**Sociology: Uses, Careers and Importance of Studying Sociology**

Sociology seeks to deepen our understanding of human relationships by unravelling new truths about them. It helps in removing ignorance about human relationships. It is relevant wherever human relations are at work. Whatever the field the emphasis will be on understanding human behaviour and relationships. ‘Sociology enables us to understand the world we live in but also to understand ourselves, for we are the products of that world.

This understanding can help us to gain more control over our lives but it can also be put to more practical uses as well’ (Fulcher and Scott, 2003). In fact, it can be argued that sociology is indispensable for understanding the present complex world. There are several reasons (listed below under the sub-heading ‘uses of sociology”) why sociological knowledge is essential in making sense of the contemporary world.

‘Sociology is not only an intellectual discipline, it is also a profession … when we speak of a profession, we refer mainly to themes as the uses or appli­cations of a body of knowledge’ (Inkeles, 1964). The student may sometimes get confused about sociology and social reform.

But sociology is not social reform. The essential principles of sociology are a prerequisite in any study of human relationships and in any proposed solution to a social problem. It is desirable, of course, that ‘solutions’ be found for the problems of society and that certain universal principles of social life be established.

A student may study sociology for his own sake, just to know more about society and culture. But mere knowledge does not satisfy him. He may probably seek sociological knowledge just to apply it to the social situations in which he finds himself.

In general, it may be said that sociological knowledge lends itself to helping an individual and his society achieve results in terms of better social relations. But, a very few students pursue the subject of sociology to either seek knowledge for knowledge sake or applying it in the solution of their own day-to-day life problems.

A person can be an expert in sociology but may not be able to solve his own family problems or may behave as a social deviant. Relatively few students become professional sociologists but everybody must all times live in society, associate with people, and enact social roles. It is obvious that sociological knowledge is a basic help in choosing one’s own career and vocation.

Positions in teaching, salesmanship, business administration or local bodies administration, law, journalism and even in politics and other fields, where an essential occupational activity is ‘dealing with people’, require more than ordinary knowledge of human relations in society. Reliable knowledge about social phenomena is an essential and basic prerequisite for better human relationships and, in turn, for a better society.

**Uses of Sociology:**

Famous Swedish Noble laureate Gunnar Myrdal (1970) long back said that the social sciences are important in a democracy because they encourage the open discussion of important issues by appealing to the people’s rationality rather than to superstition and narrowness. The sociologist can make this contribution. Sociology has its uses.

**The main uses of sociology may be as listed below:**

1. It provides a basic understanding of human society, how social system work, how people’s behaviour is modified by their circumstances.

2. It broadens the range of our perspective from which we try to understand the social world.

3. It gives us an insight into our daily life like a tourist guide.

4. It helps in removing ignorance about human relationships.

5. The world we live in is in trouble. It besets with many dilemmas. Sociology guides us in sorting out such dilemmas. The world is shrinking in many ways too—satellite TV, cell phone networks and Internet have created many new conditions and problems. Contact between culturally different groups has increased enormously in the present time. Sociology helps in studying cultures of different societies in various circumstances.

6. It provides us an orientation to the use of research techniques applicable in a wide variety of contexts.

7. It helps us understand ourselves and our positions in society. It is a source of self-enlightenment and increases self-understanding.

8. It is a useful preparation for our careers.

9. It helps us in developing awareness of cultural differences. We adopt the views transmitted to us by our culture, but these views are often limited and superficial and do not constitute any understanding. Quite often, if we properly understand how others live, we also require a better under­standing of what their problems are.

10. There is educational value of sociology. It learns us how other people manage their societies and solve their problems. It may lead us to healthy scepticism, a tendency to ask intelligent questions about our own. It has been said that the hallmark of a university trained mind is intelligent and unprejudiced scepticism.

11. 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.

12. Knowledge gives humans the power to shake off the past and shape their destiny—and sociology brings this power into the social world.

13. Society and culture change rapidly in our day and age. The stable joint family and even nuclear family is no longer the only common and socially acceptable way of life. It is being replaced slowly by a new type of relationship called ‘living together’ ‘or’ ‘live-in relationship’.

Youth culture and trends in fashion and music change so fast that older people have difficulties in following their twists and turns, food habits are being trans­formed, leading together diversity within many countries, and so on. These and other changes which impinge upon human behaviour make it necessary to study sociology.

The discipline of sociology can play a valuable role in developing critical thinking. It can help students to better understand the working of their own society and of other cultures. Students will be able to use sociological concepts, approaches and theories in emaciating human interactions and insti­tutions. Sociological imagination can be useful in examining such public policy issues as capital punishment, feminism, reservation (affirmative action) and the AIDS crisis, etc.

All sciences are emancipatory, including sociology. The prime objective of all sciences is to improve the human conditions and liberate the man from all shackles of exploitation and deprivation. Anthony Giddens (1997) aptly remarked: ‘Studying sociology should be liberating experience sociology enlarges our sympathies and imagination, opens up new perspectives on the sources of our own behaviour, and creates an awareness of cultural settings different from our own … sociological thinking is a vital help to self-understanding, which in turn can be focussed back on an improved under­standing of the social world.’

Perhaps, the main contribution of sociology is that it makes more sense of our lives. It does so by explaining the relationships between personal experience and ‘external events’, between self and society. Charles Wright Mills (1956) described the links between self and society in terms of ‘personal troubles’, such as losing one’s job or being wounded in combat and ‘public issues’, such as rising unemployment or war phobia.

It is befitting to conclude this section with the views of founder sociologist Max Weber (1970) who nearly a century ago argued in his lectures on ‘Science as a Vocation’ and ‘Politics as a Vocation’ that sociology could not tell members of society what values to hold, but it could demonstrate the possibilities and constraints facing them within their social structure.

### Careers in Sociology:

Sociology is not only an intellectual discipline, it is also a profession. When we speak of a profession, we refer mainly to such things as the uses or applications of a body of knowledge. Sociologists play a rich and varied role in today’s society.

They serve in a variety of capacities, such as consultant, teacher, policy maker, researcher, administrator, clinical counsellor, social critic, inter­viewer, journalist, probation and parole worker, career counsellor, social worker, recreation worker, programme evaluator, urban planner, marketing administration coordinator, personnel manager, etc. They work in areas as broad and diverse as the discipline they have chosen.

**Knowledge of sociology can be used in the following areas of social life:**

1. Teaching

2. Social research

3. Social work

4. Professions—medicine, law, engineering, business, etc.

 Industry

6. Rural and urban planning

7. Public administration—civil services

8. Policy making

9. Business consultancy

10. Politics

11. Architecture

12. Child welfare and health care

13. Gerontology (study of old age people)

14. Computer industry

15. Military intelligence and military

16. Entrepreneurship

17. International relations

18. Criminal justice

19. City management

20. New emerging careers:

(a) action programme,

(b) development, and

(c) human resource management.

### Sociology and Common Sense:

Many a time, it is charged that sociology is nothing but sheer common sense in the garb of jugglery of words or bombastic expression used in the name of science. It is often said that whatever sociologists say, we already have at least a bit of knowledge of it or we may have experienced it at some juncture of our life. Some people opined that it is just our popular wisdom couched in metaphoric language.

This notion is not correct. Such knowledge, while sometimes accurate, is not always reliable because it rests on commonly held beliefs rather than systematic analysis of facts. It was once considered ‘common sense’ to accept that the earth was flat or the sun revolves round the earth. Such notions still remain with us even today. These questions were raised by many early thinkers such as Pythagoras, Aristotle and many others.

For thousands of years people’s common sense has made them believe that big objects are faster than small ones, that stone and iron are perfectly solid materials, that the desire for children is instinctive, that the institutions of caste and joint family or the custom of dowry will automatically wither away with the spread of education, that the high caste or white people are more talented than the low caste or black people, etc.

But when these state­ments were investigated scientifically, it was found that they were not true. These common sense statements based on popular wisdom illustrate our point that common sense knowledge is not always true.

Many common sense conclusions are based on guesses, ignorance, prejudices, mistaken interpreta­tions and haphazard trial and error learning’s. On the other hand, scientific observations are based on verifiable evidence or systematic body of proofs.

Like other scientists, sociologists’ perspective of looking at social phenomena is different from the layman or common sense perspective. Sociol­ogist sees the society through the trained eyes of a scientist. Sociologists do not accept something as a fact because ‘everyone knows it’.

Sociological perspective consists of objectivity, empiricism, precision, ethical neutrality and verifiability. Sociologists gather facts scientifically in order to describe understand and predict any social phenomenon. Sociologists look at the world critically and do not take things for granted based on traditional beliefs and practices.

### Sociology and Social Policy:

Sociology at its best is the science of social interactions and social relationships which are the core to the formation of society. While not a precise science that can predict behaviour, it is nonetheless a valuable discipline assisting the search for more rational social arrangements and preparing social policy.

The term ‘policy’ commonly refers to clearly articulated set of ideas about what should be done in a particular sphere. It differs from a plan. Plans specify in detail the way in which objectives are to be achieved, whereas a policy is typically formulated at a more general level, indicating only objectives and the intended direction of change. A policy is begun in the hope that it will produce a desired effect.

What is social policy? To answer this question in a few words is slightly problematic. Some people chose to answer this question by listing the areas of public (government) policy under this heading. The main areas are social security and social welfare, social services, health service, education, employment services and housing.

This simple definition, i.e., listing the areas of welfare fields, is too narrow. It is argued that exclusive concentration on government policies is mistaken and that one should also include the policies of religious and charitable bodies as well as of private corporations also aiming to meet the social needs of the population.

Some have gone to the extent of including even economic policies in the gamut of social policy. We shall use the term ‘social policy to mean all policies (carried out by government and private agencies) that are directed towards meeting the social needs (welfare needs) of the population including policies concerning social security, health, education, housing, child, women, sick and disabled and old age welfare.

It also includes social division of welfare, or the management of public, fiscal and private allocation of wealth, the organization of employment, the management of wage system and the creation of styles of living. In short, social policy is about the kind of society people want to create and what they do to create it.

There have been a range of approaches to the analysis of social policy. T.H. Marshall (1963), in his classic statement, stated that ‘the avowed objective of 20th century social policy is welfare’. Marxists and others argue that the objective of certain social policy measures is to control disaffected groups in the population rather than to act out of concern for their welfare.

Similarly, Peter Townsend (1979), Professor of International Social Policy, London School of Economics, argued that the main aim of social policy is the institutional control of services, agencies and organizations, which are engaged in maintaining of changing social structure and values.

It is to be noted that much of the work has been done in departments of social administration outside the framework of sociology. ‘Social administration’ refers to the means by which social policy is implemented.

### Pure and Applied Sociology:

All sciences contribute to the knowledge base and also to the solution and resolution of practical problems and issues.

**As such, all sciences have two faces:**

**1. Pure Science/Pure Sociology**

**2. Applied Science/Applied Sociology:**

Logically, the distinction is one between ‘pure’ research—concerned with advancing fundamental, theoretical knowledge—and ‘practical’ or ‘applied’ research—applying already existing scientific knowledge to the solution of practical problems.

Both are interdependent, rather than one being dependent on the other. Although technology (applied science) does in fact advance by applying scientific principles to practical problems, its own successes often contribute in anticipated ways to basic science.

#### Pure Science/Pure Sociology:

Pure science is a search for knowledge, without primary concern for its practical use. Knowledge for knowledge sake is the main aim of a pure scientist. Scientists, who seek knowledge for its own sake, no more moved by the question of its utility like the mother and the father who protect and nourish their children without expecting anything in return.

Parents commonly love their children without calculating their usefulness. Many students/researchers of science feel much the same thing about their work. Pure sciences (Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Botany, Physiology, Economics, Political Science, Psychology, Anthropology and Sociology, etc.) are concerned with the advancement of knowledge.

Their main aim is to inves­tigate the underlying principles of the natural and social world which sustain and change the natural and social order. They are not concerned with the practical application of their results or curing the immediate ills of our natural or social order. The goal of each natural science, including sociology, is the formulation of scientific laws.

Sociology is a pure science, not an applied one. As a scientific endeavor, it is not directly concerned with social welfare or with solving social problems and building a better society. The knowledge gained by sociology can help formulate public policies. Sociologists investigate why people do the things they do and feel and think the way they do.

The immediate goal of sociology is the acquisition of knowledge about human society, and not the utilization of that knowledge. According to Lester F. Ward (1841-1913), a pioneer sociol­ogist of America, the main aim of pure sociology is ‘to investigate fundamental rules of social structure and social change’.

Robert Bierstedt (1974) wrote: ‘Sociologists do not determine questions of public policy, do not tell legislators what laws should be passed or repealed and do not dispense relief to the ill, the lame, the blind, or the poor—except, of course, in their capacity as citizens—apply the knowledge that it is their duty and profession to acquire.’

This view was held by early sociologists between 1920 and 1940 who believed sociology as a value-free science. But this view is now no more accepted in totality by all sociologists.

#### Applied Science/Applied Sociology:

Applied science is the search for ways of using scientific knowledge to solve practical problems. The sciences, which apply the principles of knowledge or use principles to manipulate something, gained from the basic or pure sciences, are known as applied sciences.

All branches of engineering, science of medicine,’ architecture and social work come under the category of applied sciences. An applied science has quite opposite aim and intent than a pure science.

It is not concerned with the theory or formulation of laws or development and systematization of principles. For example, an average doctor is not primarily interested in the theory of disease or the principles that underlie diagnosis but he is primarily concerned with the treatment of the disease of his patient.

The social sciences (e.g., sociology) like all sciences have dual function. They serve to help the people to solve their problems and at the same time explore and understand the world around them. As such, there is an interest in application and also in understanding.

When social scientific findings are applied to the solutions of social problems, it is called applied sociology. Sociology, as an applied discipline, uses the knowledge of the pure social scientist to improve social life.

Immediately, sociology seeks to understand the fundamental mechanism of social reality, but the desire to understand is always motivated by the wish to control. The main aim of applied sociology is to bring social welfare in society through social scientific investigation.

For example, a sociologist making a study of the social structure of a slum is working as a pure scientist but if he studies how to prevent or control delinquency in a slum or how to remove poverty, then he is working as an applied scientist. In the role of applied scientist, a sociologist tries to solve the social problems.

Though sociologists and social workers do share some common tasks, still it is a mistake to regard sociology as equivalent to social work or social welfare.

#### Types of Applied Sociology:

**Applied sociology may be divided into five main branches:**

**1. Clinical Sociology:**

It refers to the use of sociological knowledge in providing assistance to individuals and organizations. This term, analogous to clinical psychology, was introduced in 1931 by Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth for the work of sociologists employed in clinical settings alongside social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists. Clinical sociology involves the use of sociological knowledge to aid diagnosis, treatment, teaching and research. A clinical sociologist may study the ways of improving employee morale.

**2. Social Engineering:**

It attempts to use sociological knowledge to design social policies or institutions with a specific purpose. It refers to planned social change and social development. The planned improvement of society is practically impossible without the scientific knowledge provided by sociology.

Social engineering involves the intelligent appli­cation of sociological knowledge. It is based on the idea that governments can shape and manage key features of society in much the same way as the economy is managed.

For example, the extent of women’s employment is clearly determined in part by government policy to promote to impede women’s paid work. For doing such works, applied sociologists use social indicators and social trend reports. Every family, school, club, business and local bodies recognizes and pursues its goal. This is nothing more or less than social engineering.

**3. Social Work:**

Though it is a distinct discipline, it is considered as an applied aspect of sociology. Social work is the field in which the principles of the social sciences, especially sociology, are applied to actual social problems in the same way the principles of physiology are applied in medicine or the principles of economics are applied in business management. A social worker might, for example, use information obtained from family research to try to place children in foster homes or to establish centres of spouse abuse.

The term ‘social work’ is applied to the various organized methods for promoting human welfare through the prevention and relief of suffering. In the late 19th century, social work was largely voluntary (notably as a charitable activity).

Since the Second World War, social work practice has become increasingly professionalized. In India, many institutions of social work training and education were established; notable among them is the renowned Tata Institute of Social Work, Mumbai. Many state governments have also started such institutions on its pattern. These institutions have the aim to train people to step out into society and to assist in the solution of its immediate problems.

**4. Applied Social Research:**

It is similar in many respects to the basic/pure research conducted in universities and colleges. At one end of the continuum of social research would be the disciplines involved in research, not to solve a specific problem, but simply to increase our understanding of the social world. Such researches are known as pure/basic research.

At the other end of the continuum would be the disciplines that use knowledge to solve actual problems, these researches is called applied social research. Social workers devise their own research methods and techniques to help people solve personal and group problems, and the resulting applications contribute to our existing body of knowledge.

Applied social research may take the form of descriptive research, survey research, analytical or evaluation research such as systematic attempts to estimate the potential effects of a proposed social programme or effects of planned change or a new approach to management in a business firms.

**5. Action Sociology:**

Action sociology is also a form of applied sociology in which sociologist is asked to participate in the development process and tackle vital social problems actively. It is directly concerned with the solutions of the social problems. It requires the involvement of the sociol­ogist in all stages of development or the solutions of the problem.

This means not only to find out the roots of the social problem and suggest it remedy but to associate ourselves in the diagnosis of the problem, planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation of the programme designed to solve the problem. In India, a fine example of this approach (action sociology) we find in the project of Sulabh International started by a sociologist Bindeswar Pathak.

Intervention is needed to make society better. Action sociology/action research places emphasis on the sociologist not only to work as a researcher but to assume the role of a change agent also. Such change agents are often used in local communities, local bodies or in companies as consultants. They work as part of the change process itself.

This view was supported by Herbert Gans (in Paul Felix Lazarsfeld et al., 1967). He wrote: ‘I believe that the sociologist ought to be more than a detached researcher and he should participate more directly in social action programmes…. The sociologist can help to develop the means necessary to achieve the goals, i.e., by participating in the development of programmes of action. It is here that he can perhaps make his most useful contribution.’

Currently, there is a strong trend toward action sociology. Indeed, radical sociologists maintain that action sociology is sociology of engagement. Recently, French sociologist Alain Touraine (1988) developed a radical new theoretical framework known as actionalism. He claimed that the sociologist is an agent of change, not a neutral observer. He has a stake in the conflicts of his or her society.

As such he or she should play the role of a ‘sociological interventionist’ in which he/she should study social change movements by participating in them directly. This actionalist sociology, Touraine believed, will ‘replace a sociology of society with a sociology of actors’.