The Scientific Status of Sociology

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Abstract: Sociology is a scientific study of society, social interaction, institutions and social relationship. As human behaviour is complex and influenced by values and emotions, the question arises about its scientific nature. This study applies secondary data analysis by empirical evidence and logical reasoning to analyse with the sociology fulfills the criteria of science. Despite some limitations and ambiguity, as it tries to follow scientific method and maintain careful observation, measurement, analysis and systematic approach, it possesses scientific validity. The findings of the study will be useful for the students, researchers, and academicians to understand the status of sociology in terms of it scientific nature.

Keywords: Sociology as a Science; Scientific Method; Objectivity and Value Neutrality; Social Science vs. Natural Science; Sociological Research.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluating whether a subject is a science or not based purely on the topic itself is difficult. Instead, one should examine whether it follows a systematic, disciplined, and sequential process. There is a divergence of opinion among sociologists regarding whether sociology qualifies as a science. Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, and Karl Marx believed that because sociology utilizes the scientific method, it is indeed a science. Durkheim characterized sociology as the science of social facts. According to him: "Sociologists study social facts as like as chemists study chemical facts and biologists study biological facts" (McIntyre, 2000). English sociologist Herbert Spencer supported this idea even more strongly. In his view: "Society was governed by laws as like as the physical world was" (McIntyre, 2000).These two sociologists considered sociology to be very close to the natural sciences. However, the German sociologist Max Weber expressed a different view. According to him: "Following the natural sciences model would leave sociological work incomplete" (McIntyre, 2000). Yogesh Kumar Singh agrees on this matter. He believes that: "Sociological research is not as exact as research in physical science" (Singh, 2006).Sociologist Anthony Giddens holds a similar view. According to him: "Studying human beings is different from observing events in the physical world and sociology should not be seen as natural science" (Giddens, 2001).

Perhaps this line of reasoning classifies sociology apart from the natural sciences. Not only that, sociology is a science that is difficult to present with absolute objectivity. Here, both the researcher and the subjects being researched are human beings. As a result, working with complete value neutrality is far more challenging than it is for natural scientists, who can study oxygen or hydrogen in an isolated laboratory.

While the scientific status of sociology is questioned due to various limitations on one hand, its potential and scope are vast on the other. Therefore, this article attempts to evaluate the scientific status of sociology by analyzing its inherent challenges and prospects.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this article is to highlight the scientific status of sociology. Additionally, specific objectives include examining the nature of sociology, analyzing how closely its characteristics align or diverge with science, and highlighting its similarities, differences, strengths, weaknesses, objectivity, and value neutrality in comparison to natural or physical sciences.

METHODOLOGY

An analytical research methodology has been adopted for this article. Data was collected from secondary sources, primarily focusing on the literature of classical and modern sociological theorists. Research articles, journals, textbooks, and websites were also utilized to gather relevant data.

SUBJECT MATTER AND DISCUSSION

To determine whether sociology is a science—and if so, what kind of science—it is necessary to first understand what science is and identify its core characteristics. Generally, structured and disciplined knowledge is called science. It relies on logic and empirical evidence. Regarding this, David Dressler states: "Science is a collection of knowledge and deliberate search for additional knowledge through the use of procedures, which we called the scientific method" (Dressler, 1969:4).

Scientific knowledge is acquired through observation, experimentation, and generalization. The defining traits of science include objectivity, observation, experimentation, measurement, establishing causal relationships, and making predictions based on these factors.

STRENGTHS OF SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

• Sociology Uses the Scientific Method: Karl Pearson rightfully pointed out that the unity of all sciences lies in their method, not in their material (Majumdar, 2005). In sociological research, sociologists lay great emphasis on methodology and systematically conduct social research under scientific frameworks.

• Sociology's Principles and Subject Matter are Verifiable: Sociologists do not make predictions about things that cannot be verified. For instance, whether criminal behavior is more prevalent among the educated or the uneducated is something sociologists can verify and demonstrate.

• Sociology Verifies Causal Relationships in Social Interactions: Sociology tests cause-and-effect relationships within social dynamics. Regarding this, Durkheim noted: "Variations in suicide rates were caused by differences in social interaction and regulation" (Durkheim, 1897). Similarly, an increase in divorce rates can be seen as a consequence of family breakdown. Here, we see one event acting as a cause and another as an effect—verifying this is standard practice for sociologists.

• Sociology is Capable of Making Predictions: Based on cause-and-effect relationships, sociology can forecast future trends. Ian Robertson notes: "Science relies for its generalization on careful and systematic analysis of variables" (Robertson, 1981). For example, if domestic instability rises, divorce rates will likely increase. This is both a product of research and a conclusion that anyone can verify to make valid predictions.

• Sociological Research is Grounded in Observation: Although the subject matter of sociology is society and human beings—which cannot be tested inside a traditional laboratory—sociologists still conduct precise field observations. By observing rituals like marriage ceremonies among indigenous communities, social researchers can deliver accurate, empirical results. These characteristics strengthen sociology's claim to being a science.

LIMITATIONS OF SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

Despite possessing these scientific qualities, many sociologists hesitate to place sociology on the exact same footing as the natural sciences. This is because every individual human being possesses unique characteristics. There is no reason to assume all children born to the same mother and father will behave identically.

Therefore, questioning the validity of generalizing a broader population based on a small sample size of families is entirely justified. Here, issues of sampling errors and non-sampling errors frequently arise. Furthermore, because both the researcher and the respondents are human beings, the research can easily be influenced by personal values, making subjective bias a genuine concern. It was likely for this reason that the French mathematician Henri Poincaré remarked that sociology is: "The science with the most methods and the fewest results" (Bottomore, 1970).

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the definition, characteristics, and core principles of science reveals that sociology embraces and applies them all. Therefore, sociology is undoubtedly a science. As Robert Bierstedt notes: "Sociology is a pure science, not an applied science" (Bierstedt, 1974:4).

However, unlike natural sciences that study inanimate objects or animals in controlled laboratory settings, sociology deals with human subjects, shifting contexts, and evolving environments, which naturally alters the nature of its investigations. "Sociology is a social science not a natural science" (Bierstedt, 1974:11). "Like the other social sciences, however, sociology is relatively less advanced than most of the natural science" (Robertson, 1981:7).

Because of this relative difference, various scholars have labeled it as a Pseudo-Science, Proto-Science, Normal Science, or an Emerging Science. Sociology was born out of crises like the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, and society continues to undergo various revolutions today. The more research is carried out on individuals, institutions, and communities, the more mature sociology will become as a science.

Since it functions scientifically to uncover the true nature of social problems and realities while charting paths toward solutions, it goes without saying that calling sociology a science is highly logical. B.N. Ghosh (1992) aptly stated that the real grasp and implication of facts guide the development of science. In other words, truly understanding and explaining events leads a discipline down the path of science. Earl Babbie (1989) also posits that the two pillars of science are logic and observation. When sociologists conduct research, they must utilize deep understanding, explanation, logic, and systematic observation. Therefore, despite certain limitations and complexities, the logical arguments for classifying sociology as a science are substantial. Sociology is, without a doubt, a science.

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