

THE SCIENTIFIC STATUS OF SOCIOLOGY: THE OBJECTIVITY ISSUE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is mainly an exploratory research effort in an attempt to scrutinize the origin, evolution and the development of sociology. The discussion also covers the scientific objectivity of sociology as a social science and further submits to picture its difference to natural or pure sciences. However, document evidences and materials from periodicals from texts, books, journals, magazines and websites were utilized. The study in addition raises further questions for future research and as concrete suggestions are proffered

Keywords: *sociology, concept, format, theories, society.*

INTRODUCTION

Question is being raised on what exactly is Sociology? Sociology is a termed which derived its meaning from the Latin word - “**Socius**” which means companion and the Greek word – “**Logos**” i.e., - Science. Science in itself is derived from Latin word – “**Scire**” which literally means to know. It was in 1837 A.D. that a French man named AUGUST COMTE combined all these word together to mean – **Sociology**. In trying to give a simple meaning to sociology it would then mean the “science of the society”. Using society to give meaning to sociology would rather limit the meaning of sociology. A social scientist, we are part of the society, we live within the society and of course there is no human endeavor that does not have one form or the other of social bearing

In considering the origin of sociology, it was a discipline that evolved and emerged at a particular time as a response to a noticeable change and in response to societal problems that are prevalent at that time. AUGUSTE COMTE (1798-1857) who is usually credited with being the founder of the discipline and coined the word “sociology”, actually intended to fill a vacuum, hence developing a discourse that would engage the methods used in the natural sciences in studying human society. COMTE insistence is premised on the fact that solutions have to be found to the problems that was bedeviling the French society at the time in question. In the same vein, far back in the 14th century, **IBN KHALDUN** (1332-1406), an African and a Tunisian used the Arabic word – **Al Umran** – which literally translated to mean Sociology: the scientific structure of the human society. The question of whether we accept IBN KHALDUN or AUGUST COMTE as the father of sociology and/or whether the discipline originated from speculative social philosophy and empirical science, one fact is clear that sociology is a product of a response and the

need to confront issues of social decay and to formulate relevant policies aimed at rescuing society from decadence and bringing about positive change and general societal development (Oтите, 2008).

For an introduction, sociology could be defined as the scientific studies of the society and its component unit. Ibrahim (2000) defined sociology as “a social science which studies the relationship between people as individual and as a group also studies the influences of social conditions on these relationships. And giving sociology a simple meaning, Oтите (1994) defines sociology “as the study of human interactions and organization of social institution, which deals with social process and social relationship particularly in their institutional contexts”.

Sociology itself can be defined in many different ways. Many sociologists have laid credence giving different meaning to sociology. LESTER FRANK WARD AND WILLIAM GRAHAM SUMMER defined sociology simply as “the science of the society”. WHILE FRANKLIN HENRY GIDDINGS sees it as “the science of social phenomena”. The subject matter has also been defined as “science of institution” (EMILE DURKHEIM) while MAX WEBER sees as a science of “social action”. And A.W. SMALL defined it as “the science of social process” and ROBERT E. PARK gave it a meaning of “the science of collective behaviours”.

Sociology is the science of society, social institutions, and social relationship. Specifically, it is the scientific study of the development, structure, interactions and collective behaviour of organised groups of human beings. Sociology can also be defined as the scientific analysis of social institution as a functioning whole and as it relates to the rest of society (Merriam-Webster, 2020)

It is pertinent to add that the subject matter being discussed is the society itself rather than the “individual”. Although one cannot separate the individual from the study of the society but more sociologists are convinced that the study of the individual is essential to the understanding of the society.

THE METHODS OF SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES

For a better understanding of what we seek to study in sociology one needs to address briefly about the scope in sociological study. The scope of sociology has to do with the limit, the extent and the range of observation of event or phenomena. What one studies is the scope of sociological studies. WILMOT (1985) defines method as “an organized way of achieving set objectives and must be adapted to fit these objectives”. This simply means that the way of doing things that is the system, the pattern that one goes about doing it is the method.

In social science parlance, the methods commonly used are the same method applicable in the Natural sciences as we have it in physics, chemistry, biology etc, the same method is also being used in sociological studies. It is often stated that sociology cannot be considered a science this is because it cannot experiment and thus cannot predict. It is a truism that materials with which sociology deals with-human behavior and relationships-experimentation in the laboratory is quite impossible. But within limit, sociology can and does make use of techniques, which apply quantitative measurements to social phenomena which can be comparable to method of experimentation. It is also important to add that two other basic methods of scientific investigation – observation and

comparison – is readily available to the study of sociology as the case in the physical sciences.

Sciences are closely linked to experimentation, but not all science does experiment. Astronomy one of the oldest sciences cannot experiment with its materials. The essence of any experimentation is to be able to predict. Prediction is however a possibility at least to an extent in Sociology. Sociologist matures and coming to fore of a better understanding the “principles underlying human behaviour, it will be in a better position to make accurate prediction” (KOENIG, 1957).

On a final note the content of sociological studies is the social interaction, social to us means our relationship with each other i.e. interrelationship that exist between persons and community at large. Interaction cannot be to mean what actually takes place between and among individual and to a large extent the people i.e. the behavior of the people. In short, social interaction takes place when human beings take each other mutual influence, thus the analysis has to do with its origin, its nature and its consequence of which sociological focal point is the investigation, description and analysis of this social interaction.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Theorizing is mental activity, which make an attempt to formulate ideas, which help scientist to explain the occurrence of an event or phenomenon. If theories are ideas then, it is closely linked to a concept or principle or law, which is the foundation of scientific studies. WILMOT (1985) defined theory as “a system or related ideas that enable one to explain and predict phenomena”. Theories are assumption of a set of principles, which give explanation to causation of events or phenomena and in the same pattern try to seek and establish the relation of cause and effect with certain degree of certainty.

In the same vein, certain and several events or phenomena may occur together, which need explanation. Explanation cannot take place until it is analyzed. Analysis in this sense is the “technique for breaking down complexes of related phenomena into component parts in order to study relations of part to part and part to whole”, (Igun, 1994). It thus mean that analysis provide the basis for establishing the casual relationship of events and phenomena. However, a theory can only be judge through its explanatory process and the reliability of its prediction based on it richness; level of interest and accuracy. These are attribute of explanations in the physical sciences. Hence, wherever there is a system of living ideas, theories are bound to develop.

Judging by the standard of scientific theorizing, the sociological theories cannot favourably compete with these scientific theories. In the sociological world today, no theory has been acclaimed to employ a widely validity or acceptance. This is so because, sociological theories are “devoted to mapping, describing and explaining social relations as they actually are, as they have actually occur rather than as they ought to be” (Otite, 1994).

At present, it is an on-going debate that available perspectives may be used as a guide for sociological theorizing; there are two main groups of thought. The first groups, referred to as the POSITIVIST School, follows the ideas put forward by founding father of sociology – AUGUST COMTE. The school view Sociology in the same way that physical and natural sciences such as Physics, Biology and Chemistry would view their subject

matter. Their argument is premised on the fact that world of nature and social world can be viewed and observed in such manner that generalized theories can be propounded.

On the other hand, the second group known as THE INTERPRETIVIST argued that sociology should select its own particular way of seeing the world, which is adequate in terms of particular nature of its subject matter. They further posit that, that way must be different from the ways of the natural science basing their argument on the fact that world of nature is distinctively different from social world and as such then, different approaches to their studies. In holding on to their position, this school believed that an action in a social action can only be observed based on the interpretation of the “meaning” of the action on the minds of the actors, this cannot be the same form of observation in the natural world for the fact that actions can be observed externally.

On a final note, these two extreme positions still persist today, which make sociological theory to be of different shades, the most common compromised position today is the POSITIVISTIC view of world, which gives or allows data that are not directly externally observable as an input in a research process which thus give room for explanation.

THE SCIENTIFIC NATURE OF SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES

The Man’s efforts to make use of scientific observation and the analysis of these observable elements have resulted in the rise of social sciences. At the onset, a simple social science dealt and interprets man’s activities on Economics Politics or the Social phase. However, in due course, each of these various subject try as much to establish itself. Sociology however was able to establish and concern itself with social aspect of man, but in a large sense, Sociology concern itself with the entire workings of social science.

WHAT THEN IS SCIENTIFIC THEORY?

All scientific theories are characterized with four main element, these are: concepts, variables, statements and formats (Igoun, 1994).

CONCEPT

Concepts “are ideas or principles relating to a class of things”. (Bammeke 2004). These concepts form the pieces from which theories are built. And going by WILMOT (1985) definition of theories “as a system of ideas that are related to predict and explain phenomena”. Concepts are then composed of statement, which are system of terms. For an example; a language sentence, a logic symbol or even a notation in Mathematics. This system of term indicates phenomena or an aspect of it. Social role is a concept in Sociology and can define as “the set of expected behavior of an occupant of a social position” (Igoun, 1994). This simple definition is expected to give a uniform meaning to all investigators Sociology have also being able to develop other social concept such as social structure, social institution bureaucracy, social group, social class, social statusetc, which are variously used in other discipline; meaning that it has acquire a general acceptance – a universal acknowledgement – a characteristic of science.

VARIABLES

Variables constitute a hypothesis in a scientific research. A hypothesis is a statement that is trying to explain the relationship between two variables. Concepts

however, are partly found in a theory, like all scientific theory, sociological theories are also characterized with hypothetical statement, which are the basis for theories. There are two broad parts of concept in theories. The first of this kind is the LABEL phenomena, this are mainly use to build theories, and in Sociology such concept are Social action, Social group, Family, Social class etc. On the other hand, the second kind of concept are those that seek to explain that phenomena differ; such are social solidarity, urbanization etc.

However scientific theory depend more on this kind of concept this because scientific theories emphasizes degree of difference in variables. A social researcher, need to refer to variable properties of the world so to give meaning and to understand event in variations.

STATEMENT

Statements are the foundations that mainly constitute theories. Statement in theories is basically the concept of that particular theory. Concepts are of two types. The concept of the first type is *label concept*, which is merely pointing to the existence of a phenomenon and the second types is *variable concept* that permits a researcher to see the variation in the phenomenon. It is noteworthy to mention that concept is of little usage in the goals of the science, if science is to go beyond the stage of mere description. Although, science needs explanation and in order to justify their theories, scientist must be able to relate phenomena or events to one another in a way of weaving concept together to form a theoretical statement. For an example the concept of conflicts, social unit and solidarity are theoretical statement. (Igun, 1994). Social conflicts in sociology refers to varying degree of hostile interaction in social world, social units refer to different kind of collective patterns into which individual may be organized solidarity refers to various degree of internal unity in social groups. And in relating this to an African situation it could then mean that the greater the degree of conflict among the ethnic groups which make up a country, the greater the degree of solidarity and loyalty in each ethnic group.

The statement above simply asserts a relationship between variables, this could be true or untrue, but it is a tested fact of an observation of the real world.

FORMAT

Here, format simply refers to the forms of theory. Although there are many different of format in Sociology. It is very rare to find theoretical statement standing alone, but a number of them have been woven together as a form or system of statement, which is known as theory. The organization of statement into theory must be systemic in such a way that statement follows one another logically.

CONCLUSION

Emphasis has been made on why sociology is a science. Sociological theories are bound and have so far proven that theories exist in sociology and which can be generalizing to have attained a universal acknowledgement. Although, it is pertinent to mention that sociology cannot equate the validity and reliability as the case in Natural and Physical sciences.

However, Sociology is concerned not only with the behaviours and interaction within institutions and problem of relationship between institutions in society. (Otite, 1994). Added to this assumption that Sociology is the study of man's behaviour in groups

or of interaction among human beings. (KOENIG, 1957). Sociology which seek to understand the nature and the purpose of human association which include the manner that these various kinds of association arise, develop and change and as well the belief system and the practices that characterized them.

With the foregoing, the relevance of Sociology in a given society cannot be over emphasized, which encompasses all spheres of human endeavours. Essentially, Sociology is concerned and well relevant in the management of order and by implication, the problem of disorder in the society. It also deals with consensus and conflict with the problem of continuity and change in the structure and function of the societies.

Finally, we have able to demonstrate the scientific value of sociology in studying social orders, social institutions, social group, social activity, social organization, urbanization, family, bureaucracy etc, these various sociological concept are key concept in the entire organization structure of any society.

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