

## DEFINITION OF SOCIOLOGY

“**Sociology**” which had once been treated as a **social philosophy** or the **philosophy of history**, emerged as an independent social science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Auguste Comte, a Frenchman**, is traditionally considered to be **father of sociology**. Comte is accredited with the **coining of the term sociology (in 1839)**. “Sociology” is composed of two words; **socius**, meaning companion or associate; and **“logus”** meaning science or study. **The etymological meaning of “Sociology” is thus the science of society.**

**John Stuart Mill**, another social thinker and philosopher of 19<sup>th</sup> century, proposed the word **ethology** for this new science.

**Herbert Spencer** developed his **systematic study of society** and adopted the word “sociology” in his works. With the contribution of Spencer and others it (sociology) became a permanent name of the new science.

Sociology has been defined in a number of ways by different sociologists. **No single definition has yet been accepted as completely satisfactory.**

In fact, there are as many definitions of sociology as there are sociologists. For our purpose of study a few definitions may be cited here.

1. **Auguste comte, the founding father of sociology**, defines sociology as the science of social phenomena **“subject to natural and invariable laws, the discovery of which is the object of investigation”**
2. **Kingsley Davis** says that **“sociology is a general science of society”**.

3. **Harry M. Johnson** opines that “ **sociology is the science that deals with social groups**”
4. **Ogburn and Nimkoff** define sociology as “**the scientific study of social life**”
5. **Franklin Henry Giddings** defines sociology as “**the science of social phenomena**”
6. **Max Weber** defines sociology as “ **the science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a casual explanation of its course and effects**”
7. **Morris Ginsberg**; of the various definitions of sociology the one given by Morris Ginsberg seems to be more satisfactory and comprehensive. He defines sociology in the following way;

*“In the broadest sense, sociology is the study of human interactions and inter-relations, their conditions and consequences.”*

## **NATURE OF SOCIOLOGY**

**Sociology, as a branch of knowledge, has its own unique characteristics.** It is different from other sciences in certain respects. An analysis of its internal logical characteristics helps one to understand what kind of science it is. The following are the main characteristics of sociology as enlisted by **Robert Bierstedt** in his book “ *The Social Order*”

### **1. Sociology is an independent science**

Sociology has now emerged into an independent science. It is not treated or studied as a branch of any other science like philosophy or history. **As an independent science it has its own field of study, boundary and method.**

## 2. Sociology is a social science and not a Physical science.

Sociology belongs to the family of social sciences and not to the family of physical sciences. As a social science it concentrate its attention **on man, his social behaviour, social activities and social life**. As a member of the family of social sciences **it is intimately related to other social sciences like history, political science, economics, psychology, anthropology etc.** The fact that **sociology deals with the Social universe** distinguishes it from astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology, mathematics and other physical sciences.

## 3. Sociology is a categorical and not a Normative Discipline

Sociology **“confines itself to statements about *what is, what should be or ought to be*”**. As a science, sociology is necessarily silent about questions of value. **It does not make any kind of value – judgments. Its approach is neither moral nor immoral but amoral. It is *ethically neutral*.** It cannot decide the directions in which sociology ought to go. It makes no recommendations on matters of social policy or legislation or programme. **It only means that sociology as a discipline cannot deal with problems of good or evil, right and wrong, and moral or immoral.**

## 4. Sociology is a Pure Science and not an Applied Science

A distinction is often made between **pure sciences and applied sciences**. The main aim of pure sciences is the acquisition of knowledge and it is not bothered whether the acquired knowledge is useful or can be put to use. On the other hand, **the aim of applied science is to apply the acquired knowledge into life and to put it to use.** Each pure science may have its own applied field. For

example, physics is a pure science and engineering is its applied field. **Similarly the pure sciences such as economics, political science, history etc., have their applied fields like business, politics, and journalism respectively. Sociology as a pure science has its applied field such as** administration, diplomacy, social work etc. Each pure science may have more than one application.

**5. Sociology is Relatively an Abstract Science and not a Concrete Science.**

This does not mean that sociology is an art and not a science. Nor does it mean, it is unnecessarily complicated and unduly difficult. It only means that **sociology is not interested in concrete manifestations of human events.** It is more concerned with the form of human events and their patterns. For example, sociology is not concerned with particular wars and revolutions but with war and revolution in general, as social phenomena, as types of social conflict. **Similarly, sociology does not confine itself to the study of this society or that particular society or social organization, or marriage or religion, or group and so on.** It is in this simple sense that sociology is an abstract not a concrete science.

**6. Sociology is a Generalising and not a Particularising or Individualising Science.**

Sociology tries to find out the general laws or principles about human interaction and association, about the nature, form, content and structure of human groups and societies. It does not study each and every event that takes place in society.

**7. Sociology is a General Science and not a Special Social Science**

**The area of inquiry of sociology is general and not specialized.** It is concerned with human interaction and human life in general. Other social sciences like political science, history, economics etc. also study man and human interaction, but not all about human interaction. They concentrate their attention on certain aspects of human interaction and activities and specialize themselves in those fields.

#### **8. Finally, Sociology is Both a Rational and an Empirical Science.**

There are two broad ways of approach to scientific knowledge. One, known as **empiricism**, is the approach that emphasizes experience and the facts that result from observation and experimentation. The other, known as **rationalism**, stresses reason and the theories that result from logical inference.

**It is clear from the above that sociology is an independent, a social, a categorical, a pure, an abstract, a generalizing, both a rational and an empirical and a general social science.**

#### **SUBJECT-MATTER OF SOCIOLOGY**

Ever since the beginning of sociology, sociologists have shown a **great concern in man and in the dynamics of society.** The emphasis has been **oscillating between man and society.** Sometimes the emphasis was **on man in society**, at other times, it was **man in society.** But at no stage of its development, **man as an individual was its focus of attention.** On the contrary, sociology concentrated heavily on society and its major units and their dynamics. It has been striving to analyse the dynamics of society in terms of organized pattern of social relations. It may be said that sociology seeks to find

explanations for **three basic questions; How and why societies emerged? How and why societies persist?How and why societies change?**

**An all embracing and expanding science like sociology is growing at a fast rate no doubt.**It is quite natural that sociologists have developed different approaches from time to time in their attempts to enrich its study. Still it is possible to identify some topics which constitute the subject matter of sociology on which there is little disagreement among the sociologists. Such topics and areas broadly constitute the field of sociology. A general outline of the fields of sociology on which there is considerable agreement among the sociologists could be given here.

**Firstly,**a major concern of sociology is ***sociological analysis***. It means that sociologist seeks to provide an analysis of human society and culture with a sociological perspective. He evinces his interest in the evolution of society and tries to reconstruct the major stages in the evolutionary process.**An attempt is also made”to analyse the factors and forces underlying historical transformations of society.”** Due importance is given to the scientific method that is adopted in the sociological analysis.

**Secondly,** sociology has given sufficient attention ***to the study of primary units of social life***.In this area,it is concerned with social acts and social relationships, individual personality, groups of all varieties, communities(urban, rural and tribal), associations,organizations and populations.

**Thirdly,**sociology has been concerned with the ***development,structure and function of a wide variety of basic social institutions***such as **the family and**

kinship, religion and property, economic, political, legal, educational and scientific, recreational and welfare, aesthetic and expressive institutions.

**Fourthly**, no sociologist can afford to ignore the fundamental social processes that play a vital role. The social processes such as co-operation and competition, accommodation and assimilation, social conflict including war and revolution; communication including opinion formation, expression and change; social differentiation and stratification, socialization and indoctrination, social control and deviance including crime, suicide, social integration and social change assume prominence in sociological studies.

**Fifthly**, sociology places high premium on the method of research also. Contemporary sociology has tended to become more and more rational and empirical rather than philosophical and idealist. Sociologists have sought the application of scientific method in social researches. Like a natural scientist, a sociologist senses a problem for investigation. He then tries to formulate it into a researchable proposition. After collecting the data he tries to establish connections between them. He finally arrives at meaningful concepts, propositions and generalizations.

**Sixthly**, Sociologists are concerned with the task *“formulating concepts, propositions and theories.”*

**Finally**, in the present era of explosion of knowledge sociologists have ventured to make specialization also. Thus, today good number of specialized fields of inquiry is emerging out. **Sociology of knowledge, sociology of history, sociology of literature, sociology of culture, sociology of religion, sociology of family etc., represent such specialized fields.** The field of sociological inquiry is

so vast that any student of sociology equipped with genius and rich sociological imagination can add new dimensions to the discipline of sociology as a whole.

### **Delimits its Scope**

Every science has its own areas of study or fields of inquiry. It becomes difficult for any one to study a science systematically **unless its boundaries are demarcated and scope determined precisely**. Unfortunately, there is no consensus on the part of sociologists with regard to the scope of sociology.

However, there are two main schools of thought regarding the scope of sociology;

- (i) The specialistic or formalistic school and
- (ii) The synthetic school.

#### **(I) The specialistic or formalistic School**

The school of thought is led by the German sociologist **George Simmel**. The other main advocates of this school are **Vierkandt, Max Weber, Small, Von wiese and Tonnies**.

**Simmels** and others are of the opinion that **sociology is pure and independent science**. As a pure science it has a limited scope. Sociology should confine itself to the study of certain aspects of human relationship only. Further, **it should study only the forms of social relationships but not their contents**. Social relationships such as competition, sub-ordination, division of labour etc., are expressed in different fields of social life such as economic, political, religious, moral, artistic etc. **Sociology should disentangle**



**the forms of social relationships and study them in abstraction. Sociology as a specific social science describes, classifies and analyses the forms of social relationships.**

**Vierkandt** says that sociology concerns itself **with ultimate form of mental or psychic relationship which links men to one another in society.** He maintains that in dealing with culture, sociology should not concern itself with the actual contents of cultural evolution but it should **confine itself to only the discovery of the fundamental forces of change and persistence.** It should refrain itself from making a historical study of concrete societies.

**Max Weber** opines that the aim of sociology **is to interpret or understand social behaviour.** But social behaviour does not cover the whole field of human relations. He further says that sociology should make an analysis and classification of types of social relationships.

## **CRITICISM**

The views of **the Formalistic School** are widely criticized. Some critical remarks may be cited here;

**Firstly,** the formalistic school has **unreasonably narrowed the field of sociology.** Sociology should study not only the general forms of social relationships but also their concrete contents.

**Secondly,** the distinction between **the forms of social relations and their contents is not workable.** Social norms cannot be abstracted from the content at all, since social forms keep on changing when the contents change. Sorokin writes, "we may fill a glass of wine, water or sugar without changing its form, but

I cannot conceive of a social institution whose form would not change when its member change”

**Thirdly**, sociology is **not the only science that studies the forms of social relationships**. Other sciences also do that. The study of international law, for example, includes social relations like conflict, war, opposition, agreement, contract etc. Political Science, Economics also study social relationships.

**Finally**, the establishment of **pure sociology is impractical**.

## **2 The Synthetic School**

The Synthetic school of thought conceives of **sociology as a synthesis of social sciences**. It wants to make sociology a **general social science and not a pure or special social science**. In fact, this school has made **sociology synoptic or encyclopedic in character**. **Durkheim, Hob House Ginsberg and Sorokin** have been the **chief exponents of this school**.

The main argument of this school is that all parts of **social life are intimately inter-related**. Hence the study of one aspect is not sufficient to understand the entire phenomenon. Hence sociology should study social life as a whole. This opinion has contributed to the creation of a general and systematic sociology.

### **The View of Emile Durkheim**

Durkheim, one of the stalwarts of this school of thought, says that sociology has three main divisions or fields of inquiry. They are as follows; Social Morphology, Social Physiology and General Sociology.

(i) **Social Morphology**;

Social Morphology studies the territorial basis of the life of people and also the problems of population such as volume and density, local distribution etc.

(ii) **Social Physiology;**

Social Physiology has different branches such as sociology of religion, of morals, of law, of economic life and of language etc.

(iii) **General Sociology;**

General Sociology can be regarded as the philosophical part of sociology. It deals with the general character of the social facts. Its function is the formulation of general social laws.

**The Views of Morris Ginsberg**

Ginsberg, another advocate of synthetic school, says that the main task of sociology can be categorized into four branches; **Social Morphology, Social Control, Social Processes and Social Pathology.**

(i) **Social Morphology;**

“Social Morphology” deals with the quantity and quality of population. It studies the social structure, social groups and institutions.

(ii) **Social Control;**

“Social Control” studies—formal as well as informal—means of social control such as custom, tradition, morals, religion, convention, and also law, court, litigation etc.

(iii) It deals with the regulating agencies of society.

(iv) **Social Processes;**

“Social Processes” try to make a study of different modes of interaction

such as cooperation, competition, conflict, accommodation, assimilation, isolation, integration, differentiation, development, arrest and decay.

(v) **Social Pathology;**

“Social Pathology” studies social mal-adjustment and disturbance. It also includes studies on various social problems like poverty, beggary, unemployment, over-population, prostitution, crime etc.

Ginsberg has summed up the chief function of sociology as follows;

**(i)** Sociology seeks to provide **a classification of types and forms of social relationships.**

**(ii)** It tries to determine the relation between different factors of **social life**, for example, **the economic and political, the moral and the religious, the moral and the legal, the intellectual and the social elements.**

**(iii)** It tries to **disentangle the fundamental conditions of social change and persistence and to discover sociological principles governing social life.**

### **CONCLUSION**

The scope of sociology is, indeed, very vast. It studies all the social aspects of society such as social processes, social control, social change, social stratification, social system, social groups, social pathology etc.

### **Reference:**

Shankar Rao, C. N. (2018), ***Sociology Principles of Sociology with an Introduction to Sociol Thought***, pg. 18-23.