

### **SOCIAL ACTION AND IDEAL TYPES**

Max weber” stated that, there are four ideal types of social actions\* . Which are as follow, goal rational social action, value rational social action, affective social action and traditional social action. Before moving on to the ideal types of social action, it is important for reader to understand that, what weber meant by the ideal types of social action? Mentioned ideal types of social action, may not occur similarly in real world as it is explained in weber theory. However, it may exist and occur in the real world as, a mixture or contaminated form of social action. He explained the types of actions in the context of ideal world or as ideas.

#### **Goal Rational Social Action**

This type of social action is goal oriented and the motive of the goal is derived from the desires of actor. However, the goal should be realistic and actor should have means which are required to achieve the goal. In goal rational action; individual set a goal and he uses the efficient ways or means to achieve it. Moreover, the goal and the means should be rational or justifiable. For example, an individual may want highest score in the class, however, to accomplish that goal, he has to work hard and give more time to study and do not let his emotions come in a way of accomplishing his goal. If he does not give time to his studies and yet want to score high in class then his goal and mean of achieving it is considered to be irrational or unrealistic.

#### **Value Rational Social Action**

In value rational social action, goal and means of achieving end is derived and determined by values. This type of social action is also considered to be rational however, the rationality of that action is justified by the actor from his set of beliefs, which may be aesthetic, religious, constitutional, and based on profession policy. For example, individuals who are in the following professions, Police, clergy and lawyers are supposed to choose goals and means to accomplishing it, under a particular code and rules, which efficiency and effectiveness cannot be questioned by them.

#### **Affective Social Action**

Such social action is motivated by the emotions of individual. This type of social action is considered to be the most irrational action. For example, if a football player gets angry during a match and in that moment of anger, he hits opponent team player, he knows that such action will weaken their team position and may affect his career, despite knowing the consequences he hits the player. The reason why “weber” called it the most irrational social action.

#### **Traditional Social Action**

Traditional social action is derived from the customs of society. For example if someone eat food with their bare hands and someone asks why are you not eating with fork and knife? If he/she replies that, my ancestor used to eat with bare hands that's why I am eating too that way, such social action will come into the category of traditional social action.

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### **The Max Weber's Theory of Social Action**

Max Weber conceived of sociology as a comprehensive science of social action. His primary focus was on the subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions in their mutual orientations within specific socio-historical contexts. Coser says, "In his analytical focus on individual human actors he differed from many of his predecessors whose sociology was conceived in socio-cultural terms".

Max Weber began with the idea of social action to make of sociology a scientific enquiry. Thus the idea of action is central to Max Weber's sociology. For Weber the combined qualities of "action" and "meaning" were the central facts for sociology's scientific analysis.

Weber defined sociology is, "the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at causal explanation of its courses and effects." Action in Weber's analysis is all human behaviour to which an actor attaches subjective meaning. According to Weber "Action is social, insofar as by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual it takes account of the behaviour of others and thereby oriented in its course."

Weber was particularly interested in how social action is often conceptualized by social actors in terms of means-ends chains. For instance, a large bureaucratic organization will organize the activity of social individuals by assigning each worker a particular role in a hierarchy.

The responsibilities associated with this role are rules, or norms, that serve as means to the ends served by the bureaucracy. These norms serve to make organized social action possible; that is they routinize and formalize social interaction among individuals who, for whatever reason are committed to serving the organization.

According to Weber, there are three key terms: **(i) Deuten, (ii) Verstehen, (iii) Erklaren**

- i. **Deuten:**  
To interpret, to grasp the significance or subjective meaning.
- ii. **Verstehen:**  
To comprehend, to organize the subjective meaning of human actions into concepts.
- iii. **Erklaren:**  
To explain causally or reveal the constants of human behaviour. The primary task of sociology is the study of social action. Sociology studies the different aspects of human behaviour particularly meaning, purpose and value of the human behaviour. Max Weber observes that social action is that action of an individual which is somehow influenced by the action and behaviour of other individuals and by which it is modified and its direction is determined.

Weber writes, "A correct causal interpretation of concrete course of action, is arrived at when the overt action and the motives have both been correctly apprehended and at the same time their relation has become meaningfully comprehensible."

### **Characteristics of Social Action:**

The significant characteristics of Weber's ideas are as follows:

- 1. Social action may be influenced by an action of past, present or future.**
- 2. Social action presupposes the existence of other individual and some action by him.**
- 3. Necessity of subjective meaning.**
- 4. It is oriented in its course.**

Weber's focus on the mutual orientation of social actors and on the "understandable" motives of their actions was anchored in methodological considerations, which account for much of the distinctiveness of his approach. Social action may be influenced by the action of past, present and future. So social action is a result or a modification of some action of other person or persons.

Social action presupposes the existence of other individual and some action by him. This means there can be no social action in isolation. Therefore social action is possible if there is another human being whose action or behaviour is prompting to the giving individual to act in a particular manner.

In a social act it is necessary that it should have subjective meaning. A blind imitation without any understanding of the nature of act being imitated is not social action. Weber's primary focus was on the subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions in their mutual orientations within specific socio-historical contexts.

Behaviour devoid of such meaning falls outside the purview of sociology. "Action is Social" Weber says. According to Weber, it is action when man assigns a certain meaning to his conduct and the action is social when, by the meaning he gives it, it relates to the behaviour of other persons and is oriented towards their behaviour.

For Weber human action is social in so far as "the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it." Mere behaviour becomes action when it derives dealings with others and when it is meaningful; that is oriented in its course. The basic requirement is that the actor is aware of what he or she is doing which can be analyzed in terms of their intentions, motives and feelings as they are experienced.

### **Social Actions at a Glance:**

- 1. Rationally-Purposeful action:**

It is the social action that is instrumentally oriented. It occurs when the ends of action are seen as means to higher, taken-for-granted ends.

**2. Value-rational action:**

It occurs when individuals use effective means to achieve goals that are set by their values.

**3. Affective action:**

Emotional and impulsive action that is an end in itself.

**4. Traditional action:**

It occurs when the ends and means of social action are fixed by custom and tradition. Action is so habitual that it is taken for granted. This classification of types of action serves Weber in two ways. It permits him to make systematic typological distinctions, for example between types of authority and also provides a basis for his investigation of the course of western historical development.

Raymond Aron rightly sees Weber's work as "the paradigm of a sociology which is both historical and systematic." Weber was primarily concerned with modern western society, in which as he saw it, behaviour had come to be dominated increasingly by goal-oriented rationality, whereas in earlier periods it tended to be motivated by tradition, affect or value oriented rationality.

**Stages of Social Action:**

Weber has described various stages of social action relating to various types. These are:

**1. Rational-purposeful stage**

**2. Valuational stage**

**3. Emotional stage**

**4. Traditional stage**

**1. Rational-purposeful stage:**

In this stage the actions covered are primarily guided by reason and discrimination. The pursuit of goals is a corollary of the facts; the rational choice involves consciousness of ends or goals.

**2. Valuational stage:**

Religious and ethical actions come under this category. In this stage the actions prevailing, are pertaining to values.

**3. Emotional stage:**

An emotional reaction to the action of others comes under this stage. Here there is expression of love, hatred, sympathy, compassion or pity in response to the behavior of other individuals prevails.

**4. Traditional stage:**

This stage is characterised by long standing customs, traditions and usages. So all those actions, which are guided and determined by customs and traditions are covered under this category.

**Raymond Aron** writes the above classification of action has been argued, elaborated and refined:

1. **Weber conceives of sociology as a comprehensive science of social action.** The typology of actions is therefore the most abstract level of the conceptual system applicable to the social field.
2. **Sociology is a comprehensive science of action.** Here comprehension implies an understanding of the meaning man gives to his conduct. Weber's aim is to understand the meaning each man gives his own conduct, so that it becomes essential to the comprehension of subjective meanings to proceed to a classification of types of conduct.
3. **The classification of types of action to a certain extent governs the Weberian interpretation of the contemporary era.** According to Weber the prime characteristic of the world we live in is rationalization. Rationalization is expressed by a widening of the sphere of zweckrational action, the rational action in relation to goals. Economic enterprise is rational, so is the control of the state by bureaucracy.
4. The classification of action according to Max Weber may be co-related with the relations of solidarity or independence between science and politics.

According to Weber, "Interpretative sociology, considers the individuals and his action as the basic unit as its atom." The individual is the upper unit and the sole carrier of meaningful conduct. Concepts like "state," association, feudalism etc. are certain categories of human interaction.

Hence Weber concludes; "it is the task of sociology to reduce these concepts to understandable action that is without exception, to the actions of participating individual men."

When we come to examine Weber's substantive sociological writings i.e. those writings in which he actually does sociology, we find that Weber is not a methodological individualist. Turner explains the contradiction between two themes in Weber's work well.

The overt emphasis is on the role of the active individual who constructs and creates meaning. The covert theme is that the ultimate origin of the meanings of actions is to be found in charismatic religious movements and these absolute values dig their own graves with the inevitable logic of fate. Thus Turner suggests that, "in fact Weber's pessimism produces a deterministic sociology in which the intentions of social actors are overtaken by historical fate."

Weber coined the concept "social relationship" to describe patterned human interaction which is intentional, meaningful and symbolic", Abraham and Morgan wrote, they said, there are six types of social relations designated as modes of orientation of social action. Weber thought of these as "patterns of human behaviour" attributable to the recognition of normative expectations.

The six types have been identified and defined by Larson:

1. **Usage**
2. **Custom**
3. **Rational Orientation**
4. **Fashion**
5. **Convention**
6. **Law.**

**1. Usage:**

Described behaviour performed simply to conform to a style of pattern, for example, social etiquette.

**2. Custom:**

Described habitual practices with roots in antiquity.

**3. Rational orientation:**

Designated that variety of social action which is consequence of actors orienting themselves to one another on the basis of similar ulterior expectations, for example mutual self-interest.

**4. Fashion:**

Described social action which is the result of adherence to contemporary fad.

**5. Convention:**

Designated that type of social action performed in recognition of strong moral obligation in the manner of Sumner's mores.

**6. Law:**

Described that type of social action performed in recognition of codified expectation and restriction. Sociology concerns the rationality of individual and collective behaviour. It is the science of human action "both comprehensive and explicative. Weber has "a kind of existential philosophy." He wants to know the manner men live, here and now. According to him sociology is deeply connected with history and with culture.

**Criticisms:**

Weber's theory of social action especially his typology of social action has encountered severe criticisms.

1. **Talcott Parsons criticises** Weber for stressing too much the element of voluntary subjective meaning of the actor. For Parsons, the action of an actor is involuntary; it is behaviour directed by the meanings attached by actors to things and people.
2. **A. Schultz criticises** Weber for not providing a satisfactory account of meaningful action since if meaning is too much divorced from the actor it becomes an objective category imposed by the sociologists.
3. **According to P.S. Cohen**, Weber's typology of social action is confusing due to Weber's emphasis on subjective meaning of the actor. **Cohen explains with an example of traditional action whereby a commoner pays tribute to his chief because it is customary.**

If the commoner can give no other reason for making the payment other than that it has always been so then the conduct may be treated as non-rational. It may be called rational, if he gives as his reason for payment that the chief is the father of the people and hence entitled to tribute.

It may be value-rational-the goal of pleasing the chief is a valued end and the means adopted produces the desired result. It may be goal-rational – the tribute has always been paid because it pleases the chief and enables one to obtain the favour from him and the failure to pay may displease the chief and induce him to punish the offender.

To this Weber might reply that whether the commoner can give reason for payment or not, he will make it because he has considered no alternative. Despite the above shortcomings Weber's theory of social action has inspired sociologists of subsequent generations.