

Unit 2

Concept and Theory

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Learning objectives

After having read this lesson you should be able to,

- Link concept and theory
- Learn about concept and sociological theorems

2.1 Introduction

- Common day experiences provide the starting point for understanding words by a group of speakers in the same sense; as knowledge grows more technical, the words are defined for their properties and examples of how a scientific vocabulary develops are given.
- Technical meaning of words is commonly understood and we call them concepts.
- Concepts are then used to signify a relationship with one another like various measurements of medical tests that ultimately lead to a conclusion – normal or pathological state.
- Such concepts are used in physics, chemistry and biology as well and they help in the measurement of things/forces, formation of equation and conduct of experiments.
- Social sciences have limited scope for experiments, but indirect experiments through comparative method are used.
- Differences in societies and groups are significant for explaining their effects on human actions.
- At times universality of explanations works, at others uniqueness and historical setting becomes significant.
- There is greater use of history on social sciences than of natural science for the conduct of fresh studies.
- Concepts in interaction lead to the formulation of theory, that needs constant revisions.
- Examples have been given from Durkheim and Weber; Parsons and Merton.
- Students are advised to enrich examples from own experience and related lesson units.

2.2 Words and Language

As human beings we use language to describe analyse and evaluate our

actions and convey our ideas, feelings and concerns. We interact through words and a group of words we call sentences, there are other persons who do the same. We understand the words they use. Gradually, we begin to use a word that means or signifies same objects to all in a community. Language is a social product. Words are given a meaning and that meaning is commonly accepted by others. Thus, social interaction gets facilitated. A story is told about nine different lineages living in separate valleys of the Naga in the north eastern India. They sat down to take a thing (in local dialect). Others did not understand which thing was wanted. Then each of them opened a small packet. It contained salt; but salt was described in nine different words. So we can understand the value of one word meaning or signifying the one chosen object. Two more examples will help. The word chair indicates a piece of furniture used for being seated. At a time in the Parliament, members used to sit on benches. Those who were in the government and controlled the finances were said to occupy 'Treasury Benches', those on the other side were seated on 'opposition benches' and the person who was addressed as 'The Chair'. Here objects are associated with positions and the meaning understood by persons occupying those seats. In the court 'The Bench' signifies the judges. The lawyers are separated by a bar from the dias. Lawyers are thus said to belong to the 'bar'. Here again objects : the bar and the bench, get associated with their respective position of persons who are differentiated from each other, in cricket the white coat used to indicate the umpire. Different dress codes are laid down for different ranks in the army and the police.

When one word is used many times to convey the same meaning, it becomes possible for other persons to share it and thereby to communicate with each other. Even signs can be used to convey 'yes' or 'no'. In Andhra Pradesh, if one move the head or the neck from left to right, it means 'yes'; in northern India that means 'no', whereas for 'yes' the movement has to be up and down. Showing 'thumb up' in the west means 'ready to go'; in the traditional Indian setting, it stands for discarding the other. In Hindi '*thenga dikha diya*' means 'I damn care for you'. These few examples show there is a need for a shared meaning of words/signs to be able to communicate with each other. Human beings are distinguished from animals for possessing the capacity to have language for interaction.

Box 2.1: Consensual Meaning

This is most effectively done when words have the same meaning that is understood by all at least in a defined group. It has to be understood that the choice of a word for describing is a human activity. Things are described through an agreed meaning of words. Some writers refer this as an intersubjectivity agreement among persons. They deny any objectivity to things. In this sense reality is a social construct. This view has been put forward by philosophers from Vienna and carried forward through their influence.

Karl Popper and Wallerstein's names are among of the foremost among them, as scholars from that significant academic centre got spread over to English speaking countries making their mark in Philosophy Economics, and Sociology, and might of them brought up in the classical trends of music continue to illustrate the argument from the same. Be it recalled that German as a language linked the scholarly traditions of Austria and Germany.

2.3 The Nature of Concepts

When scientists use a word, it gets a technical meaning. It becomes a concept. In referring to a human being, biologists use the phrase 'homo sapiens' or 'wise man' to describe the modern man. If a person falls ill, in common language people say he / she has got fever. As discoveries get advanced, words like 'malaria' 'influenza' indicate the nature of the fever. They also describe which parts or insects have affected the body. Then we understand the nature and causes of the disease. The next step is finding the cure for the same through the use of tablets or injections. So when fever or disease is described in terms of its components and their behaviour or misbehaviour is known, we begin to know how things or bodies associated and recognised get inter related. Each measurement helps the physician to analyse the nature of the disease. Thus, temperature, blood pressure, 'sugar' or blood sugar content in urine can be measured. Each of these words and their measurements have a definite meaning, thus tests can be carried out by persons other than physicians; the words that describe each measurement become concepts and are commonly understood in the same sense by technicians. A common understanding helps locate the normal and pathological distribution of the bodies or anti-bodies and their particular combinations tell how they lead the physician to determine the disease and where to look for a cure.

Chemistry as a science came into its own when the atom was discovered as the smallest particle of matter that could take part in a chemical reaction. Atomic Weight of Hydrogen was taken to be 1 and of Oxygen 2; thereby weights for 92 elements were calculated. These were arranged in a table called the Atomic table. Further, researchers on unstable elements carried their number to 110. The elements could mix up in a reaction soon it was found that there was no loss of weight in a chemical reaction. This was a theoretical statement. Atomic weight was a concept. The inter relations among concepts that could be proved to hold in a number of trials or experiments became a theoretical proposition. Further, inter relation among such theoretical conclusions became a part of theory. The chief characteristic of theory is that it constitutes a series of conclusions stated in terms of concepts and their inter relations. Thus theoretical proposition gets linked to others and one/all taken together constitute the theory in a subject.

The process of theory formation then requires the following steps:

- i) Identification of the smallest unit and its characteristics.
- ii) The interactions among these units that lead to the formation of compounds and complexes in determinate ways.
- iii) Statements that use concepts and their interrelations to indicate the nature of interactions and their results.
- iv) Frequent experimentation to arrive at the stated results; and if results show a difference. Then, explain the difference and arrive at a revised statement.

Box 2.2: Conceptual Abstraction

A little further explanation of a concept is in order. We do not see a concept. We arrive at a concept. It is an abstract. When we see a person and come to know his/ her name, it is described as a proper noun. Som Nath or Abul Kalam are proper names but when they refer to the speaker of the Lok

Sabha or the President of India, we are referring to their characteristics. Thus speaker, or president are abstractions. Pushpa may be the name of teacher and Shashi the name of a student. Here again, teacher and student are abstractions. We arrive at abstractions by converting proper nouns into common nouns. Sachin and Kaif are cricketers, and Gulam Ali a musician and so on. Can you try to convert the following places into their characteristics. Delhi, Mumbai, Bhopal; choose from among the following : a port city, a national capital a state capital. Match the characteristics. The second list is of abstractions.

2.4 Concepts in Sociology: Some Illustrations

Now let us look at some concepts that sociologists use frequently.

We use one word to signify one object or a meaning. We use different words to signify other objects. Thus we try to have same meaning for describing similar things; different words to make differences clear. Human beings can be put into different categories eg. Male, female. Brother and Sister belong to the same generation. Father and son to different generations; So do mother and(You try).. and add your own example.... mother-in-law and (1) in law (2)in law. Thus we begin to describe a relationship among two persons. These relations are found among many such units of two persons. Relations among two persons are called dyadic (di means two); the unit of two persons is called a dyad. Radcliffe Brown, a British social anthropologist suggested that the first social relationship is dyadic in nature.

When we talk of a relationship, we ask a question: Is the relationship limited to one event or is it repeated time and again? Then we raise a second question: Is the relationship limited to two persons only, or many people in similar situations are involved in it. 'A student-teacher' relationship is found among two persons, but then there are many teachers and many students. There is a common acceptance that students will get related to teachers in some defined way. Here let us introduce a few concepts : A student in getting related to the teacher performs a **Role**. It gets defined when repeated time and again it acquires a **pattern**. This **pattern** is expected to be performed, An individual performing the role has been defined as a **person** by Nadel. Let us go ahead. The role of a student is performed by many students. Hence Nadel says one role is performed by many individuals: or a person is many individuals. Now our individual enters into more than one interrelationship every day. In the family he may be a brother or a sister of some one else. Next he may a son related to father, a son related to mother, and in a three generation family, a grandson related to the grandparents and so on. This situation is described (or conceptualised) by saying that one individual is many persons.

2.5 Concepts to Theorems: Natural Sciences

It is useful to recall the difference between arithmetic and algebra. In the first case, we try to solve every question that is posed to us. Add two sums, three sum and so.....on, or exercises 1, 2, 3 is subtraction; or to go further to multiplication and division. Each exercises is solved individually. In algebra, we have a formula or a method of solving a problem. If $(a + b)$ is multiplied by $(a + b)$, we start with a in the first set and get the following results: $a \times a + a \times b = a^2 + ab$. Then we start with b of the first set and multiply

with each letter, we get $b \times a + b \times b$ or $ba + b^2$. Now we add both the results. We get $a^2 + 2ab + b^2$. So we have a formula $(a+b)^2 = a^2 + 2ab + b^2$ and likewise we can go to $(a + b)^3$ to get further results. But let us remain with the first sum. $(a + b)^2 = a^2 + 2ab + b^2$. This formula will be valid for all the values of a & b ; it can be that $a = 2$ and $b = 3$; and our results will be $2^2 + 2.2.3 + 3^2 = 4 + 12 + 9 = 25$. We can go on increasing the value of a or b and get the desired results. Here we need not calculate each exercise, but use this formula to answer various values of a or b , be they 4 and 5; or 7 and 9.....and so on. The algebraic exercise applies to many cases. This is something like discovering a principle or a common method for doing each calculation individually. The discovery of a method common to several cases of a type is a step forward in evolving a formula, something like a theorem.

Let us now move to a set of theorems. Remember our school days learning geometry. We learn about a point, a line, an angle, a triangle — then say a triangle has three angles and their sum is 180° . If one angle is of 90° , the other two have to share the remaining 90° in any combination - say 60° and 30° or 45° and 45° . In the latter case two sides will be equal in length. If all the three angles are of 60° each, each side of the triangle will also be equal in length. Here a relationship is posited between the degree of the angle and the length or size of a side. We can go on further to read about triangles and quadrilaterals..... and reach the connected 28 theorems. The interconnection of theorems then leads to theory in general, or an all embracing theory.

Reflection and Action 2.1

Read section 2.5 and give your explanation, interpretation and commentary.

In the example last given words like a point, a line or a straight line, and angle are concepts, Their interconnection a theorem. The interrelation among them a theory.

In natural sciences, say in Physics and Chemistry, we come across words (Concepts). Their interrelations and then inter connections among concepts (expressed in quantities) that lead to theory or better 'laws'. We take an example of an apple. It fell down from the tree, a normal occurrence. But Newton asked the question why did the apple fall to the ground. He propounded the theory of gravity. not apple alone, but all objects fall towards the ground. If the earth is round then why do people on the other side of the earth do not fall away. This doubt was expressed by our villagers — why do the Americans on the other side of the globe do not fall away. Newton had an answer. All things fall towards the centre of the earth. This explained all falls. Thus the theory of gravity came into being; The explanation came with Newton — though apples or other objects had been falling that way ever since the creation of the earth. Here we can sum up the process of theory formation.

- Theory is an explanation of recurring event and is a valid explanation universally in space and time.
- The condition under which the theoretical statement would hold true need to be spelt out.
- The theory can be modified if subsequent experiments create new situation that have to be considered afresh. The theory is a revisable

proposition. Examples are the theory of the atom being indivisible part of matter had to be revised after the splitting of the atom. The case of discovery of elements beyond 92 has earlier been stated. The theory of gravity was given a new look when a non-matter or a force like light was found to be subject to gravity by Einstein.

- Science is impersonal in the sense that the laws and theories do not depend for their truth value on the status of a person, be he a king, a prime minister, priest or even the scholar himself/ herself.
- When an inquiry is conducted or a problem solved on the basis of existing knowledge about concepts and theory and illustrated as a case of a more general application, it is called a deductive approach. We move from theory to facts.
- When we move from facts and arrive at an explanation that process is called induction.
- The inter-play between inductive and deductive processes constitutes the method of science, or sciencing. Here conclusions are only provisional, and are under consent testing and revision. As a process body of science consists of revisable propositions.
- Some authors are of the opinion that science grows double, say every 10 years, and after 50 years quite a few conclusions or theoretical statements need modification.

2.6 Towards Social Science: Durkheim, Weber and Beyond

There has been a lot of discussion whether social sciences can follow the method of natural sciences. These need separate discussion. Comte 'Durkheim, and Radcliffe-Brown answered 'yes'. Dilthey, a historian took the other view. Weber tried to follow the middle path. On different occasions systems of explanation have been tried and these have been called 'grand theories' which could be applied to several inquiries / cases. At least that is the claim. Marxism and Parsonian systems belong to that category. Then there are descriptions at an empirical level – facts gathered and put into tables, without any explanation. These are not theories *per se* but theories can be made through proper analysis. Durkheim's study of suicide rates and explanation of their variations is the best example of theory formation from the existing data. It will be helpful to understand his method:

- Firstly, Durkheim clarified the term, and located three (or four) types of suicides and their nature.
- For each type, the existing data available in official records were classified in terms of their distribution in various social categories. This classification needed intelligence and brilliance of the author.
- Each type of suicide rate varied according to the data on social facts, and comparisons were made.
- Explanations were given for each type.
- A theory of suicides was formulated in terms of the variations of the degree of integrated (solidarity) in society.

Let us recall how Max Weber formulated his theories:

- The key words: 'The protestant ethic' and 'capitalism' were defined after going through the literature. Their ideal types were defined.

- Cases where both were present, and not present were identified.
- Comparisons in the historical settings were attempted and existing data on the type of education prevalent in each religious group were compared.
- A conclusion on the coincidence of the rise of capitalism in protestant dominated regions was confirmed.
- Why this inter relationship holds is examined.
- How is the explanation of this case related to the general history of civilizations is attempted.

Path breaking studies such as these continue to receive attention among scholars from related subjects as well as the main discipline over a period of time. It happens that certain parts of a theory receive greater attention in subsequent studies. Durkheimian studies on suicide received attention at the hands of psychologists and social psychologists in particular and they began re-examining the loss of sense of security as a possible explanation, besides others. One of the types of suicide was classified as anomie. A group of writers considered this concept as central to the analysis of modern societies. In turn they began to de-link the concept from that of solidarity, introduced more psychological variables in it; while Merton retained the social component as control. Thus succeeding social scientists find an alternative relevance of the concept and try to look at the problem of a different age through it (with some modifications).

a) Max Weber

The second example refers to Max Weber. His treatment of the protestant ethic gave rise to the counter-point at the hands of writers treating the Catholic, Hindu, Shinto and Confucian faiths suggesting a sort of 'negation of negation'. Marxist scholars primarily pointed on 'structural' factors as being more decisive than the 'cultural' as propounded by Weber. Yet most of the Asian dialogue on entrepreneurship kept alive the debate with Weber within the cultural frame. Mario Rutten in the article on the 'Study of Entrepreneurship in India' neatly summarizes the position and calls for greater interaction among the two major approaches (2003 : 1319-41). There have been ample discussions on Weber v. Marx, and a sort of convergence signifying Marx and Weber as complements of each other. Yet other variations of Weber are found in the conceptualisation of ethno-methodology and phenomenology wherein actor's point of view is being given primacy over 'others'. Within Marxism one comes across increasing emphasis on empirical studies of the sub-altern as well as other political forms of dominance. The classical writers who developed ways of looking at social facts, currents, and actions, in their own times, are being increasingly discovered for their relevance to addressing the problems of the new societies, or our contemporary periods. This dynamism constitutes the process of science linking concepts and theories of the classical writers and modern situations.

b) Parsons and Merton

Among the twentieth century writers Talcott Parsons is the most significant for conceptualising human actions and connecting economy, polity, institutions and pattern maintenance. This exercise required contribution from economics, anthropology, psychology and sociology, and their integration into a general theory of action. As Parsons grew mature, he examined economy, polity, family and professions, specially medicine, as sub-systems and in cooperation with valued colleagues looked into specifics of the American society. In

discussing writers of significance spread over a life time, with some contributions appearing posthumously, a question is raised about the continuity of the academic effort involved. Critics at times find that 'the young' author was different from the 'mature' 'one; the 'younger' being more general and the 'mature' being more specific. This is what one gets by looking at Marx with 1848 serving as the dividing line, more or less. The *Philosophical* manuscript and the *communist Manifesto* belong to that period, the *Capital* to the next. A similar exercise on Parsons suggests that the publication of *Towards a General Theory of Action*, (1936) and to an extent *Social System* mark the first phase.

c) Theories of Society

Thereafter specifics gained currency, and the treatment got manifestly grounded in the empirical situation of the American Society. We have hinted at the influence Parsons had on Indian scholarship in a different unit. Some critics commented upon Parsons as if he was guilty of using too many concepts to state his position and synthesize the effects. Their use earned him more critics than supporters. Yet from among the galaxy of his students and co-workers. We get more and more specific studies of various aspects of society.

Merton was among the most serious of the students who attempted a fresh combination of empirical studies and grand theory taking some aspects selectively at a time. Harry M. Johnson passed on the gains of the entire approach in a text book entitled *Sociology*, which got translated in Hindi by Yogesh Atal who had spent a semester with Merton. Other writers studies the family, religion, economy and polity. Merton is important for having coined the phrase 'theories of the middle range' – middle between grand theory and pure description. He thought at that level, theory had a heuristic purpose i.e. acting as a guide for further research (including field studies). Accordingly, he systematised classical explanation for use as tools of research of modern societies and to an extent modified old concepts giving them a new relevance and vibrancy. He did this for 'function' by pin pointing three categories, function, dysfunction and non-function and to look for a 'balance of consequences' of the three. He devised a protocol of 'for observation' that would permit gathering of information with a potential for being understood in the functional perspective. At the conceptual level, he had a fresh look at the analysis a comparison between the sociology of knowledge, and at the level of nature cosmopolitan and local press. He clarified social aspects of anomie, the conflict between the accepted goals of a society and the use of rather open means for achieving the same; and then the specification of the Theory of the 'Role-Set' and the 'Reference Group' as examples of middle range theory developed at different stages of the inquiry. Merton's other contribution lay in attempting some questions set by financing agencies; and using the opportunity for developing concepts that would acquire explanatory power in the broad frameworks of *Social Theory and Social Structure*. In the preface to a volume on *social problems*, he distinguished between social problems and sociological problems, a point well taken by M.S. Gore in most of his presentations and deliberation in the Indian setting.

Conceptualising for studying special features of the Indian society has been attempted by M.N. Srinivas through 'SANSKRITIZATION' and 'Dominant Caste'. Adrian C. Mayer found it useful to study municipal elections in Dewas town of Madhya Pradesh through the operation of quasi-groups (half formed groups)

for a specific situations in the nature of 'actions sets'. There is an increasing trend in sociology in India for showing the limits within which some of the concepts made popular in the west can help us grasp the nature of social processes operating in India. 'Little community' and 'Peasant society' are some of the examples and others can be added.

2.7 Conclusion

Words and concepts are products of mind, and when their meaning is shared, communication of ideas takes place in daily life as well as in academic circles. The development of science made the meanings more and more specific, as also grammar and logic. Natural sciences connect concepts with experiments, and conclusions affect the inter connection among various concepts, and their combinations. Science keeps on growing and doubling itself faster than social sciences or humanities. History of ideas is more significant for the latter, as old formations and theories are discovered to provide insight into current problems. Yet, refinements keep on happening. This has been illustrated chiefly with respect to the methods and approaches used by Durkheim and Weber; and the nature of the middle range theories initiated by Merton over the grand theories of Parsons. In the body of the Unit, the manner in which words like structure and function have developed has been briefly touched upon. Students are advised to study the related material supplied in specific unit. Merton also developed 'protocols' for observation, and paradigms for studying questions in a theoretical or structural perspective. The next lesson deals with the Paradigms and Theories.

2.8 Further Reading

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