
UNIT 10 SOCIAL ACTION AND IDEAL TYPES*

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10.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- outline Weber's concept of social action;
- discuss the meaning and characteristics of ideal types;
- describe the purpose and use of ideal types in social sciences; and
- narrate Max Weber's use of ideal type in his major works.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit deals with concepts of social action and ideal type as part of Max Weber's concern with methodology of social sciences. This unit gives a perspective and a background to analyse the major theoretical formulations of Max Weber.

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In this unit first we clarify the general meaning of social action and ideal type. This is followed by discussion on the role of beliefs and values in influencing social action. Thereafter, we highlight types of social action outlined by Weber. Subsequently, we discuss the concept of ideal type and characteristics of ideal-type as reflected in the writing of Max Weber. Here we also answer two questions as to how and why of social scientists' construction of ideal type in their researches. Weber used ideal type in three distinctive ways. We explain these three ways of use of ideal type in Weber's work in terms of (a) ideal types of historical particulars, (b) ideal types of abstract elements of social reality and (c) ideal types relating to the reconstruction of a particular kind of behaviour. We examine each of these kinds with suitable illustrations.

10.2 SOCIAL ACTION

According to Mitchell (1968: 2,) 'social action denotes social behaviour. This concept is used both by social psychologists and sociologists. Many social scientists regarded social action as the proper unit of, observation in the social sciences. Action is social when the actor behaves in such a manner that his action is intended to influence the action of one or more other persons. In sociology it was Max Weber who first explicitly used and emphasised social action as the basis for sociological theory'. (Mitchell 1968: 2).

10.2.1 Role of Values and Beliefs

According to Max Weber (1964: 128-129) "Sociology is a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its cause and effects".

Here we can point out the following important elements of social action

- i) social action includes all human behaviour.
- ii) social action attaches a subjective meaning to it.
- iii) the acting individual or individuals take into account the behaviour of others.
- iv) social action is oriented in its course.

You may learn about Weber's theory of social action in Box 10.1.

Box 10.1 Weber's Theory of Social Action

'Weber wanted to develop social theory in a way that tried to examine social action from the point of view of social actor. Although Weber shares with Marx a desire to develop what we can call a theory of social action, that is, a coherent account of how and why social actors act as they do, aspects of Weber's explanation differ from that offered by Marx. Whereas Marx describes motivation as the expression of human-beingness through productive activity and the desire to survive and prosper, Weber argues that social action also provided social actors with opportunities to live out their values and beliefs. There is no question that social actors act in order to survive, but for many the quality of life

also depends on some of the more esoteric and abstract aspects of human consciousness, qualities that are often expressed as values and beliefs. For example, if a group of social actors share a particular set of religious or spiritual beliefs, notwithstanding the fact that they still need to survive, such beliefs are likely to shape the way in which they manage their survival. Even the concept of 'survival' might be modified to include ideas about spiritual well-being. A social theory that seeks to explain social action in that context has to include some account of needs and desires, which exist alongside basic economic ones.

Following this line of argument, and placing this in the context of his analysis of the relentless spread of instrumental rationality in the modern world, Weber's theory of social action centres around an analysis of the rationality of otherwise of different types of action. If individuals are indeed immersed in a rationalised and rationalising social world, then presumably this has an important impact on the way they act. The basic point of departure of Weber's theory of social action is that actions can be distinguished one from the other depending on which kind of rationality the actor is trying to express. Unsurprisingly he concludes that in modern society the variety of rationality that most often guides social action is instrumental rationality. Being modern or acting in a modern way means acting according to the modern principles of instrumental rationality'.

(Ransome 2011: 119)

10.2.2 Types of Social Action

Weber has talked about four types of social actions. These are classified according to their modes of orientation:

i) Zweckrational or rational action in relation to a goal

Rational action with reference to goals is classified in terms of the conditions or means for the successful attainment of actor's own rationally closed ends. An example of this is an engineer constructing a bridge. He uses certain materials in a certain manner to achieve a goal. This activity is directed towards obtaining that goal, namely, completing the construction.

ii) Wertrational or rational action with reference to a value

Rational action with reference to value is classified in terms of rational orientation to an absolute value, that is, action which is directed to overriding ideals of duty, honour or devotion to a cause. Here one may give the example of a soldier laying down his life for the country. His action is not directed towards attaining a specific material goal like wealth. It is for the sake of certain values like honour and patriotism.

iii) Traditional Action

Traditional action type is classified as one which is under the influence of long practice, customs and habits. This is an action, which is guided by customs and longstanding beliefs which become second nature or habit.

Greeting elders with folded hands, for example, is almost a second nature to many Indians.

iv) Affective Action

Affective action is classified in terms of affectual orientation, especially emotional, determined by the specific states of feeling of the actor. Affective action is classified in terms of affectual orientation especially emotional, determined by the specific states of feeling of the actor.

Since reality presents a mixture of the four pure types of action, for our analysis and understanding we separate them analytically into pure or ideal types. For instance, the use of rational ideal types can help in measuring irrational deviation and we can understand particular empirical action by interpreting as to which of the four types of action it most closely approximates.

In order to understand better the types of action, identified by Max Weber, it is a good idea now to complete Activity 1.

Activity 1

List two examples from your day-to-day life for each of the four types of action identified by Max Weber. Compare your note, if possible, with the notes of your co-learners at the Study Centre.

10.3 IDEAL TYPES: MEANING, CONSTRUCTION AND CHARACTERISTICS

To Max Weber, the term 'ideal type' has a distinctive meaning and there are certain underlying principles pertaining to its construction. Here in this section we shall explain the general and Weberian meanings of the term 'ideal type', its construction and characteristics.

10.3.1 Meaning

Let us begin with the dictionary meaning of the terms 'ideal' and 'type'. According to New Webster's Dictionary (NWD 1985), 'ideal' is a 'conception or a standard of something in its highest perfection'. It refers to a mental image or conception rather than a material object. It is a model. The Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary says: 'Your ideal of something is the person or thing that seems to you to be the best example of it'.

The term 'type' means a kind, class or group as distinguished by a particular character (NWD 1985). Thus, generally speaking, we may conceptualise ideal type as a kind, category, class or group of objects, things or persons with particular character that seems to be the best example of it.

Weber used ideal type in a specific sense. To him, ideal type is a mental construct, like a model, for the scrutiny and systematic characterisation of a concrete situation. Indeed, he used ideal type as a methodological tool to understand and analyse social reality.

Methodology is the conceptual and logical research procedure by which knowledge is developed. Historically much of the methodological concern in the social sciences has been directed towards establishing their scientific credentials (Mitchell 1968: 118). Max Weber was particularly concerned with the problem of objectivity in social sciences. Hence he used ideal type as a methodological tool that looks at reality objectively. It scrutinises, classifies, systematises and defines social reality without subjective bias. The ideal type has nothing to do with values. Its function, as a research tool, is for classification and comparison. To quote Max Weber (1971:63).

“The ideal typical concept will develop our skill in imputation in research. It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description”.

In other words, ideal types are concepts formulated on the basis of facts collected carefully and analytically for empirical research. In this sense, ideal types are constructs or concepts which are used as methodological devices or tools in our understanding and analysis of any social problem.

To understand ideal types, as used by Max Weber, we explain how ideal types are constructed.

10.3.2 Construction

Ideal types are formulated by the abstraction and combination of an indefinite number of elements, which though found in reality, are rarely or never discovered in specific form. Therefore, Weber does not consider that he is establishing a new conceptual method. He emphasises that he is making explicit what is already done in practice. For the construction of ideal types, the sociologist selects a certain number of traits from the whole which is otherwise confusing and obscure, to constitute an intelligible entity. For example, if we wish to study the state of democracy in India (or for that matter of secularism, communalism, equality a court of law) then our first task will be to define the concept of democracy with the help of its essential and typical characteristics.

Here we can mention some of the essential characteristics of democracy, namely, existence of a multi-party system, universal adult franchise, formation of government by peoples representatives, peoples participation in the decision making, equality before law, respect to majority verdict and each others' views as well. This formulation of a pure type or an ideal type concept of democracy will guide us and work as a tool in our analysis. Any deviation from or conformity to it will unfold the reality. Ideal types, therefore, do not represent the common or the average characteristics but focus on the typical and the essential characteristics. For instance in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber analyses the characteristics of the 'Calvinist Ethic'. These characteristics are taken from various historical writings and involve those

components of Calvinist doctrines which Weber identifies as of particular importance in relation to the formation of the capitalist spirit. Ideal types are thus a selection of certain elements, certain traits or characteristics which are distinctive and relevant to the study undertaken. However, one thing which should be kept in mind here is that though ideal types are constructed from facts existing in reality, they do not represent or describe the total reality, they are of pure types in a logical sense. According to Weber 'in its conceptual purity, this ideal mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality'. This then is the way in which ideal types are constructed. To facilitate our understanding later in this unit we will take up those ideal type concepts which have been used by Weber.

10.3.3 Characteristics

From the above discussion we can draw some important characteristics of ideal types.

- i) Ideal types are not general or average types. That is, they are not defined by the characteristics common to all phenomena or objects of study. They are formulated on the basis of certain typical traits, which are essential to the construction of an ideal type concept.
- ii) Ideal types are not a presentation of total reality or they do not explain everything. They exhibit partial conception of the whole.
- iii) Ideal types are neither a description of any definite concept of reality, nor a hypothesis, but they can aid both in description and explanation. Ideal types are different in scope and usage from descriptive concepts. If descriptive concepts can be used, for instance, in the classification of different sects, and if one wants to apply the distinction in order to analyse the importance of these for the economic activity, then one has to reformulate the concept of sect to emphasise the specific components of sectarianism which have been influential in the economic pursuit. The concept then becomes an ideal typical one, meaning that any descriptive concept can be transformed into an ideal type through abstraction and recombination of certain elements when we wish to explain or analyse rather than describe a phenomenon.
- iv) In this sense we can say that ideal types are also related to the analytic conception of causality, though not, in deterministic terms.
- v) They also help in reaching to general propositions and in comparative analysis.
- vi) Ideal types serve to guide empirical research, and are used in systematisation of data on historical and social reality.

After learning about the meaning, construction and characteristics of ideal type it will not be difficult for you to complete Check Your Progress 1.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Tick mark the correct answer to the following question.

What are ideal types?

- a) Ideal types are general types.
- b) Ideal types are average types.
- c) Ideal types are pure types.
- d) Ideal types are normative types.

2) Tick mark True or False box given below each of the following statements.

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|--|------------|
| a) Ideal type is a description of reality. | True/False |
| b) Ideal type helps in the analysis and explanation of a social phenomenon. | True/False |
| c) Ideal types are constructed by selection of typical and essential traits. | True/False |
| d) Ideal types are hypotheses | True/False |
| e) Ideal types represent a total reality | True/False |
| f) Ideal types help in the causal and in comparative analysis | True/False |

10.4 PURPOSE AND USE OF IDEAL TYPES

Ideal types are constructed to facilitate the analysis of empirical questions. Most researchers are not fully aware of the concepts they use. As a result their formulations often tend to be imprecise and ambiguous, or as Weber himself says, ‘the language which the historians talk contains hundreds of words which are ambiguous constructs created to meet the unconsciously conceived need for adequate expression, and whose meaning is definitely felt, but not clearly thought out’ (Weber 1949: 92-3).

It is however the job of social scientists to render subject matter intelligible by avoiding confusion and obscurity. For example, we may talk about the construction of ideal types of authority. Weber distinguishes three types of authority, namely, rational, legal, traditional, and charismatic, each of which was defined by the motivation of obedience or by the nature of legitimacy claimed by the leader. Reality presents a mixture or confusion of the three ideal types and because of this very reason we must approach the types of authority with a clear idea. Because these types merge in reality each must be rigorously defined.

Ideal types are not formed out of a nexus of purely conceptual thought, but are created, modified and sharpened through the empirical analysis of concrete problems. This, in turn, increases the precision of that analysis.

We can therefore say that, ideal types are a methodological device which not only help us in the analysis of empirical questions, but also in avoiding obscurity and ambiguity in the concepts used, and in increasing the accuracy of our analysis. Completing Activity 2 at this stage will help you appreciate the process of construction of an ideal type.

Activity 2

You may be aware of the functioning of the institution of Village Panchayat in the rural areas and that of the Municipal Corporation in the urban areas. If you are living in a rural Area, construct an ideal type of a Village Panchayat. If you are living in an urban area, construct an ideal type of a Municipal Corporation. Exchange your note, if possible, with the notes of your co-learners at the Study Centre.

Ideal type, a key term in Weber's methodological essays has been used by him as a device in understanding historical configurations or specific historical problems. For this he constructed ideal types, that is, to understand how events had actually taken place and to show that if some antecedents or other events had not occurred or had occurred differently, the event we are trying to explain would have been different as well. For example, because of the implementation of the land reform laws and penetration of other modernising forces, like education, modern occupation etc., the joint family system has broken down in rural India. This means that there is a causal relation between the event (land reform, education and modern occupation) and the situation (the joint family). In this way ideal type concept also helps in the causal explanation of a phenomenon.

This, however, does not mean that every event has a particular or a specific cause. Weber does not believe that one element of society is determined by another. He conceives the causal relations both in history and sociology as partial and probable relations. It means that a given fragment of reality makes probable or improbable, favourable or unfavourable to another fragment of reality. For instance, certain Marxists would say that private ownership of the means of production makes inevitable the political power of the minority possessing these means. Weber would say that an economic regime of total planning makes a certain type of political organisation more probable. In Weber's work such analysis of causal relations was related to his interest in worldwide comparisons or in analysis of events and establishment of general preposition. That is, he used ideal types to build up a conception of a particular historical case, and used the same ideal type conceptions for a comparative analysis. This interdependence of history and sociology appears most clearly in Weber's conception of the ideal type.

Besides examining any particular historical case Max Weber also used ideal types to analyse the abstract elements of social reality and to explain particular kinds of social behaviour. We shall discuss these in greater detail in the following section, dealing with ideal type in the body of Weber's work.

Check Your Progress 2

1) How do we construct ideal type?

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2) What is the purpose of constructing ideal type?

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10.5 IDEAL TYPES IN WEBER'S WORK

Weber used ideal types in three distinctive ways. Indeed, his three kinds of ideal types are distinguished by three levels of abstraction. The first kind of ideal types are rooted in the historical particularities namely, Western city, the Protestant ethics etc. In reality, this kind of ideal types refer to the phenomena that appear only in the specific historical periods and in particular cultural areas. The second kind relates to the abstract elements of social reality, for example, the concepts of bureaucracy or feudalism. These elements of social reality are found in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. The third kind of ideal type relates to the reconstruction of a particular kind of behaviour (Cosser 1977: 224). In the following subsections we shall be dealing with each of these kinds of ideal types.

10.5.1 Ideal Types of Historical Particulars

According to Weber capitalism has been fully realised in modern western societies. Weber constructs an ideal type of capitalism by selecting a certain number of traits from the historical whole to constitute an intelligible entity. This was to show that there was a spiritual affinity between Calvinism and the economic ethics of modern capitalist activity. For this he identified those components of Calvinist doctrine which he considered as of particular and significant importance in the formation of capitalist spirit.

The essence of capitalism according to Weber is embodied in that enterprise whose aim is to make maximum profit or to accumulate more and more. These are based on the rational organisation of work and production. It is the conjunction of desire for profit and rational discipline which constitutes the historically unique feature of western capitalism. The desire for profit is satisfied not by speculation or conquest or adventure, but by discipline and rationality. This is possible with the help of legal administration of the modern state or rational bureaucracy. Hence capitalism is defined as an enterprise working towards unlimited accumulation of profit and functioning according to bureaucratic rationality.

Weber tried to show that there was a close affinity between this type of economic activity and elements of Calvinist doctrine. According to the Calvinist ethic, God is all powerful and above common man. Man has to work for God's glory on earth and this can be done through hardwork and labour which are rational, regular and constant. The calling of the individual is to fulfil his duty to God through the moral conduct of his day to day life whether he is rich or poor. For him work is worship and there is no room for idleness and laziness. This specific character of Calvinistic belief accounted for the relation between Calvinist doctrine and the spirit of capitalism which was characterised by a unique devotion to the earning of wealth through legitimate economic activity. This is rooted in a belief in the value of efficient performance in the chosen vocation as a duty and a virtue.

The affinity between the two and the emergence of Capitalist economic regime as defined by Weber existed only in the west, which made it a historically unique phenomenon. In Calvinist ethic, religious and economic activities are combined in a way not found either in Catholicism or in any other world religion like Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Judaism and Buddhism of which Weber made a comparative analysis.

10.5.2 Abstract Elements of Social Reality

These elements of social reality are found in a variety of historical and cultural contexts. Bureaucracy and types of authority and types of action are important examples of these abstract elements. Let us examine these three examples.

i) Bureaucracy

Weber pointed out that bureaucracy was the best administrative form for the rational or efficient pursuit of organisational goals. See Box 10.2 to understand what bureaucracy means.

Box 10.2 Bureaucracy

General meaning of the term bureaucracy is the rule by departmental or administrative officials following inflexible procedures. Max Weber emphasized the indispensability of bureaucracy for the rational attainment of the goals of any organization in industrial society (Mitchell 1968:21)

Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy comprised various elements such as (a) high degree of specialisation and a clearly-defined division of labour, with tasks distributed as official duties, (b) hierarchical structure of authority with clearly circumscribed areas of command and responsibility, (c) establishment of a formal body of rules to govern the operation of the organisation and administration based on written documents, (d) impersonal relationships between organisational members and the clients, (e) recruitment of personnel based on ability and technical knowledge, (f) long term employment, promotion on the basis of seniority and merit, (g) fixed salary and the separation of private and official income.

Though examples of developed bureaucracies existed in different parts of the world prior to the emergence of modern capitalism, it is only within this that organisations are found which approximate to this ideal typical form. Weber used these abstract elements of bureaucracy to explain a concrete phenomenon.

ii) Types of Authority

To understand the various aspects of authority Max Weber constructed its ideal types in terms of three types of authority. These are traditional, rational and charismatic.

Traditional authority is based upon the belief in the sanctity of age-old customs and rules. Rational authority is maintained by laws, decrees, regulations. Charismatic authority is characterised by exceptional virtue possessed by or attributed to the leader by those who follow the leader, have confidence in the leader and are devoted to the leader.

10.5.3 Reconstruction of a Particular Kind of Behaviour

This ideal type includes those elements that constitute rationalising reconstructions of a particular kind of behaviour. For example, according to Weber, all propositions in economic theory are merely ideal typical

reconstructions of the ways people would behave if they were pure economic subjects. These include laws of supply and demand, marginal utilities etc. Supply of commodity in the market governs prices in relation to demand. Similarly, utility of a commodity for consumption is higher or lower depending upon the units available for consumption. Economic theory rigorously conceives economic behaviour as consistent with its essence. This essence is often defined in a precise manner (Weber 1964: 210). It is now time to complete Check Your Progress 3.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) In what sense Weber used the concept of ideal type to show the relationship between Calvinist ethic and the spirit of capitalism?

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- 2) What are the major characteristics of ideal type of bureaucracy as outlined by Max Weber?

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- 3) What are the four ideal types of social actions stated by Max Weber?

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10.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit began with a clarification of the general meaning of the terms ‘ideal’ and ‘type’. We discussed the concept and characteristics of ideal type as associated with Max Weber’s writings. Ideal types are those constructs or concepts which are formulated for interpretation and explanation of social reality. Weber used ideal types in three distinctive ways. First, he used ideal types of historical particulars to explain Protestant ethics that appeared only in specific historical periods and in particular cultural areas. Secondly he used ideal type to explain abstract elements of social reality, namely, bureaucracy, types of authority, social action and so on. His third kind of ideal type relates to the reconstruction of particular kind of behaviour. We examined in detail the use of ideal type in Weber’s work in this unit.

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10.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) c
- 2) a) False
b) True

- c) True
- d) False
- e) False
- f) True

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Ideal types are constructed by selecting those characteristics or elements of an object of study, which are considered essential or typical to it.
- 2) Ideal types are formulated, first, to understand and analyse a particular social phenomenon or problem; secondly, to avoid confusion or obscurity in the concepts used and thirdly, to increase the precision and accuracy of the analysis.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Weber constructed ideal type of capitalism and identified those components of Protestant ethic which he thought were of significant importance in the formation of capitalist spirit and was responsible for the rise of modern capitalism in the West.
- 2) According to Max Weber the ideal typical characteristics of bureaucracy are: division of labour and specialisation, work distributed as official duties, hierarchy or offices with clearly defined areas of command and responsibility, formal body of rules to govern, written documents, impersonal relations, recruitment on the basis of merit, separation of private and official income, promotion and fixed salary.
- 3) Max Weber has talked about four types of social actions. These are as follows:
 - a) Rational Action with reference to Goal — e.g. the action of the collector who makes preparation for the coming election.
 - b) Rational Action with reference to value — e.g. the action of the soldier who risks his life for one's country.

Max Weber

- c) Affective Action — e.g. the abuses given by the bowler to the empire in a cricket match for not giving the batsperson out.
- d) Traditional Action — e.g. the action of taking bath by an individual after coming from the cremation ground.

