Is Sociology Essay, Research Paper

Is Sociology a Science?

To decide whether or not sociology is a science we must first understand the terminology of the word science. Science literally means knowledge. Systematically observing and analazing a theory made. The information gathered must then be validated over a period of time and the final data then correlated. This whole process giving facts that people feel to be reliable.

These methods are applied to the natural sciences such as biology and chemistry. Chemists for example carry out controlled tests often in a laboratory environment. Measurements of chemicals are mixed and degrees of heat are often applied to give a reaction. Once it has been shown that the same reaction occurs in the same condition each time, a theory is made to explain the results. These same principles of natural science have been sometimes successfully applied to society.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was the founding father in applying these methods his assumption being that it was possible to produce a positive science of society . Positive science being those humans and their reaction to external stimuli are an explanation to their behaviour. This behaviour can then be observed and measured. (The same logic as in the for mentioned chemistry exp).

In 1897 Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) used this approach in his study of suicide. His study involved the gathering of statistics on suicide from a number of European countries with which he was then able to produce the statistical table below.

Period Numerical position in the

1866-70 1871-75 1874-78 1period 2period 3Period

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Italy 30 35 38 1 1 1

Belgium 66 69 78 2 3 4

England 67 66 69 3 2 2

Norway 76 73 71 4 4 3

Austria 78 94 130 5 7 7

Sweden 85 81 91 6 5 5

Bavaria 90 91 100 7 6 6

France 135 150 160 8 9 9

Prussia 142 134 152 9 8 8

Denmark 277 258 255 10 10 10

Saxony 293 267 334 11 11 11

(source:Emile Durkheim,Suicide:A Study in Sociology,Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1970,p.50)

As the above table shows there is a consistency in the comparative suicide rates. He regarded these statistics as social facts and so believed that they could be used to find the sociological causes of suicide rates. In order to achieve his objective Durkheim first tried to show that suicide rates were quite stable in some society s at certain times. He then went on to establish correlations between suicide and other social facts such as religion. I.e.: Suicide rates higher in Protestant countries than Catholic. Religion therefore was one of the main social facts in the low suicide statistics

Religion is then influencing certain sectors of society, as is their integration into society through religion. He was then able to claim that suicide rate is a factual order determined by the relation ship and our integration into society, and that if it were solely an individual act it wouldn t be possible to establish a development of pattern. Durkheim therefore in his work on suicide was able to produced a theoretical framework through correlations and statistics, enabling him not only to back up his above argument but also to distinguish different types of suicide.The positivist method to which he had adopted had enabled him to see beyond the individual and permit Durkheim to see how various sections of the community were more at risk to commit suicide. This enabled coroners to look at other factors when completing their reports and in doing so we lead to a more correct interpretation of the individual s circumstance of death.

Natural science methods have been applied in studies to obtain statistics and establish paradigm in the works of acting bodies such as the government as far back as 1801.This was when the first Census was taken. Sociologists have then used the statistics from the Census to examine topics such as birth and death rates, marriage and fertility rates and divorce. Other areas such as off stead and crime rates also use these methods although areas in the crime surveys cannot always be taken for granted to be accurate as of unreported crimes such as rape. Though they do establish paradigms which lead to other questions that might not have been thought of before.

Theorists such as Weber (1864-1920) disagree with the natural science methods and claim that they are rather a simple and na ve view towards mankind and their actions. As it tends to treat humans as an unconscious matter as used by the natural scientist. Humans are though individuals whom do not simply unconsciously react. Each person can have a different interpretation of a situation and their interpretation can sometimes be biased according to their race, culture, religion, political standing or social status, these and in taking the other members of society into consideration can give different conscious motive to our reaction, and underline our behaviour. Therefore external stimuli are not governing our behaviour, we are not as society forms us, and so the same laws and rules of the natural sciences cannot govern methods of understanding and interpreting the social structure and the people, which form it.

Weber defines sociology as social action. Action being social when taking into accounts other members of society. Weber believed that the explanation of social action meant understanding the meaning and motive, which underline our behaviour. Interpreting the meanings of our actions. Understanding this is achieved through Versthehen (taking the role of another). For example if we observe someone baking we might presume from just observing their actions that they are doing so because they are hungry. They could be however baking because they are cold and by baking and selling their produce for money, they can then buy wood for their fire to warm themselves. The reason for which they were baking would therefore would only have been understood by understanding the individual circumstances.

By doing this we then can have a greater insight into the individual motive behind the action. For if we understand the social actors role and meaning they give to it, we can

begin to understand their logic and belief of other areas such as religion and politics. Once a sociologist has managed to achieve this it is possible then to understand the individuals need for companionship and integration through various methods such as work and religion.

Durkheim was not only influential in the paradigm on suicide, but also as one of the early theorists of Functionalism. One of the key factors in the functionalism being in the comparison of society to the interdependency of the organs in the human body.

This theory is shown below and is referred to as the Organic analogy theory.

Functionalism theorises that all parts of society are equal because they are interdependent much the same as the human body. Interdependent on each other as a means of survival for if one part were to break down the whole system would die. For example if the heart were to die the human body could not function and cease to exist. Therefore society should be regarded as a system. A system being an entity made up of interconnected and interrelated parts, each part affecting the other. This type of integration and interdependency is achieved in society through functional prerequisites and value consensus. Functional prerequisites being the needs and requirements of society members that needs to be met in order for its survival. For example means of producing food, warmth and shelter are necessary as without them society would not survive. Value consensus being the unspoken agreement of shared values between members of society. This value consensus is expressed through various parts of the social structure integrating them in the process. The value consensus also gives the order and stability needed to uphold the social system. Although functionalism see the value consensus as a key element of society s system, they do recognize that conflict can occur but merely as a small ripple in a vast ocean that is immediately swallowed back into the sea of life as society evolves.

Other theorists however see these tiny ripples of contradiction and conflict as building into giant crashing tidal waves. A good example of this conflicting theory of functionalism is through the work of Karl Marx (1818-83) for he theorises that the contradictions, conflicts and exploitation of fellow man form the basis of social change and society s infrastructure. People are both the product and producers of society . In explanation of the Marxist theory if we begin with the basic instinct of man survival, in order to achieve this the need for material objects and food need to be met. These are only possible by entering into social relationships with other people, forming the labour of production. The forces of production (technology and raw materials etc.) then need to correspond with the social relationship. The correspondence of the two forming the framework or infrastructure of society. All other areas of society such as political and legal aspect s form the superstructure and are shaped by the infrastructure. In understanding this we can see how parts of the social system are formed to meet our needs and requirements and form the social structure. Conflict within the society s framework will then need a corresponding change in other areas in order to survive. Marx believes that the main conflict within society being exploitation of the relations of production (employed labour) by the forces of production (employer). For the value of production produced by the labourer exceeds the wage paid by the employer to the labourer. The employer is then exploiting those he employs, as he is not paying the producer a true value in comparison to the product produced. Therefore the employer became richer rising in earning and status above those that he employed. This all in turn not only creating conflict but also social class division. Once workers realised the value of their worth they formed unions to uphold their rights and demands in working environment, safety and wage. Society then had to change to incorporate the union s rights. Then laws needed to be introduced to protect them. This is and will be an ongoing process as technology evolves; the work environment will follow suit then the rights of the worker. Although there will always be the division created through exploitation and mans greed for material gain.

This has happened in many areas of society and society has evolved and altered each time to incorporate the ever-increasing demands and changes of lifestyle of those within it. We can however only evolve and incorporate within our society by understanding the structure of society and its infrastructure (the individuals that form the social class). Studying society, gathering information-forming paradigms and understanding the religions and beliefs of others achieve this. Sociology therefore must be considered a social science as in doing so we are given a greater understanding of others points of view and enables an understanding of concepts beyond the individual.

Science of any kind gives us factual information that leads to further understanding and questions that need to be asked. Through interpretation of the information gathered. This will lead to more rational and educated concepts of society.

So in treating sociology as a social science, societies can be systematically studied and understood and ways of improving the lives of those within it can be found. Governments, which we elect to uphold the shared consensus of our society, can have a greater understanding of the evolving needs and requirements of the people within it. This is seen through unemployment figures etc, as the government is then able to see the need to create an opportunity for those without modern technology standards to enter into further education in order to obtain them . This could not be possible without unemployment figures as in studying them it is able to understand the type of people unemployed and the areas in society, which would benefit from the greater aid.

Sociology though will always be subject to scrutiny over its objectiveness. This being as we are all even if subconsciously so biased in our judgement in comparison to our needs or the theory of which we are hoping to prove.

Social science does however have a more open understanding than other sciences as if a theory in natural science is not always proven to be correct it is often ignored and presumed that the experiment was incorrectly preformed by the for example chemist. Where as in social science if the same problem occurs the sociologist will review the theory and if necessary a new theory will be made.

Sociology is therefore an open a constantly evolving people s Social Science.