin with the assumption that society exists only in so far as members perceive its existence. (The term 'member' replaces the interactionist term 'actor'.) With this emphasis on members' views of social reality, ethnomethodology is generally regarded as a phenomenological approach. Ethnomethodology is a developing perspective which contains a diversity of viewpoints. The following account provides a brief and partial introduction.

One of the major concerns of sociology is the explanation of social order. From the results of numerous investigations it appears that social life is ordered and regular and that social action is systematic and patterned. Typically the sociologist has assumed that social order has an objective reality. His research has apparently indicated that it actually exists. He then goes on to explain its origin, to provide causal explanations for its presence. Thus from a functionalist perspective, social order derives ultimately from the functional prerequisites of social systems which require its presence as a necessary condition of their existence. Social action assumes its systematic and regular nature from the fact that it is governed by values and norms which guide and direct behaviour. From a Marxian perspective social order is seen as precarious but its existence is recognized. It results from the constraints imposed on members of society by their position in the relations of production and from the reinforcement of these constraints by the superstructure. From an interactionist perspective, social order results from interpretive procedures employed by actors in interactions. It is a 'negotiated order' in that it derives from meanings which are negotiated in the process of interaction and involves the mutual adjustment of the actors concerned. The net result is the establishment of social order, of an orderly, regular and patterned process of interaction. Although the above perspectives provide very

different explanations for social order, they nevertheless agree that some form of order actually exists and that it therefore has an objective reality.

Ethnomethodologists either suspend or abandon the belief that an actual or objective social order exists. Instead they proceed from the assumption that social life appears orderly to members of society. Thus in the eyes of members their everyday activities seem ordered and systematic but this order is not necessarily due to the intrinsic nature or inherent qualities of the social world. In other words it may not actually exist. Rather it may simply appear to exist because of the way members perceive and interpret social reality.

Social order therefore becomes a convenient fiction, an appearance of order constructed by members of society. This appearance allows the social world to be described and explained, and so made knowable, reasonable, understandable and 'accountable' to its members. It is made accountable in the sense that members of society become able to provide descriptions and explanations of their own actions, and of the society around them, which are reasonable and acceptable to themselves and others. Thus, in Atkinson's study of suicide, coroners (investigating officers) were able to justify and explain their actions to themselves and to others in terms of the common-sense ways they went about reaching a verdict. Atkinson argues that coroners have a 'common-sense theory' of suicide. If information about the deceased fits the theory, they are likely to categorise the death as suicide.

The methods and accounting procedures used by members for creating a sense of order form the subject matter of ethnomethodological enquiry. Zimmerman and Wieder state that the ethnomethodologist is concerned with how members of society go about the task of *seeing*, *describing*, and *explaining* order in the world in which they live.

Garfinkel argues that members employ the 'documentary method' to make sense and account for the social world and to give it an appearance of order. This method consists of selecting certain aspects of the infinite number of features contained in any situation or context, of defining them in a particular way, and seeing them as evidence of an underlying pattern. The process is then reversed and particular instances of the underlying pattern are then used as evidence for the existence of the pattern. In Garfinkel's words, the documentary method:

consists of treating an actual experience as 'the document of', as 'pointing to', as standing on behalf of' a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of 'what is known' about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other. (Garfinkel, 1984)

For example, in the case of Atkinson's study of coroners, those deaths defined as suicide were seen as such by reference to an underlying pattern. This pattern is the coroner's common-sense theory of suicide. However, at the same time, those deaths defined as suicide were seen as evidence for the existence of the underlying pattern. In this way, particular instances of the pattern and the pattern itself are mutually reinforcing and are used to elaborate each other. Thus the documentary method can be seen as 'reflexive'. The particular instance is seen as a reflection of the underlying pattern and vice-versa.

Garfinkel argued that social life is 'essentially reflexive'. Members of society constantly look at particular activities and situations in terms of presumed underlying patterns, and in turn confirm the existence of those patterns by referring to particular expressions of them in activities and situations. In this way, members produce accounts of the social world that not only make sense of and explain, but actually constitute, that world. Thus, in providing accounts of suicide, coroners are actually producing suicide. Their accounts of suicide constitute suicide in the social world.

In this respect, accounts are a part of the things they describe and explain. The social world is therefore constituted by the methods and accounting procedures in terms of which it is identified, described and explained. Thus the social world is constructed by its members by the use of the documentary method. This is what Garfinkel means when he describes social reality as 'essentially reflexive'.

Ethnomethodologists are highly critical of other branches of sociology. They argue that 'conventional' sociologists have misunderstood the nature of social reality. They have treated the social world as if it had an objective reality which is independent of members' accounts and interpretations. By contrast, ethnomethodologists argue that the social world consists of nothing more than the constructs, interpretations and accounts of its members. The job of the sociologist is therefore to explain the methods and accounting procedures which members employ to construct their social world. According to ethnomethodologists, this is the very job that mainstream sociology has failed to do.

Although there are differences between those who support social action and those who support phenomenological views, they all agree that the positivist approach has produced a distorted picture of social life. Peter Berger (1966) argued that society has often been viewed as a puppet theatre with its members portrayed as 'little puppets jumping about on the ends of their invisible strings, cheerfully acting out the parts that have been assigned to them'. Society instils values, norms and roles, and humans dutifully respond like Berger's puppets. However,

interactionists and phenomenologists believe that humans do not react and respond passively to an external society. They see humans as actively creating their own meanings and their own society in interaction with each other. In this respect their views have similarities with some of the postmodern approaches discussed later.

Dear Candidate, the distinction between positivist and anti-positivist (or phenomenological) approaches is not as clear cut as this section has implied. There is considerable debate over whether or not a particular theory should be labeled positivist or anti-positivist. Often it is a matter of degree since many theories lie somewhere between the two extremes.

Important: Dear students, after reading about these different perspectives, you may ask: Which one is right? The answer can be found in the following story from sociologist Elliot Liebow (1993):

Mr. Shapiro and Mr. Goldberg had an argument they were unable to resolve.

It was agreed that Mr. Shapiro would present the case to a rabbi.

The rabbi said to Mr. Shapiro, "You are right."

When Mr. Goldberg learned of this, he ran to the rabbi with his version of the argument. The rabbi said to him, "You are right."

Then the rabbi's wife said to the rabbi, "You told Mr. Shapiro he was right and you told Mr. Goldberg he was right. They can't both be right!"

The rabbi said to his wife, "You are right too."

As the rabbi would say, each of the three perspectives in sociology is right in its own way. Each shows what our world looks like, but only when viewed from a certain angle. Although different, the three perspectives are not really incompatible. To some extent, they are like different perspectives on a house. Looked at from the front, the house has a door, windows, and a chimney on top. From the back, it has a door and a chimney on top but probably fewer windows and may be a porch. From the top, it has no doors or windows, but it has a chimney in the middle. It is the same house, but it looks very different, depending on perspective. Similarly, whether we see functions, conflict, or interaction depends on the position from which we are looking. Each perspective is useful because we cannot take everything about the complex social world into account at once. We need some vantage point. Each perspective tells us what to look for, and each brings some aspect of society and human behaviour into sharper focus. Brought together, these diverse perspectives can enrich our sociological knowledge of the world.

Postmodernism

The challenge to modernism

Since the 1980s, postmodern perspectives have become increasingly influential in sociology. These perspectives take a number of forms, and the more radical of these represent a major challenge to the perspectives examined so far.

Some postmodern theorists content themselves with describing and explaining what they see as the crucial changes in society. They retain elements of conventional approaches in sociology. For example, they still believe that it is possible to explain both human behaviour and the ways in which societies are changing. They no longer assume that the changes are progressive, but they stick to a belief that they can be explained through developing sociological theories.

Some postmodernists go much further than this. They argue that conventional, modern approaches in sociology, which grew out of modern society, must be abandoned. While approaches such as Marxism, functionalism, feminism and interactionism might have explained how the social world worked in previous eras, they are no longer useful. New theories are needed for the postmodern age. They support this claim in two main ways.

First, some postmodernists argue that social behaviour is no longer shaped as it used to be by people's background and their socialisation. They argue that factors such as class, gender, and ethnic group influence people a great deal less than they used to. Instead, people are much freer to choose their own identity and lifestyle. Thus, for example, people have more choice about whether to be heterosexual or homosexual, where they live and where they travel, what sort of people they mix with and what clothes they wear. The boundaries between social groups are breaking down, and you can no longer predict the sorts of lifestyles that people will adopt. If so much choice exists, then many of the aspects of social life studied by modern sociologists are no longer important and their studies are no longer useful.

Second, some postmodernists question the belief that there is any solid foundation for producing knowledge about society. They argue that modern sociologists were quite wrong to believe that sociology could discover the truth by adopting the methods of the physical sciences. From their perspective, all knowledge is based upon the use of language. Language can never describe the external world perfectly. Knowledge is essentially subjective – it expresses personal viewpoints that can never be proved to be correct.

Postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard argue that it has become increasingly difficult to separate media images from anything even approximating to reality. Society has become so saturated with media images that people now sometimes confuse media characters with real life. For example, they talk about soap opera characters as if they were real people rather than dramatic roles.

Postmodernists such as Jean Francois Lyotard are particularly critical of any attempt to produce a general theory of how society works (for example, Marxism or functionalism). Lyotard believes that all attempts to produce such theories are doomed to failure. They cannot truly explain something as complex as the social world. Generally such theories are simply used by groups of people to try to impose their ideas on other people, for example in communist or fascist societies. General theories are therefore dangerous and should always be rejected. In Lyotard's view, modern sociological theories fall into this category and should be rejected.

Many writers who adopt some of the stronger claims of postmodernism emphasise differences between people rather than similarities between members of social groups. They believe that it is the job of the researcher to uncover and describe these differences rather than to make generalisations about whole social groups. This involves acknowledging that there are many different viewpoints on society and that you should not judge between them. All viewpoints are seen as being equally valid; none is superior to any other. Sociologists should not try to impose their views on others, but should merely enable the voices of different people to be heard. This is very different from the goals of other sociologists (such as Marxists and functionalists) who set out to produce scientific explanations of how society works and how social groups behave.

Sociology is Simple
Sociology is Scoring
provided that you
Study Sociology Systematically

Fact, Value and Objectivity

The word **fact** derives from the Latin *factum*. A fact is something that has really occurred or is actually the case. The usual test for a statement of fact is its verifiability, that is, whether it can be proven to correspond to experience. Scientific facts are verified by repeatable experiments. Thus, a fact is regarded as an empirically verifiable observation. A **theory**, on the other hand, is a set of ideas which provides an explanation for something. It is an abstract and generalized statement which tends to establish a logical interrelationship between facts (concepts or variables). Theories involve constructing abstract interpretations that can be used to explain a wide variety of empirical situations.

Thus, in sociology, we can say that a sociological theory is a set of ideas which provides an explanation for human society. As discussed earlier, sociology is a scientific study of society and as we know that scientific research is a guided search for facts based on the formulated hypothesis. A hypothesis is a tentative statement asserting a relationship between certain facts. It is the hypothesis that guides the researcher what data to look for. A social scientist or researcher conducts a field research and collects data (facts) in order to test the hypothesis. After data collection, data is processed. Thereafter, the researcher tests the hypothesis against the processed data. If the hypothesis is proved (i.e. supported by data) then it becomes **thesis** – if it is repeatedly proved, it becomes a **theory** and if it is almost universally true, then it becomes the **law**.

Thesis → Theory → Law

Thesis, Theory and Law, they all are generalizations. They represent different degrees of generalizations. In natural sciences, we hear about several laws but in social sciences we only have theories. Social sciences study social behaviour of man which is guided by unique meanings and motives, values and beliefs, etc. Hence, given the diversity and dynamism of human society in general, it is nearly impossible to arrive at a universally valid generalization or law of human society.

Let us now discuss the interrelationship of theory and facts (empirical research). Robert K. Merton, the American sociologist, has elaborated on this aspect in detail in his essays. In his essay '*The bearing of sociological theory on empirical research*' he argues that without a theoretical approach, we would not know what facts to look for in beginning a study or in interpreting the results of research. Often, existing theories serve as a source for hypothesis formulation and thus stimulate and guide further research resulting in discovery of new facts. For example, Marxian theory suggests that increasing economic inequalities are the primary cause of alienation and class conflict in modern capitalist societies.

This theory can serve as a source for our hypothesis to understand the rising discontentment among masses in the contemporary Indian society. Thus you may start exploring that to what extent the existing economic inequality is a factor in the rise of Naxalism or caste conflicts in rural India, etc. Thus theory helps to define which kinds of facts are relevant. Secondly, theory establishes a rational link between two or more variables and thus can act as a tool for prediction and control. For example, various theories have highlighted female education as a critical factor in the overall social development. Thus, in order to improve their ranking on the social development index, countries with low female education can initiate female education programmes at national level because we now know that female education has direct bearing on the social development of a society. Thirdly, as stated earlier, theory is an abstract and generalized statement which tends to establish a logical interrelationship between facts (concepts or variables). Theories involve constructing abstract interpretations and thus make the knowledge cross-culturally useful. For example, Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy is nothing but an abstraction which can serve as tool for a comparative study of bureaucratic models across societies.

Merton in his another essay '*The bearing of empirical research on sociological theory*' argues that empirical research is generally assigned a rather passive role: the testing or verification of hypotheses. Merton argues that empirical research goes far beyond the passive role of verifying and testing theory: it does more than confirm or refute hypotheses. According to Merton, research plays an active role: it performs at least four major functions which help shape the development of theory. It *initiates*, it *reformulates*, it *deflects* and it *clarifies* theory. Merton explain in his essay that how under certain conditions, a research finding gives rise to social theory. He calls it '*serendipity pattern*'. Merton argues that fruitful empirical research not only tests theoretically derived hypothesis, it also originates new hypothesis. This might be termed the 'serendipity' component of research, *i.e.*, the discovery, by chance or sagacity, of valid results which were not sought for. In simpler words, it implies that during the course of research some unanticipated but strategic data may come to light, which may initiate a new theory altogether. For example, Elton Mayo, a professor at the Harvard Business School, in his investigation at the Hawthorne plant of Western Electric Company in Chicago, conducted a series of experiments designed to investigate the relationship between working conditions and productivity. Mayo began with the assumptions of scientific management believing that the physical conditions of the work environment, the aptitude of the worker and the financial incentives were the main determinants of productivity. However, during the course of his research Mayo struck upon the role of informal groups and group norms in determining the productivity. From the Hawthorne studies, developed the human relations school, which challenged and led to the reformulation of the conventional

scientific management approach. It stated that scientific management provided too narrow a view of man and that financial incentives alone were insufficient to motivate workers and ensure their cooperation. The Hawthorne studies moved the emphasis from the individual worker to the worker as a member of a social group. The behaviour of the worker was seen as a response to group norms rather than simply being directed by economic incentives and management designed work schemes. It was found that the informal work groups develop their own norms and values which are enforced by the application of group sanctions. The power of such sanctions derives from the dependence of the individual upon the group. He has a basic need to belong, to feel part of a social group. He needs approval, recognition and status, needs which cannot be satisfied if he fails to conform to group norms.

Thus there is an intricate relation between theory and fact. Facts (i.e. empirical research) and theory are inherently dependent on each other. Factual research and theories can never completely be separated. We can only develop valid theoretical approaches if we are able to test them out by means of factual research.

Important: Dear candidate, since the topic mentioned in the syllabus is '*Fact, Value and Objectivity*', I wish to give you a few hints in case the examiner asks you the role or significance of facts and values in sociology. As you know that a fact is an empirically verifiable observation. It is objective in nature. A value, on the other hand, is subjective in nature. Values are socially accepted standards of desirability. In other words, a value is a belief that something is good and desirable. It defines what is important and worthwhile. Values differ from society to society and culture to culture.

The significance of facts was asserted by the early founding fathers of sociology, be it Comte, Spencer or Durkheim. Remember? We had discussed earlier that how these scholars advocated a positivist approach to study society i.e. they emphasised on the study of only those aspects of social reality which could be empirically observed and hence quantified. Anti-positivist scholars, on the other hand, argued that the subject matter of sociology is the study of human behaviour in society and all human behaviour is guided by values. Hence, these scholars, be it Max Weber, Mead, etc., suggested social action approach to study society.

In this manner, with the limited content, you can easily formulate a good analytical answer. But you must support all your arguments with suitable examples to score better than others.

Now we will discuss the role of values in sociological enquiry and associated with it is the problem of objectivity.

As stated earlier, the subject matter of sociology is the study of human behaviour in society. All human behaviour is guided by values. Moreover, social research is in itself a type of social behaviour guided by the value of 'search for true knowledge.' Values are socially accepted standards of desirability. In other words, a value is a belief that something is good and desirable. It defines what is important and worthwhile. Values differ from society to society and culture to culture. For example, in West, the dominant values are individualism and materialism which are this-worldly in nature. While in India, *moksha* had been a long cherished goal of human life which is other-worldly in nature.

In order to have a complete understanding of man's social behaviour it is not only important but also necessary to take into account the unique meanings, motives and values that underlie such behaviour. Initially this view was advocated by anti-positivists scholars (also known as neo-Kantian scholars in Germany) like Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915) and Heinrich Rikert (1863-1936). Later, Weber also argued that behaviour of man in society is qualitatively different from that of physical objects and biological organisms. He argued that unlike matter, man has consciousness – thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions and an awareness of being. Because of this, his actions are meaningful. He defines situations and gives meaning to his actions and those of others. As a result, he does not merely react to external stimuli, he does not simply behave, he acts. Thus, if action stems from subjective meanings, it follows that the sociologist must discover those meanings in order to understand action. He cannot simply observe action from the outside and impose an external logic upon it. He must interpret the internal logic which directs the actions of the actor.

However, the views mentioned above are quite antithetical to the propositions of positivist tradition in sociology. Auguste Comte, who is credited with inventing the term sociology and regarded as one of the founders of the discipline, maintained that the application of the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences would produce a 'positive science of society'. In terms of sociology, the positivist approach makes the following assumptions. The behaviour of man, like the behaviour of matter, can be objectively measured. Just as the behaviour of matter can be quantified by measures such as weight, temperature and pressure, methods of objective measurement can also be devised for human behaviour. The positivist approach in sociology places particular emphasis on behaviour that can be directly observed. It argues that factors which are not directly observable such as meanings, feelings, motives, etc. are not particularly important and can be misleading. This is best manifested in the works of

Durkheim. Durkheim in his “*Rules of Sociological Method*” states that social facts must be treated as ‘things’ and all the preconceived notions about the social facts must be abandoned.

On the basis of the above discussed ideas of both positivist and anti-positivist scholars, one thing is clear that without taking into account the values that underlie human behaviour, a comprehensive understanding of man’s social behaviour would not be possible. Our reliance on positivist approach alone would produce a partial picture of social reality. But if we undertake study of values as well in the course of sociological research then the problem of objectivity raises its head (because we know that values are subjective). Let us now discuss what does objectivity means and how different scholars have tried to address the problem of objectivity in sociology.

Objectivity is a ‘frame of mind’ so that the personal prejudices or preferences of the social scientists do not contaminate the collection and analysis of data. Objectivity is the goal of scientific investigation. Sociology also being a science aspires for the goal of objectivity. Thus, scientific investigations should be free from the prejudices of race, colour, religion, sex or ideological biases. The need of objectivity in sociological research has been emphasized by all important sociologists. For example, Durkheim, in this ‘*Rules of the Sociological Method*’ stated that ‘social facts’ must be treated as ‘things’ and all preconceived notions about the social facts must be abandoned. Even Max Weber emphasized the need of objectivity when he said that sociology must be free from any kind of value biases on the part of the researcher. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the social scientist must abandon or transcend his ethnocentric and egocentric biases while carrying out researches. Similarly, Malinowski advocated ‘cultural relativism’ while conducting anthropological field work in order to ensure objectivity.

However, objectivity continues to be an elusive goal at the practical level. In fact, one school of thought represented by Gunnar Myrdal (1898-1987) states that complete objectivity in social sciences is a myth. Gunnar Myrdal in his book ‘*Objectivity in Social Research*’ argues that total objectivity is an illusion which can never be achieved. Because all research is always guided by certain viewpoints and viewpoints involve subjectivity. Myrdal argues that subjectivity creeps in at various stages in the course of sociological research. For example, the very choice of topic of research is influenced by personal preferences and ideological biases of the researcher. How personal preferences influence the choice of topic of research can be illustrated from a study made by Prof. Schwab. In his study he analyzed 4000 scientific papers produced over a span of centuries. He found that the choice made by scientists in pursuing their research was based on their personal preferences as determined by personality factors and social circumstances.

Besides personal preferences, the ideological biases, acquired in the course of education and training also have a bearing on the choice of the topic of research. The impact of ideological biases on social research can be very far reaching as can be seen from the study of Tepoztlán village in Mexico. Robert Redfield (1897-1958), an American anthropologist, studied the village in 1930 with a functionalist perspective and concluded that there exists total harmony between various groups in the village while another American anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1914-1970) studied this village at almost the same time from Marxist perspective, and found that the society was conflict ridden. Here we can see that how the differences of ideological perspectives had a bearing on the research findings even though the society studied was the same.

Subjectivity can also creep in at the time of formulation of hypothesis. Normally hypotheses are deduced from existing body of theory. Now all sociological theories are produced by and limited to particular groups whose view points and interests they represent. Thus formulation of hypotheses will automatically introduce a bias in the sociological research.

The fourth stage at which subjectivity creeps in the course of research is that of collection of empirical data. No technique of data collection is perfect. Each technique may lead to subjectivity in one way or the other. For example, in case of participant observation, the observer as a result of '*nativisation*' acquires a bias in favour of the group he is studying. While in non-participant observation, the sociologist belongs to a different group than that under study. He is likely to impose his values and prejudices. In all societies there are certain prejudices. For e.g., in America, people have prejudices against the Blacks and in India, people have prejudices against untouchables or women. Such prejudices of the observer may influence his observation. Further, in case of interview as a technique of data collection, the data may be influenced by (i) context of the interview; (ii) interaction of the participants; (iii) participants' definition of the situation; (iv) and if adequate rapport does not extend between them there might be communication barriers. Thus, according to P.V. Young, interview sometimes carries a double dose of subjectivity.

Finally subjectivity can also creep in due to field limitations as was found in case of Andre Beteille's study of Sripuram village in Tanjore where the Brahmins did not allow him to visit the untouchable locality and study their point of view.

Thus complete objectivity continues to be an elusive goal. Myrdal argues that sociology at best could aspire for the goal of value-neutrality on the part of the researcher. This could be attained by either of the following ways:

- i. The researcher should exclude all ideological or non-scientific assumptions from his research;
- ii. The researcher should make his value-preference clear in the research monograph. As Weber has also stated that the researcher should be value-frank;
- iii. The researcher should not make any evaluative judgement about empirical evidence;
- iv. The researcher should remain indifferent to the moral implication of his research;
- v. Highly trained and skilled research workers should be employed.
- vi. Various methods of data collection should be used and the result obtained from one should be cross checked with those from the other.
- vii. Field limitations must be clearly stated in the research monograph.

Eminent sociologist T. K. Oommen in his book *Knowledge and Society* emphasizes the importance of 'contextualization' in sociological enquiry. Oommen argues that while objectivity in natural sciences is *generalizing objectivity*, in social sciences it is *particularizing objectivity*. He suggests that objectivity in social sciences has to be *contextual objectivity*. Contextual objectivity, according to Oommen, can be determined by intra-subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. Intra-subjectivity is one where the same researcher (with his given value orientation) studies the same object (the social group) at two different points of time using same method and arrives at the similar conclusions. Inter-subjectivity, on the other hand, is one when two researchers (with similar value orientations) study the same object at the same time using same method and arrive at similar conclusions.

Of late, a group of American sociologists who have come to be known as 'radical sociologists', have advocated that total value-neutrality is not desirable. Commitment to total political neutrality reduces the sociologist to the status of a mere spectator and sociologists can play no creative role in the society. After all the basic purpose of sociological knowledge is social welfare. But, given such excessive preoccupation with value-neutrality, the role of sociologists has been like, to use W.H. Auden's phrase, "Lecturing on navigation while the ship is going down." C. Wright Mills has also complained that sociology has lost its 'reforming push'.

Alvin W. Gouldner, most remembered for his work *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970), argued that sociology must turn away from producing objective truths and understand the subjective nature of sociology and knowledge in general and how it is bound up with the context of the times. He called for a *reflexive sociology* in which there would be no forgetting of the idea that the sociologist was part of society and played a social role. As the commonplace has it, sociology cannot be practiced outside its historical and social context. Thus, according to C. Wright Mills, Alvin W. Gouldner and others, sociology must have commitment to certain basic human values and sociologists should be ready to defend human freedom and the pursuit of reason.

In addition

Sociology and values

The positivist approach assumes that a science of society is possible. It therefore follows that objective observation and analysis of social life are possible. An objective view is free from the values, moral judgements and ideology of the observer: it provides facts and explanatory frameworks which are uncoloured by the observer's feelings and opinions.

An increasing number of sociologists argue that a **value-free** science of society is not possible. They maintain that the values of sociologists directly influence every aspect of their research. They argue that the various theories of society are based, at least in part, on value judgements and ideological positions. They suggest that sociological perspectives are shaped more by historical circumstances than by objective views of the reality of social life.

Those who argue that an objective science of society is not possible maintain that sociology can never be free from ideology. The term **ideology** refers to a set of ideas that present only a partial view of reality. An ideological viewpoint also includes values. It involves a judgement not only about the way things are, but also about the way things ought to be. Thus ideology is a set of beliefs and values which provides a way of seeing and interpreting the world, which results in a partial view of reality. The term ideology is often used to suggest a distortion, a false picture of reality. However, there is considerable doubt about whether reality and ideology can be separated. As Nigel Harris (1971) suggested, 'Our reality is the next man's ideology and vice versa.'

Ideology can be seen as a set of beliefs and values that express the interests of a particular social group. Marxists use the term in this way when they talk about the ideology of the ruling class. In this sense, ideology is a viewpoint that distorts reality and justifies and legitimates the position of a social group.

Karl Mannheim (1948) used the term in a similar way. He stated that ideology consists of the beliefs and values of a ruling group which 'obscures the real condition of society both to itself and others and thereby stabilises it'. Mannheim distinguished this form of ideology from what he called **utopian ideology**. Rather than supporting the status quo – the way things are – utopian ideologies advocate a complete change in the structure of society. Mannheim argued that such ideologies are usually found in oppressed groups whose members want radical change. As their name suggests, utopian ideologies are based on a vision of an ideal society, a perfect social system. Mannheim referred to them as 'wish-images' for a future social order. Like the ideologies of ruling groups, he argued that utopian ideologies are a way of seeing the world that prevents true insight and obscures reality.

Mannheim's ideas will now be applied to two of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology: Marxism and functionalism. It has often been argued that Marxism is largely based on a utopian ideology, and functionalism on a ruling-class ideology. Marxism contains a vision and a promise of a future ideal society – the communist utopia. In this society the means of production are communally owned and, as a result, oppression and exploitation disappear. The communist utopia provides a standard of comparison for present and past societies. Since they inevitably fall far short of this ideal, their social arrangements will be condemned. It has been argued that the communist utopia is not a scientific prediction but merely a projection of the 'wish-images' of those who adopt a Marxist position. Utopian ideology has therefore been seen as the basis of Marxist theory.

By comparison, functionalism has often been interpreted as a form of ruling-class ideology. Where Marxism is seen to advocate radical change, functionalism is seen to justify and legitimate the status quo. With its emphasis on order and stability, consensus and integration, functionalism appears to adopt a conservative stance. Rapid social change is not recommended since it will disrupt social order. The major institutions of society are justified by the belief that they are meeting the functional prerequisites of the social system.

Although functionalists have introduced the concept of **dysfunction** to cover the harmful effects of parts of the system on society as a whole, the concept is rarely employed. In practice, functionalists appear preoccupied with discovering the positive functions and the beneficial effects of social institutions. As a result, the term function is associated with the ideas of 'useful' and 'good'. This interpretation of society tends to legitimate the way things are. Ruling-class ideology has therefore been seen as the basis of functionalist theory.

It is important to note that the above interpretation of the ideological bases of Marxism and functionalism is debatable. However, a case can be made to support the view that both perspectives are ideologically based.

Postmodernists would certainly support the view that Marxism and functionalism are ideologically based. Postmodernists do not just reject these particular perspectives – they reject any attempt to produce a theory of society as a whole. They see such theories as dangerous. This is because they can lead to one group trying to impose its will on others. From this viewpoint it is neither possible nor desirable to try to remove values from sociology. Instead, a range of different values should be accepted and tolerated. People have a right to be different from one another and to hold different views. It is not the job of the sociologist to arbitrate between these different values and say which is better.

Some sociologists reject this standpoint. Critical social scientists do not deny that values must inevitably enter into sociology. However, they do not believe that sociologists should just accept the range of different values present in society. Rather, it is the duty of social scientists to try to improve society. If, like postmodernists, they were simply to accept the range of different values that exists, they would be shirking their responsibility. By refusing to make any judgement about whose values are better, they would be accepting the way society is. Taken to extremes, this would mean, for example, that the values of the rapist are no worse than those of the rape victim; the values of racists are no worse than those of people who campaign against racism; and the values of capitalists who exploit their workers are no worse than those of people who try to help the poor.

Critical social scientists argue that sociologists should take sides and that they should try to use their work to fight injustice and improve society. The American sociologist C.Wright Mills, whose ideas are examined below, generally supports this view.

The sociological imagination

Although sociologists vary in their perspectives, methods and values, they all (with the exception of some postmodernists) share the aim of understanding and explaining the social world. Combining the insights offered by different approaches might be the best way of achieving this goal.

Structural theories of society, such as functionalism and Marxism, emphasise the importance of society in shaping human behaviour. On the other hand, approaches such as interactionism emphasise the importance of human behaviour in shaping society. Many sociologists today believe that good sociology

must examine both the structure of society and social interaction. They believe that it is only by combining the study of the major changes in society and individual lives that sociologists can develop their understanding of social life.

This idea is not new: the very influential German sociologist Max Weber supported it, and more recently the British sociologist Anthony Giddens examined it in depth. However, perhaps the American sociologist C.Wright Mills put forward the clearest exposition of this view.

Mills called the ability to study the structure of society while also studying individuals' lives the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959). He argued that the sociological imagination allowed people to understand their 'private troubles' in terms of 'public issues'. People experience unemployment, war and marital breakdown in terms of the problems these events produce in their personal lives. They react to them as individuals, and their reactions have consequences for society as a whole.

However, to Mills, these issues can only be fully understood in the context of wider social forces. For example, very specific circumstances might lead to a person becoming unemployed, but when unemployment rates in society as a whole rise, it becomes a public issue that needs to be explained. The sociologist has to consider 'the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals'.

According to Mills, then, sociology should be about examining the biographies of individuals in the context of the history of societies. The sociological imagination is not just of use to sociologists; it is important to all members of society if they wish to understand, change and improve their lives. Perhaps sociology can be seen as succeeding when it allows people to achieve this imagination.

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Reflexive Sociology

Dear Candidate, *reflexive sociology* is the newly emerging perspective in sociology. Though it is not explicitly mentioned in the syllabus but a short or long question can anytime be asked in the examination. So, it would be wise here to discuss some of the central arguments of reflexive sociology.

Reflexivity refers to the ‘reflexive monitoring of action’, that is, the way in which humans think about and reflect upon what they are doing in order to consider acting differently in future. Humans have always been reflexive up to a point, but in pre-industrial societies the importance of tradition limited reflexivity. Humans would do some things simply because they were the traditional things to do. However, with modernity, tradition loses much of its importance and reflexivity becomes the norm. Social reflexivity implies that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus continuously altering their character.

Contemporary sociologists want sociology to be a reflexive discipline. They try to understand society, and to feed the knowledge they gain back into social life. Social change is informed by our understanding of how society works and what the consequences of various actions might be. **Anthony Giddens** summed up this idea in his book *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990):

“The practical impact of social sciences is both profound and inescapable. Modern societies together with the organisations that compose and straddle them, are like learning machines, imbibing information in order to regularize their mastery of themselves... Only societies reflexively capable of modifying their institutions in the face of accelerated social change will be able to confront the future with any confidence. Sociology is the prime medium of such reflexivity.”

This concept of a reflexive sociology is nothing new, but it can help us to grasp the place of sociological understanding today. We need to note what Giddens is *not* saying in this passage. He is not suggesting that social scientists know best, and this means they cannot plan social development from above. The people who take action to change society are not social scientists, but members of society with varying amounts of power. Social science knowledge is a resource that people can draw upon when creating social change. Human beings constantly act upon their society and change it to some extent. It is not just programmes of reform or revolution that use social science knowledge. All of us need frameworks to interpret our world and act upon it; **social science is one important source (amongst others) of frameworks to guide action**. This means that sociology does not provide a critique of society on behalf of people, dictating their future for them.

Even so, there is inevitably a critical dimension if sociology is offering people an understanding of their social position. Alvin Gouldner emphasized this in 1971 in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. The solution he offered then – a liberating, reflexive sociology – is extremely relevant today. Gouldner was one of the first modern sociologists to reject the 1950s focus on social order and continuity in favour of studying change, conflict and social renewal through action. His work expressed the mood of radicalism in sociology in the 1960s and 1970s.

Since that time, most sociologists have become more cautious about the idea of a leading role for sociology in radical change. Instead, there is a widespread sense of what Giddens calls the ‘recursiveness’ of social knowledge. That is, sociologists’ knowledge can never be wholly neutral and detached because, in whatever form, it is used by people to interpret and reshape their society – and this is the society that sociologists have studied. So the study needs to be renewed, and the new knowledge must feed back into social life, and so on. This endless, looping interaction between sociology and social life has important consequences. For one thing, sociologists need never be out of work, for our knowledge of a particular society can only be provisional and temporary.

As we have seen, sociologists do not write the script for the future. They cannot tell people what values they should believe in, nor what their dreams and goals should be. Making the future is up to the members of society. However, as we have also seen, we are not free to do exactly as we will. Life in society is influenced by many factors, some of which we can control and some we cannot.

Alvin W. Gouldner (1920-1980), an American sociologist, in his most influential work *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* offered a substantial and exhaustive argument for ‘reflexive sociology’. Reflexive sociology, as put forward by Alvin W. Gouldner, is a meaningful alternative to positivism. Gouldner, an American sociologist, wrote with a high degree of moral sensitivity, and critiqued positivism. Against the view that science in general and sociology in particular is concerned with producing objective truths, Gouldner argued that knowledge is not independent of the knower and that sociology is intimately bound up with the socio-economic and political context in which it exists.

Gouldner advocated ‘reflexive sociology’ in response to **Methodological Dualism** (implicit in positivism) which was the dominant methodological assumption in early 20th century in American sociology. Methodological dualism was based on the elementary distinction of *subject* and *object*. Natural sciences in general were based on this premise. Since the subject matter of natural sciences was physical reality or matter, their prime concern was to discover the underlying pattern in nature and arrive at certain universal laws which can help in predicting

and controlling natural phenomenon. In sociology, methodological dualism was emphasized by scholars belonging to the positivist tradition in France and America. They argued that like natural sciences, social sciences can also study social reality in an objective manner and information thus arrived could be used to predict and control man's social behaviour and social change. Methodological dualism in sociology implied a clear distinction between the *inquiring subject* (social scientist) and the *studied object* (the social group whom he observes). Methodological dualism enjoins the sociologist to be detached from the world he studies. It sees his involvement with his object of study primarily from the standpoint of its contaminating effect upon the information system.

Gouldner warned social scientists of the methodological dualism which was implicit in positivism. This dualism separates the knower from the known, subject from object, fact from value. Not solely that. It views that if the sociologist engages politically, emotionally and aesthetically with the object of his/her study, the 'scientific nature' of the discipline would suffer. This cold objectivity, as Gouldner would argue, is essentially an expression of alienation, that is, the alienation of the sociologist from his/her own self. It is like looking at sociological knowledge as just a piece of amoral technique.

Methodological Dualism is based upon a fear; but this is a fear not so much of those being studied as of the sociologist's own self. Methodological Dualism is, at bottom, concerned to constitute a strategy for coping with the feared vulnerability of the scholar's self. It strives to free him from disgust, pity, anger, from egoism or moral outrage, from his passions and interest, on the supposition that it is a bloodless and disembodied mind that works best. It also seeks to insulate the scholar from the values and interests of his other roles and commitments, on the dubious assumption that these can be anything but blinders. It assumes that feeling is the blood enemy of intelligence, and that there can be an unfeeling, unsentimental knower.

Gouldner rejects the assumption of methodological dualism in sociology. He argues that positivists who emphasize on methodological dualism in sociology do so primarily because they conceive of knowledge only as information. But, according to Gouldner, the ultimate goal of sociology is not to seek neutral information about social reality but rather such knowledge which facilitates a better understanding of social reality in terms of men's changing interests, expectations, values, etc. In this regard, Gouldner cites the example of Weber's *Verstehen* method. In contrast to positivists, Weber had emphasized the need for the interpretative understanding of social action. He argued that in order to have a better understanding of social action, it is necessary to take into account the unique meanings and motives that underlie such action. Weber suggests that this can be done by the sociologist by establishing empathetic liaison with the actor. In other words, it implies that the sociologist should imaginatively place himself in the

actor's position and then try to understand the motives of the actor which guided his action.

Gouldner, however, pleads for methodological monism, and asserts that the separation between the knower and the known must be overcome, because you cannot know others without knowing yourself. That is why, self-reflexivity is absolutely important. To know others a sociologist cannot simply study them, but must also listen to and confront himself/herself. Knowing is not an impersonal effort but 'a personalised effort by whole, embodied men'. Reflexive sociology invites methodological monism, and, therefore, alters the very meaning of knowledge. It does not remain merely a piece of information. Instead, it becomes an awareness. It generates self-awareness and new sensitivity. Reflexive sociology, you would appreciate, is heavily demanding. Unlike positivist sociology in which you can remain 'neutral' and 'apolitical', reflexive sociology demands your moral commitment and ethical engagement. You cannot separate your life from your work. Gouldner wrote,

Reflexive Sociology, then, is not characterised by what it studies. It is distinguished neither by the persons and the problems studied nor even by the techniques and instruments used in studying them. It is characterised, rather, by a relationship it establishes between being a sociologist and being a person, between the role and the man performing it. Reflexive sociology embodies a critique of the conventional conception of segregated scholarly roles and has a vision of an alternative. It aims at transforming the sociologist's relation to his work.

In other words, Gouldner argues that the knowledge of the world cannot be advanced apart from the sociologist's knowledge of himself and his position in the social world. He argues that to know others, a sociologist cannot simply study them but must also listen to and confront himself. Awareness of the self is seen as an indispensable avenue to awareness of the social world. Reflexive sociology aims at transforming the sociologist's relation to his work. It is characterized by the relationship it establishes between being a sociologist and being a person, between the role and the man performing it.

Reflexive sociology rejects the subject-object dichotomy, that is, sociologist who studies and those whom he studies or observes. Rather, the historical mission of sociology, according to Gouldner is to raise the sociologist's awareness of himself and his position in the social world. Thus, a reflexive sociologist must become aware of himself as both *knower* and as *agent of change*. He cannot know others unless he also knows his intentions toward and his effects upon them. He cannot know others without knowing himself, his place in the social world, and the forces – in society and in himself – to which he is subjected.

Gouldner argues that reflexive sociology is radical sociology. It is radical because in contrast to positivism, it rejects the assumption of methodological dualism i.e. subject-object dichotomy. It is radical because it is a historically sensitive sociology as it seeks to deepen the awareness of sociologists about themselves, of their own historically evolving character and of their place in a historically evolving society. It is radical because it embodies and advances certain specific values. As a work ethic, it affirms the creative potential of the sociologist and encourages him to take an independent stand of his own and resist the demands for conformity by the established authorities and institutions. Hence, according to Gouldner, a reflexive sociology would be a moral sociology.

Take an example. Suppose you wish to study the phenomenon called 'slum culture'. A way of doing it is, of course, a highly positivistic/technical research. You hire research assistants, send them to a particular slum with a questionnaire, and instruct them to distribute copies of it after random sampling. The data you gather get classified and quantified, and you make your conclusions. These are the conclusions derived from 'hard' facts. And never do you feel the need to engage yourself as a person with the slum. In other words, your dispassionate exercise is not different from the way a mathematician solves a puzzle, or a scientist works in a lab.

Now Gouldner's reflexive sociology would oppose this kind of research. Instead, it would make you reflect on your own self and your politics and morality. Possibly you are urban, upper class, English speaking and relatively privileged. What does it mean for you to understand the slum culture? Isn't it the fact that their suffering cannot be separated from your privilege? Can you understand them without questioning this asymmetrical power? These questions born out of self-reflexivity would possibly create a new sociology which, far from objectifying the world, tries to create a new one. Possibly new trends in sociological research emanating from feminist and Dalit movements resemble this sort of reflexive sociology. Because in these research trends one sees not just technical objectivity, but essentially a high degree of empathy, an urge to understand suffering, and a striving for an alternative praxis (process).

Sociology is Simple
Sociology is Scoring
provided that you
Study Sociology Systematically

View of other scholars

C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), Harold Garfinkel (1917-2011), Alvin W. Gouldner (1920-1980) and Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002)

“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”

C. Wright Mills

These scholars argue that we really need to deepen our understanding of self and our position in the world to better understand the social reality of others – and really this is tied up with the concept of Sociological Imagination – that we have to be able to get out of our own way of thinking about social reality and really be willing to step into the other person’s shoes to understand why things are happening the way they are. In addition, reflexive sociology require us to be skeptical of our own views. For example, oftenly when we observe some social incident, or while watching TV or reading newspaper, we often have kneejerk reaction (without thinking) to that, such as, “Why that person is doing like this? – This is so ridiculous.” But when we are doing this, we must also take into consideration that other people are doing the same thing when they are observing us.

So, reflexive sociology require us to really examine ‘what we are doing’, ‘how we think’, ‘how we feel’, ‘what are our attitudes, feelings and prejudices’ about particular things in social reality. And if we can really grasp this idea of being skeptical about our own views, then it helps us to just simply wash away all of the preconceived notions that we have about why people behave the way they do. Because it helps us to really grasp that the reason we behave the way we do is because of all of the stimulus (context) that we have been exposed to. And if we can get to that really basic understanding that everybody else is doing exactly the same thing, it allows us to step outside of our judgement of the situation.

Harold Garfinkel’s views:

Garfinkel (1917-2011) was an American sociologist, ethnomethodologist, and a Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is known for establishing and developing ethnomethodology as a field of inquiry in sociology. Garfinkel argued that as social science researchers we should think about ourselves as being a goldfish in a goldfish bowl. He said that we often times forget that we have to live in the same water, that we are living in the same environment as everyone else.

So, rather than looking at subjects of our research as simply just objects i.e., things out there to study and report about, it would do us well to remember that we are also one of those objects, one of those people who has to live in the same social reality. So, this notion of reflexive sociology has really had a tremendous impact on contemporary sociology.

In the beginning of the field of sociology as a discipline, we didn't really take the time to think about how we fit in. We kind of saw ourselves as removed and detached researchers of everything else that was going on out there in society. So we looked at the subjects of our research as objects, as things that we could just count or things that we could record feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of. We didn't really take the time to understand how we fit in.

And the second part of the development of the field of sociology towards the reflexive type of thinking was starting to examine the methods and approaches of our discipline i.e., what is it that we are doing and how are we doing it?

The third step of reflexive sociology was looking for the things that were absent. So not only looking at the methods and approaches of the discipline but also looking for the things that were absent. And here what we find was the absence of the researcher. And that is where we get to the essence of sociology, when we are able to connect that we are part of the bigger picture, we are able to understand the reflexive nature of the study of society.

Dear Candidate, the long question on reflexivity can also be asked in context of its comparison with positivist tradition, which I think you would be able to answer. But, the examiner may also ask a question on reflexivity in context of its implications on the changing landscape of 'field' and the practices of fieldwork in social anthropological research. This I will discuss in detail in the topic 'field' in our next section on *Research Methods and Analysis*.

How can sociology help us in our lives?

Sociology has several practical implications for our lives, as C. Wright Mills emphasized when developing his idea of the sociological imagination. First, sociology gives us an awareness of cultural differences that allows us to see the social world from many perspectives. Quite often, if we properly understand how others live, we also acquire a better understanding of what their problems are. Practical policies that are not based on an informed awareness of the ways of life of people they affect have little chance of success. For example, a white social worker operating in a predominantly Latin American community in South London

will not gain the confidence of its members without developing a sensitivity to the differences in social experience between members of different groups in the UK.

Second, sociological research provides practical help in assessing the results of policy initiatives. A programme of practical reform may simply fail to achieve what its designers sought or may produce unintended consequences of an unfortunate kind. For instance, in the years following the Second World War, large public housing blocks were built in city centres in many countries. These were planned to provide high standards of accommodation for low income groups from slum areas and offered shopping amenities and other civic services nearby. However, research later showed that many people who had moved from their previous dwellings to large apartment blocks felt isolated and unhappy. High-rise apartment blocks and shopping centres in poorer areas often became dilapidated and provided breeding grounds for muggings and other violent crimes.

Third, and in some ways this is the most important, sociology can provide us with self-enlightenment – increased self-understanding. The more we know about why we act as we do and about the overall workings of our society, the more likely we are to be able to influence our own futures. We should not see sociology as assisting only policy-makers – that is, powerful groups – in making informed decisions. Those in power cannot be assumed always to consider the interests of the less powerful or underprivileged in the policies they pursue. Self-enlightened groups can often benefit from sociological research by using the information gleaned to respond in an effective way to government policies or form policy initiatives of their own. Self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and social movements like the environmental movement are examples of social groups that have directly sought to bring about practical reforms, with some degree of success.

Finally, it should be mentioned that many sociologists concern themselves directly with practical matters as professionals. People trained in sociology are to be found as industrial consultants, researchers, urban planners, social workers and personnel managers, as well as in many other jobs. An understanding of society can also help for future careers in law, journalism, business and health professions.

There is often a connection between studying sociology and the prompting of social conscience. Should sociologists themselves actively advocate and agitate for programmes of reform or social change? Some argue that sociology can preserve its intellectual independence only if sociologists are studiously neutral in moral and political controversies. Yet are those scholars who remain aloof from current debates necessarily more impartial in their assessment of sociological issues than others? No sociologically sophisticated person can be unaware of the

inequalities that exist in the world today. It would be strange if sociologists did not take sides on political issues, and it would be illogical to try to ban them from drawing on their expertise in so doing.

Dear Candidate, in our discussions so far, we have seen that sociology is a discipline in which we often set aside our personal view of the world in order to look more carefully at the influences that shape our lives and those of others. Sociology emerged as a distinct intellectual endeavour with the development of modern societies, and the study of such societies remains a central concern. However, in an increasingly interconnected global world, sociologists must increasingly take a similarly global view of their subject-matter if they are properly to understand and explain it. Of course, sociologists remain preoccupied with a broad range of issues about the nature of social interaction and human societies in general.

With changing times, the nature of social problems that sociologists are preoccupied with also changes. During the period of the discipline's classical founders, the central problems included social class conflict, wealth distribution, the alleviation of absolute as well as relative poverty, the secularization of religious belief and the question of where the process of modernization was headed. In the contemporary period, though most of these issues remain, it can forcefully be argued that sociology's central problems are shifting. Today, societies are grappling with the problems created by rapid globalization, environmental degradation and its impact on human health and well-being, the awareness of risks with potentially high consequences, how to create successful models of multiculturalism and the achievement of a genuine gender equality: to name just a few. This means that sociologists will need to question whether the theories designed to grasp the different problems of an earlier period have any purchase on the problems facing today's societies. If not, then they will need to design new theories that can grasp what Karl Mannheim once called 'the secret of these new times'.

Sociology is not just an abstract intellectual field, but has major practical implications for people's lives. Learning to become a sociologist should not be a dull or tedious endeavour. The best way to make sure it does not become so is to approach the subject in an imaginative way and to relate sociological ideas and findings to situations in your own life. In that way, you should learn important things about yourself, about your society and about the wider human world.

**UPSC: Previous Years' Questions
Paper I**

2. Sociology as Science:

- Q. Discuss the importance of interpretative understanding of social phenomena and explain its limitations. (2019/20)
- Q. Does scientific method make Sociology a science? Illustrate your answer with Durkheim's method. (2018/10)
- Q. Is non-positivistic methodology scientific? Illustrate. (2018/20)
- Q. Examine ethnomethodological and phenomenological perspectives as critique of positivism. (2017/10)
- Q. Examine the basic postulates of positivism and post-positivism. (2017/20)
- Q. Elaborate the main tenets of interpretative perspective in sociology. (2017/10)
- Q. Describe the basic postulates of scientific method. How far are these followed in sociological research? (2016/20)
- Q. What is 'value-free' sociology? Clarify. (2016/10)
- Q. "Non-positivistic methodology is essential for understanding human behaviour." Discuss. (2015/20)
- Q. Examine the problems of maintaining objectivity and value neutrality in social science research. (2015/20)
- Q. Is Sociology a Science? Give reasons for your answer. (2015/10)
- Q. In what way 'interpretative' method is different from 'positivist' approach in the study of social phenomena? (2014/20)
- Q. How is objectivity different from value neutrality? Discuss with reference to Weber's views on methodology. (2014/10)
- Q. Critically examine positivistic approach in sociological studies. (2013/10)
- Q. Critically examine the functionalist tradition in Sociology. (2013/20)
- Q. Write short note: Interpretative Sociology (2012/12)
- Q. Write short note: Fact, Value and Objectivity (2012/12)
- Q. Write short note: Fact and Value (in about 150 words) (2011/12)
- Q. Write short note: Serendipity (2010/15)

----- Aditya Mongra @ Professor's Classes -----

- Q. Comment on the reasons why neo-idealists and symbolic interactionists are critical of 'positivism' in Sociology. (2009/30)
- Q. Write short note: Problems of objectivity in sociological research (2009/20)
- Q. Write short note: Role of values in sociological enquiry (2008/20)
- Q. Write short note: Sociology as a science of society (2007/20)
- Q. Write short note: Social research design (2005/20)
- Q. Write short note: Objectivity and Value Neutrality in Social Research (2004/20)
- Q. Highlight the problem of objectivity and value-neutrality in social research. Elaborate, with suitable examples, the limitations associated with the tools of measurement in social science research. (2003/60)
- Q. Write short note: Theory and Fact (2002/20)
- Q. Write short note: Sociology as a science (2002/20)
- Q. Write short note: Problem of objectivity in social research (2000/20)
- Q. Write short note: Value neutrality in social science (1998/20)
- Q. Write short note: A good hypothesis (1997/20)
- Q. Is it possible to study social phenomenon scientifically? Give a critical answer. (1997/60)
- Q. Write short note: Value-free sociology (1996/20)
- Q. Write short note: Methods of Science and Sociology (1995/20)
- Q. Write short note: Comparative method in Sociology (1994/20)
- Q. Write short note: Significance of objectivity in sociological research (1993/20)
- Q. Write short note: Design of sociological research (1992/20)
- Q. Write short note: Methods of scientific investigation (1991/20)
- Q. Write short note: The problem of objectivity (1991/20)
- Q. Write short note: Bearing of research on theory (1988/20)
- Q. Write short note: The problem of objectivity in Sociology (1986/20)
- Q. Write short note: Research Design (1985/20)
- Q. Write short note: Sociology as a science of society (1985/20)

Q. Write short note: Rapport and objectivity in social science research

(1984/20)