



ESSENTIALS OF SOCIOLOGY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Edited by:
Elias O. Wahab
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SOCIOLOGY:
A BRIEF
INTRODUCTION

Edited by
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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated
to the course of humanity

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PREFACE

The task of teaching and research is indeed onerous partly due to the global economic meltdown, which makes the cost of foreign materials so exorbitant that most students can hardly afford them. Therefore, how does the teacher get his ideas across to the students? The research work on Essentials of Sociology: A Brief Introduction was a product of deep thought provoking class discourse. A lot of our students contributed indirect through class discussions and questions. As would be expected, it was not at all smooth sailing as we started the dream in 2010 and only consummated same in 2013. It is a serious build-up to the first Departmental book titled, "Fundamentals of Sociology", Published in 1998. Here, Ninety-three percent of the teaching staff met the various deadlines, later turned to life lines. In fact, there were few hot intellectual exchanges ranging from discouragement to encouragement. This book is divided into two parts namely: Basic Sociology and Social Institutions. The issues in Part A revolve around the controversies, founding fathers and culture and research tools in Sociology. On the other hand, part B focus on the salient and very important social institutions from family to Religion to formal organization to Economic institution, among others. In structure, each chapter begins with basic introduction before delving into the problematic and then conclusion.

It is hoped that this book would be an addition to the already existing knowledge of the subject matter and would be a further guide to all undergraduate and postgraduate students and those interested in knowing the rudiments of Sociology.

Elias O. Wahab

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Elias O. Wahab.

Fundamentals of Sociological Investigations: Concepts, Principles, and Procedures

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Sociologists engage in the scientific study of human society in order to explain and proffer solution to social problems. Hence, sociology is defined as “the systematic study of human society and social interaction” (Kendall, 2003: 3; Macionis, 22005: 1). Sociology is therefore the discipline that deals with the scientific study of human behaviour, social groups, and society (Thompson & Hickey, 1996). According to them, the major task of sociologists is to systematically examine the structural and institutional forces that influence everyday life, human behaviour and social values. These components of the sociology enterprise are what Emile Durkheim referred to as “social facts.” Social facts, in a simplified form, are the social structures and cultural norms and values that are external to, and exert profound influence on social actors (Ritzer, 2008). Durkheim, in the enormous task of developing a separate discipline earlier coined as sociology made it clear that social facts should be the focus of investigation, in order to make it distinctive from existing related disciplines such as psychology and history (Ritzer, 2008).

Social problems in any human society are usually connected to one or more social facts and research problems that engage sociologist are carved out to address these problems. Intolerable situations in society (what I like to call “negative social facts”) and sometimes tolerable (referred to here as “positive social facts”) constantly call for the attention of sociologists to investigate and provide explanation for their existence. The desire to take on these situations presents complex social realities of which sociological researchers invest enormous intellectual energy to explain and suggest steps policy makers can adopt to address. Sociologists

are confronted with the task to select an area at a point in time their research efforts seek to investigate. Max Weber in his contribution to the methodology of sociology addresses the way to face this task and be able to come up with objective knowledge about social facts through his concept of *value judgment*. The concept is split into two—*value relevance* and *value neutrality*.

Sociologists must select area (s) for investigation from the complex social realities around them. The selection is usually guided by their interest (value) which is required to carry through a research project (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 1997). This comes under Weber's *value relevance*. In other words, values of researchers are permitted at the level of the selection of topic or area to investigate. However, Weber makes it clear that as soon as a researcher selects an area or topic from the complex social facts for investigation, it is unacceptable for the researcher to allow his/her values to influence the outcome of the investigation. This is what Weber calls *value neutrality* (Coser, 1971). This is the sure way for sociologist to generate objective and reliable knowledge about social facts/social realities. Thus, value relevance and value neutrality are still critical to sociological investigations.

It is important to stress that once a researcher identifies the research topic s/he intends to investigate, the topic has to be stated in clear way to show the problem the study seeks to address. This is usually done by providing the context of the problem in one or two paragraphs; the paragraph(s) highlights literature based or statistical facts to buttress the problem. Then, one or two statements are stated to capture the suggested explanation of the social problem the study seeks to proffer solution. For instance, a sociologist seeks to explain preponderance of prostitution among undergraduates in Nigerian tertiary institution. The researcher provides statistical information on the prevalence of this problem in terms of the rate of prevalence; this is supported with evidence of scientific sources. Everything is communicated in one sentence. At

the end, a statement such as “could the high rate of prostitution among undergraduates in Nigerian higher institutions be attributed to the collapse of social structures in the society is added. This statement encapsulates the subject matter of the study. In this case, the social problem of prostitution among undergraduates is suggested explainable through the decay of social structures such as norms, family values, etc. This is the *problem statement* in sociological investigations (see Wusu, 2004b) for detailed explanation on problem statement).

Closely linked to problem statement are *research questions* and *objectives* of sociological investigations. The three concepts flow from the topic of the study the sociologist has chosen to investigate. Research questions highlight the questions a study seeks to answer while the objectives clearly state the steps a researcher should undertake in order to generate answers to the questions raised. Both research questions and objectives are expected to be broken down to specific and measurable units that sum up to address the study problem highlighted in the problem statement. This is important because the whole study would be misdirected if the questions and objectives are carelessly stated. Hence, good sociological investigators pay quality attention to come up with well thought out and articulated problem statement, research question and objectives.

When these preliminary steps are taken judiciously the next line of action is to decide how to proceed in conducting the study. There are two broad methodologies sociologists adopt to carry out sociological investigations, namely Durkheimian and Weberian research approaches. The rest of this chapter is devoted to tactical presentation of these approaches in simple terms that is easy for young sociologist to learn and put into practice. A conclusion section ends the chapter highlighting the nucleus of the methodologies.

Durkheimian approach to sociological investigation

The birth of sociology is rooted in August Comte's submission that in order to generate objective knowledge about the forces that sustain order in society the methods of natural science should be applied. Thus, sociology was then referred to as *positive science*. Durkheim invested most of his intellectual time to develop this positive science and successfully established a methodology for sociological investigations (Ritzer, 2008). His research approach in sociology is synonymous with the quantitative methodology. The quantitative research process begins with identification of appropriate theory from which *hypotheses* about the problem being studied are extracted. Hypotheses are tentative statements about relationships between or among *variables* (characteristics of a *population*—the universal set of a well defined animate or inanimate objects that a sociologist wishes to study in a research—that are of interest to a researcher). Variables are the social facts Durkheim indicates should be the concentration of sociological investigations and that social facts must be explained using social facts (Ritzer, 2008). Social facts are either *independent* (with inherent nature and is able to influence other characteristics) or *dependent* (takes its behaviour from other characteristics, mainly independent variables). *Intervening* variables are the social facts that tend to influence the relationship between dependent and independent variables. These statements (hypotheses) are derived from a sociological theory that is judged to provide explanation for the problem a study seeks to investigate. The usual practice is for quantitative sociologists to construct a conceptual framework rooted in the chosen theory (this is the theoretical framework) pictorially relates the variables (social facts) involved in a particular study. The hypotheses are direct derivatives of the constructed framework.

Hypotheses are of two fundamental forms, namely *research (H_a) or alternative (H_a)* and *null (H₀)* hypotheses. Research hypothesis is stated to indicate the relationship or association between or among the variables while null hypothesis is stated to suggest that the relationship or association does not exist. For instance, a research hypothesis will look like ‘educational achievement is likely associated with life aspirations of people’. Null hypothesis, on the other hand, will be stated as ‘education is not likely to be associated with life aspirations of people’. In a research, the choice of the type of hypothesis is a function of the style of the department or supervisor. Note that hypothesis is directly related to the research questions and objectives of a study, a quantitative sociologist must ensure there is a direct flow among the three components. Hence, if there are two or three research questions or objectives in a study there will be two or three corresponding hypotheses. Generally, it is acceptable in the social sciences to test hypotheses at *0.05 significance level* or *95% confidence level* (referred to as *p value* in computer assisted statistical analysis). This connotes a sociological hypothesis is accepted will be true 95 times out of every 100 cases and may be false only 5 times. This is emphasized to ensure sociological research process complies with the ethic of value neutrality. However, the acceptance or rejection of an hypothesis may be done in error. Two types of error may ensue: *Type I error* (when a *true* hypothesis is rejected) and *Type II error*—when a *false* hypothesis is accepted (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996).

Two study designs are compatible with the Durkheimian’s research strategy (quantitative methodology): survey and experimental designs. Survey design is popular in sociological investigations than experimental designs. This chapter will focus on the survey design. Survey research design collects quantitative data about social facts following either cross-sectional design or longitudinal design. In cross sectional studies, data are collected from a *cross-section*

of carefully sampled members of the study population within a given time period. In this case, a snap short picture of the social facts of interest is captured using a well designed questionnaire. On the other hand, *longitudinal survey* collects quantitative data within a study population over a period in a repeated format in order to assess either trend or changes. There are three types of longitudinal surveys: trend survey, cohort survey and panel survey. In *trend survey*, data collection is carried out in a study population at different times on a research topic. Different samples are involved in this process but within the same population. *Cohort surveys* collect quantitative data from a sample that shares same demographic experience or social event (e.g. birthday, graduating set, etc.) within the same study population. The emphasis here is that data are collected at different times from a sample of members of the study population who must constitute a cohort. The sample must be members of the cohort of interest in the study. Therefore, at every point of data collection, same individuals may not be sampled but must be of the same cohort and study population. In the case of *panel surveys*, same individuals are sampled every time data are collected. Each of these longitudinal surveys has respective advantages and disadvantages; a critical discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper (see Santakos, 1998; Babbie, 1998; Soyombo and Taiwo, 1996).

In survey research, one of the prime ways of data collection is the *measurement* of variables/social facts using structured or semi-structured questionnaire. What is measurement? Measurement is defined as the art of assigning numerals to variables according to rules. The rules guiding the assignment of numerals to social facts/variables generate four levels of measurement: nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio levels/scales. At nominal level, numerals are assigned for the purpose of identification while at the ordinal level numerals are assigned both for the purpose of identification and to introduce ranking of the members of the population

according to the degree of possession of the social facts/variables of interest. The assigned numerals are only symbolic and the numerals cannot be interpreted as real figures. Interval measurement assigns values (real numbers) to establish equal difference among the members of the study population. The only limitation with this level of measurement is the absence of true zero; that is zero on the scale does not mean total absence of the characteristics of interest. Ratio scale, on the other hand, is the assignment of values to variables/social facts to represent actual degree of possession of the variables by members of the study population. Note that the levels of measurement are hierarchical and commutative (see Wusu, 2004a for detailed discussion on measurement).

Measurement of variables is done through questionnaire constructed asking questions that when answered will provide data on the variables that are analysed in order to draw objective conclusions. Questions in questionnaire are of two types—open-ended and close-ended. Questions construction in questionnaire is guided by the aim and objectives. The best procedure is to list out the direct and indirect variables involved in a study (highlighted in the objectives of a study) and construct questions on each variable. The questionnaire comes out of the collation of the questions and sectionalized. Close-ended questions provide options (of responses) from which the respondents can select to represent their minds. However, open-ended ones do not provide options but expect respondents to state their responses. Closed ended questions are usually preferred because they make for smooth analysis.

Because survey research focuses on a large population that is often heterogeneous and such difficult to access every member owing to time factor and financial implications, a part is usually selected through a scientific process known as *sampling*. Sampling is the process of selecting a proportion of a population for the purpose of data collection. Sampling techniques are

of two categories, namely *probability* and *non-probability* sampling. Probability sampling techniques select sample based on the principle every member of the population has equal opportunity of being included in the sample. Quantitative studies make use of probability sampling techniques for this purpose. These techniques include simple random, systematic, stratified, cluster and multistage cluster. On the other hand, non-probability sampling techniques do not regard the principle of probability and this include purposive, quota, accidental and snowball (see Wusu, 2004b for a comprehensive discussion on sampling).

Data generated in Durkheim research strategy are subjected to statistical analysis in order to conclude the study consistent with the objectives. Choice of statistical technique is a function of the level of measurement (see Wusu, 2004a for detailed analysis of this relationship). Statistical techniques are deployed to analyse sociological data gathered at the univariate, bivariate and multivariate levels. Univariate analysis involves making sense out of data using one variable. At this level of analysis, variables are used to describe the socio-economic characteristics of the sample of a study. Bivariate analysis goes a little higher than univariate level of analysis; this level of analysis involves test of association between two variables. Statistical techniques are used to test the significance of the association (eg. Chi-square, Man-Whitney test). The highest level of analysis, which is more rigorous involves multiple variables; this involves one dependent variable and numerous (as much as possible) independent variables—multivariate analysis. It is important to stress here that analysis of data on social facts must be done at the least, at univariate and bivariate levels. This brings us to the close of the Durkheimian approach to sociological investigation.

Weberian approach to sociological investigation

Max Weber approach in sociological investigation is the foundation of qualitative methodology in social research. Max Weber's contribution to sociology as a discipline plays a key role in the development of methodology in what I call sociological investigation. He emphasized in his contribution that sociological investigations should focus on seeking understanding of social realities, he captured this in his German concept *verstehen* (meaning understanding). According to Coser (1971) the nucleus of *verstehen* is that we can understand human action by probing into the subjective meanings actors attach to their own actions/behaviour and that of others. Weber used his *verstehen* concept to describe sociology as the science that seeks to understand human behaviour in order to explain its causes (Coser, 1971). The conceptualization of *verstehen* in Weber's contribution to sociology is the foundation of *interpretive understanding* of social behaviour and it is commencement of qualitative methodology in social research (Coser, 1971; Ritzer, 2008). Qualitative theoretical perspectives such as the symbolic interactionists are rooted in the interpretive sociology of Max Weber (Ritzer, 2008).

What is the practical implication of *verstehen* in sociological investigations? The main objective of this methodology in sociological investigations is to understand the context of social behaviour. In this regards, Max Weber submits that the sociologists pre-occupation should be learning "the personal reasons or motives that shape a person's internal feelings and guide decisions to act in particular ways" (Neuman, 2000). In practical terms sociologists seeks to understand human behaviour by leaning the subjective meanings social actors attach to their actions. However, *verstehen* to Weber is not simply getting feelings; it involves systematic and rigorous research into cultural and social-structural context of human behaviour (Ritzer, 2008).

Thus, it is a scientific strategy of generating reliable knowledge about the context of human behaviour and ultimately us with understanding of society.

Qualitative research seeks to explore the social context of behaviour using the interpretive strategy, to develop hypothesis about social phenomenon. Of course, related hypotheses, generated based on empirical qualitative data, could be aggregated into a theory that provide explanation on social reality. Hence, interpretive sociology is the methodology enables the practitioners to develop social theories that are grounded in empirical qualitative data. Thus, qualitative data must be collected and analysed in order to execute qualitative research project. Popular methods of qualitative data collection are indepth interview, focus group discussion, observation, case study and ethnographic studies. Brief discussions on these methods are presented bellow.

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