

# A Sociological Analysis on Max Weber's Methodology

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**Abstract-** It is during the classical period of sociology that a strong foundation was laid on its theoretical progress. During this particular period of time, Max Weber, an outstanding classical sociologist became an exception in introducing a sociological methodology, which can enhance the prospects of sociological studies. Following the evolution of the European society into the scientific stage, having based on two *Paradigms*, researches have been conducted by the scholars who have directed themselves for the supplantation of scientific knowledge for the functionality of the materialistic and socio-cultural worlds. Those two *Paradigms*, are known as 'Nomothetic Approach' and 'Idiographic Approach'. Most importantly, Max Weber, the above mentioned German classical sociologist could be considered as an exception, since the sociological methodology, introduced by him directly belongs to neither 'Nomothetic Approach' nor 'Idiographic Approach'. As such, this specific methodology, introduced by Weber for the realistic understanding of the human society is known as the Weberian sociological methodology.

Max Weber, having demonstrated his methodology has combined the techniques relevant to both 'Nomothetic Approach' and 'Idiographic Approach'. Most importantly, having based on the disciplines of 'history' and 'sociology', Weber has presented his own methodology of analyzing the society. This paper discussed as to how Weber has based on history and sociology in investigating the society as well as that of his way of investigation on the social phenomena. The analysis on this specific methodology is based on the facts derived through the academic secondary sources which include the analysis of classical theories of sociology. The explanation on Max Weber's methodology on the titles of 'Understand/Meaningful', 'Causality', 'Ideal Types' and 'Value-free – Judgment in Sociology' and as to how those titles could be used in understanding the social phenomena were also taken into account.

**Index Terms-** Paradigm, Causality, Ideal Types, Value Free – Judgment

## I. INTRODUCTION

During the classical era, Max Weber is considered as a reputed German classical sociologist who gave a pioneer contribution for the theoretical and methodological development of sociology. Max Weber was born to a middle class family in 'Erfurt', Germany, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 1864, in the nineteenth century, during the 'Bismarck' administration. He expired on the

14<sup>th</sup> of June 1920. It is understood that the system of attitudes corresponding to the capitalist socio-economic system which is a unique feature of Weber's sociological thinking is a result of the socialization, gained through his elite family background.

Weber's elite family background has influenced on the creation of his sociological vision being different from that of the visions of the other classical sociologists. By the time Weber lived in Germany, two basic paradigms which were needed to be addressed in the sociological studies, conducted in order to generate the scientific knowledge in understanding the real form of society were getting popular in Europe. 'Nomothetic Approach', based on the vision that the reality of socio cultural phenomena is decided according to a certain natural law which remains externally from the man is the first of them. This has been used on the basis of causality corresponding to the natural sciences. The creation of the reality of social phenomena takes place with the people's contribution and interference and as such it is able to build up a scientific knowledge by accurately understanding the meaning, given by the people to social phenomena is the second approach. This is introduced as the 'Idiographic Approach' which is considered to be used in investigating the empirical reality of social phenomena. It is clear that Weber's sociological methodology has directly inclined with none of these two specific *paradigms*. According to that having combined the above 'Objectivistic' and 'Subjectivist', the two *paradigms*, Weber has introduced a unique methodology for the investigation of social phenomena. Weberian sociological methodology, introduced by Weber which should be followed by the sociologist in the scientific study of social cultural phenomena is known as an 'Intermediate Approach'. Due to the presence of intermediary characteristics of the 'Nomothetic' and 'Ideographic' methodologies, it is introduced as an intermediate methodology. This paper is expected to review the Weber's sociological methodology which should be applied with the scientific interpretation of the society.

## II. HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY

It is required to inquire briefly the opinion of Max Weber on the relationship between history and sociology in order to understand his sociological methodology which was the basis for his sociological idealism. History was his most sought after subject even when Weber was a student and a young lawyer. Weber obtained his PhD from the University of Berlin, Germany, and his doctoral thesis on 'Medieval trade law significant for the

study on Roman agricultural law and logical history' being an analysis based on law and history is a testimony even for his initial interest in history. However, it is clear that he got mostly concerned with sociology towards the middle age of his academic life. 'Economy and society', the best master piece, authored by Weber in 1909, being based on an entirely sociological foundation demonstrates the considerable academic contributions done by him on the field of sociology. Towards the contemporary period of during which Weber lived, he had directed himself towards a new direction of 'sociology' which was established as a novel discipline in the Western European society. Weber has taken efforts to inquire deeply the relationship that sociology has got for the stability of the field history.

As per Weber, every field of study is indispensable for the other field of studies whereas an interrelationship with each other is also being visible. Therefore, he has emphasized that the role of sociology is the supply of essential service to the field of history. As noted by Weber, sociology performs a basic, moderate and perfect work for the society. Weber has also shown the difference between sociology and history. In that light it has been demonstrated that actions are taken by sociology for the formulation of models and concepts, associated with the practical process corresponding to social integration. It has been demonstrated that due to the inclination of sociology towards the causality analysis of the actions of people with different cultural significance and that of their structural circumstances. Even though, there involves a slight difference between these two specific subject disciplines, Weber has combined both these disciplines in his academic discussions. Likewise, Max Weber in all his sociological discussions has developed and presented the concepts which involve the causality analysis on historical socio-cultural phenomena. Under such circumstances, Max Weber is considered as a 'Historical Sociologist'. The intellectual arguments, erupted in Germany during the contemporary period of his life have had a direct impact on upliftment of his comprehensive sociological idealism. In this aspect, the intellectual arguments arose regarding the relationship between History and Science were the most significant.

Most importantly, according to the positivists, this specific intellectual argument prevailed between the concept which considers that even history could be considered as a natural science and the concept, upheld, by subjectivists where it is considered that history and natural sciences are two different disciplines of subjects. Having rejected both these two intellectual extremes, Weber developed a specific novel concept on history which has links with sociology. As per this particular novel concept of Weber, history is created as a consequence of the impact of specific empirical phenomena which cannot be generalized on an empirical level. Hence, Weber points out that the sociologists should conduct the studies by differentiating their *Heuristic Tools* from empirical world. Weber has emphasized that the concepts are not entirely able to grasp the empirical world and its activities but it is able to understand the actual reality of the empirical world by using heuristic tools. Accordingly, the sociologists are able to logically develop these concepts by generalizing them into the empirical reality. Weber further declares that history is not capable of this particular generalization but it should not be contradicted with the empirical reality.

While being significantly impressed by generalization, Weber refused the efforts taken by historians in narrowing history according to a simple rule of law. As such, Weber refuses the concept which involves in the fact that the historians comment that as per the general notion of law, the man and the human civilization go through several stages in sequence. Weber believes in the fact that the general notion of law which is used to mitigate the empirical reality is meaningless. Weber's this particular sociological concept is reflected in most of his historical studies. For instance, in his study on ancient civilizations, it has been demonstrated that it is not able to identify either a closed circular path or liner progression within a long and persistent medieval European history. Weber has defined that the entirely dormant phenomena related with ancient civilization may at times re-emerge in a new context.

Having shunned the traditional academic concepts on history, prevailed in Germany, Weber presented a two-dimensional model perspective which is unique to him. And these two dimensions, which should be taken into account with regard to Weber's sociological prospective on history, are known as 'Individuality' and 'Generality'. Weber shows that one particular specific conclusion is able to be reached, through the study of specific social or human activities by practically using the general concepts. Weber emphasis that these general concepts can be used in identifying the individualism relevant to all the novel social status while being able to interpret the same as well and by means of those characteristics it is able to arrive at a one single conclusion on the way of the difference of one social status from that of another. Weber shows that this process assists in getting the reasons, affecting with the differences of different social stages in history revealed. Weber, having done a causality analysis on history, Weber eventually refuses the conscientious idea where history is investigated with a single reason. In lieu of that, Weber has used his conceptual model for the categorization of different facts involving specific reasons unique to a certain historical phenomenon. As Weber's concept is declared in nutshell, history is created, as believed by Weber in an unending sequence of specific phenomena. He emphasizes for the study of different concepts, planned and developed to be used in a way where the realistic world can be investigated are necessary. Weber has mentioned that the enhancement of these concepts is the aim of sociology and the role of history should be the causality of analysis of its specific historical phenomena. It is clear that Weber has taken efforts to for develop a science which is able to investigate the nature of the complex social life by combining both 'specific' and 'general' two directions.

### III. VESTEHEEN: UNDERSTANDING

Weber's 'Understand/Meaningful' is another methodology, which could be taken into consideration for the study of human activities. Weber used the word '*Vestehen*' in order to introduce this sociological methodology. '*Vestehen*' is the word used in the German language which replaces the English word of '*understanding*'.

Weber's introduction of his sociological methodology as '*Vestehen*' shows that the sociologist should study the social activities in accordance with '*understanding*' methodology (Allen, 2004, p.72/ Ringer, 1997, p.92). Weber defines that

'understanding methodology' is an approach unique to sociology and due to that the advantage, given to the sociologist is relatively greater than that of the natural scientists in the research accomplishments. This shows the fact that Weber has declared that the sociologist has the ability of meaning full understanding of social phenomena and their activities in the social researches. However, Weber has shown that natural scientists do not have the ability of understanding the behavioral patterns of natural materialistic components, atomic particles or the chemical composition during the process of experimentation. The sociologist attempts to understand the reality of social phenomena by studying the behaviors and interactions of the people who dwell in a socio-cultural environment who have got feelings, emotions and perceptions which are similar to that of them. Weber mentions that the person whose activities and behaviors are studied by the sociologists has got a certain meaning on those activities which he does. But, the natural scientists study through the 'experiment' methodology about the behaviors and activities of the materialistic phenomena of the natural world which do not have emotions, feelings and perceptions. Therefore, it is not able to derive a meaning through these specific materialistic phenomena studied by the sociologists which do not have an ability of thinking. In order to understand the activities and realistic nature of the materialistic phenomena which do not have emotions, Weber suggests that research methodology, followed by natural scientists could be more suitable. Under these circumstances, Weber argues that the research methodology of the social sciences is not certainly reliable for the studies, conducted in order to accurately understand the activities and behaviors of the people who have emotions, feelings and perceptions, living in a socio-cultural environment.

Within the above discussed situation, Weber emphasizes that the sociologists, conducting the research in order to accurately understand the activities of the socio-cultural phenomena should use a specific methodology unique to them which is not involved with the methodology of natural sciences. Therefore Weber highlights that the sociologist is able to understand the human activities and behaviors which he studies by understanding the meaning of those activities, given by the studied actor in association with his sensitiveness Weber named and introduced this sociological methodology as 'Verstehen' or 'understanding'. Weber has used the term 'sympathetic introspection' in interpreting the central meaning of the sociological methodology. Weber has explained in 'sympathetic introspection' that in order to justify the accuracy of the interpretation of a meaning of a sociological phenomenon, it would be more beneficial to accurately understand the meaning given by the relevant actor himself according to his subjective imagination on the activity which he does. It is the method of understanding his activities and behaviors with the actor's meaning through a subjective approach is introduced as 'Subjectist Approach' which is used to study the sociological phenomena of the principals of social research.

#### IV. CAUSALITY

Max Weber's causality analysis is another identified approach of his sociological methodology. It is clear that Weber has given his major concern on the investigation of causality analysis of social phenomena, associated with history, more than

the sociological point of view. However, a considerable difference cannot be seen among those subjects in Weber's analysis, as sociology and history cannot be distanced from each other. This specific causality analysis is significant, since it reflects another aspect of Weber's theoretical point of view. This reveals a methodology which Weber followed in investigating social phenomena in which both 'Nomothetic Approach' and 'Idiographic Approach' which are combined together.

In interpreting the vision of causality analysis, an activity can be introduced as understanding of a phenomenon which initiates its actions with the influence of another activity. It is understood that Weber's point of view is different from many historians who get satisfied that the understanding of the repetition of certain actions, the clear comparison of them with each other and the simultaneous happening of actions is sufficient for the historical authenticity. For that matter Weber defines that as a researcher investigates a social activity or a phenomenon, the affected reasons for that as well as the meaningful significance of its historical changes should be investigated. Weber has identified 'Dialectical Model', presented by Karl Marx based on contradiction as a 'One-way Causal Model'. Weber was mostly into the investigation of economy, society, states, organization, religion, social strata and some more within sociology. Therefore, Weber directed his investigations in analyzing the influence, created by an interrelationship involving a large number of reasons through the investigation of 'Multicausal Approach'.

However, it is understood that some of Weber's sociological analysis are different from the above approach. The concept, presented by Weber on his study of 'Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism' clearly questions his causality analysis. The easiest argument leading to the questioning of Weber is the fact that protestant ethics are only one of the other casual factors contributed towards the modern capitalist development in Europe. But the argument, brought out by Weber's analysis is the fact that the influence of the reforms of Protestants was the only reason for the European capitalistic renaissance. But Weber does not argue in the fact that European capitalistic renaissance took place due to the influence of many other casual factors. Not only in this particular study but also in most of his theoretical analysis, this specific contradiction in causality analysis is seen.

However, it is clear that Weber was hugely influenced by 'Multicausal Approach' in understanding the social phenomena while leaving away the 'One-way Causal Model'. According to Weber's above declared idea on 'Understanding' the knowledge, presented through the causality analysis by social sciences on social phenomena is different from the knowledge developed through the causality analysis of natural sciences. Weber declares that by the valuation of the meaning and the value of the social activities which could be meaningfully interpreted by social sciences, it creates an easy platform in accurately understanding them. Due to this specific reason, Weber emphasizes that there involves a considerable uniqueness in the criteria taken for the causality analysis in social sciences of the historical prevalence of human activities. Therefore, Weber has further defined that the knowledge, developed through causality analysis in natural sciences differs from that of the same developed through the causality analysis of social sciences. Weber's idea on the causality analysis is considered as a pattern of thinking which can thoroughly grasp the conflict between nomothetic and idiographic

knowledge on social phenomena. Nomothetic point of view persuades for the argument on a necessary relationship among social phenomena, while subjectivist pattern of thinking giving prominence on the analysis of random relationships among social phenomena. But Weber has declared that the analysis on social phenomena should be done while remaining in a middle position of these two analytical thinking patterns and this specific analytical concept is considered as 'Adequate Causality'. Weber has shown that a better 'Probabilistic Statement' which is unique to social sciences on the relationships developing within social phenomena through this specific 'Adequate Causality' analysis.

## V. IDEAL TYPES

'Ideal types' could be introduced as a concept which came to the limelight with the combination of the philosophical thoughts of 'Platonism' of Plato, 'Historicism' of Wilhelm Dilthey and 'Kantian Metaphysics' of Immanuel Kant and also as a significant theoretical approach which got introduced to the sociological theory by the contribution of Max Weber. Weber has given a detailed description in his academic documents about the 'Ideal types', since he understood that by developing the methodological approach on the 'Ideal types', it was able to justify the productivity of his sociological analysis. Weber's initial detailed description on the methodological approach about ideal types was appeared in 'Objectivity', his academic essay, published in 1904 (Ringer, 2004, p. 101), where examples are available on the concept of synthetic construction as the most highlighted idea about the historical phenomena in the existing economic theory. It gives an ideal picture on the activities of a commodity market in an organized society based on an extremely logical administration where there involve independent competitive or exchange principals.

Through this conceptual framework, an imaginary harmonious system which includes the whole of relationships and activities within the historical way of life is established. Weber has demonstrated that it is able to reach at an analytical conclusion on the principals happening in the reality in accordance with the concept of 'Utopia' (Ebrahim and Moragn, 1985, p.176). Likewise, Weber defines that in studying and understanding the social phenomena and social activities happening within the actual realistic society, the sociologist should have a psychological imaginative ideal framework, initially built up on such activities. The sociologist should build up an 'imaginative ideal framework' on the best superior sequence in which the relevant social activity should happen by his understanding on the historical activities in the society or investigating the existing practical social activities. And this is introduced as the 'Ideal Types'. Likewise, Weber declares that it is able to analyse the social activities happening in the realistic society while being based on the 'Ideal Type' which the sociologist have got on a certain phenomenon. At that juncture, the sociologist attends to reach at a conclusion on the realistic framework of the society by measuring the degree of deviation of the practical reality from the 'superior framework of ideals'.

Weber in his analysis on 'Ideal Types' declares that Ideal Types could be considered as conceptual idea which could unanimously generate one or several ideas surrounded by conversations happening separately on the personalized phenomena which can be either rarely ignorant or more or less

scientific. Weber notes that even though 'Ideal Types', an integrated analytical structure designed with an unanimous emphasis on different visions is a psychological, logical and clean concept, it cannot be identified in its actual form through empirical social reality. The specialty in ideal types is the fact that it could be used as a self-investigating Heuristic Device which is quite useful in the empirical studies, done in order to understand a significant cross section of the social world. Therefore, as declared by Weber, the duty of the 'Ideal Types' should be the understanding of causality relationship of the actual social reality by analyzing the divergences or similarities between empirical reality and ideals in the comparison of empirical social reality with the superior psychological conceptual structure (Ringer, 2004, p. 102).

The use of 'Ideal Types' as a Heuristic Device, used in the study of the reality of the historical activities of the social phenomena as an example is given below. Initially a sociologist is able to build up an ideal model of the bureaucracy by being heavily concerned with the historical information on official governing system. Secondly, these ideal types are compared with the activities of the actual bureaucracy. Later on, the sociologist should analyse the degree of deviation and similarity between the bureaucracy and the ideal-typical bureaucracy involved with exaggeration while inquiring the reasons behind the deviations and the gaps.

The expected causes which may affect with the difference between the ideals of the officials systems and the practical reality may be as given below.

1. Utilizing the bureaucratic activities, enhanced by wrong information.
2. The wrong strategies practiced by the leaders of legal.
3. Getting the activities of leaders of legal and their followers mislead.
4. Formulating of legal policies based on emotions.
5. Dysfunction of the activities of leaders of legal and their followers.

In this way it is clear that a sociologist comparatively analyzes the present actual empirical reality of the social phenomena with the ideal involving with the best sequence of activity of the relevant phenomena, based on his conceptual interest associated with the information of an historical social phenomenon. In this aspect the superior sequence involved with ideals, used by the sociologist cannot be seen as it is in the actual social activity. Not been able to make a conceptual ideal as practical as it should be is the reason behind its mismatch. Hence, Weber declares that the sociologist, based on ideals in conducting his studies on social phenomena should reach at an accurate conclusion on the existing social reality by analyzing the difference between the ideals and the practicality as well as the types of causality affecting with such a difference.

However, Weber has defined that although ideals are in accordance with the conceptual interest of the sociologist, they may go in line with the practicality other than entirely getting deviated from the practical reality. The reason is the fact that ideals are build up through the logical imagination of the sociologist more than the whims or fancies perceived in the mind of the

sociologist. As per Weber's vision on ideal types, no overview theory, raised from the inferior deductively, based on the carefully interpreted concepts within an ideal is involved.

In lieu of that, it has been emphasis that there involved a structure consisting of logical concepts which derive from inductivity taken place through the reality of the historical social world. As Weber emphasis that ideal type is neither generalized concept, nor it is a specific approach, his sociological methodology is introduced as an 'intermediate approach' which has got the in-between characteristics both nomothetic and ideographic methodologies. Weber has identified that ideal types have been initially divided into different forms within the logical concept on ideal types, presented relevant to the social happenings (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004, p.206; Abraham & Morgan, 1985, p.176). The different forms of those ideal types have been given below;

1. Historical Ideal Types: The ideal types, related to the phenomena relevant to a specific period time in history are included in this type. (For instance: Protestant ethics, Capitalist Market )
2. General Sociological Ideal Types: The ideal types related to the phenomena identified for several historical periods of time. (For instance: bureaucracy)
3. Action Ideal Types: The ideal types, built based on the impressions of the person who does an activity. (For instance: affectual/emotional action)
4. Structural Ideal Types: The ideal types related with the casual analysis of the social activity. (For instance: The system of tradition dominance)

#### VI. VALUE FREE - JUDGMENT IN SOCIOLOGY

As per the sociological methodology of Max Weber, it is required to evaluate in nutshell the way in which the sociologist should act within the socio-cultural environment as he studies the human activities in the society. Weber has defined the way of approach of the sociologist who does scientific studies on the society with his introduction of 'value free Judgment in sociology'.

According to the academics who are bound by positivistic approach, the values which can logically interpret the meaning of human activities are known to be obstructing the achievement of their targeted goal. And also, as per the academics who depend on idealistic approach, values erode the scientific ability of a science which talk about human activities. But according to Weber it has been emphasized that the scientific authenticity of a study on human activities is ensured by the values.

But, according to Weber's meaning given to the 'value-free approach in sociology' which is used by him to introduce the methodological approach of sociology with regard to his vision, it is emphasis that the sociologist should conduct his studies deviating from the value analysis of the values which are bound by all of his deeply rooted cultural values, whenever he is involved with the studies about social activities. On the other hand, it is noted that '*Vestehen: Understanding/Meaningful*' or

'Sympathotic Introspection' which include Weber's sociological methodology emphasizes that there involves a certain meaning of any of activity which any person in the society does. Weber has shown that as a person gives a meaning through himself from an activity which he does, this specific meaning is generated, subjected to the values rooted in him while being in accordance with his socio-cultural environment. Accordingly, ideal values directly affect in giving an accurate and logical meaning to a human activity. There involves a dichotomous appearance in value free judgment in sociology and '*Vestehen: Understanding/Meaningful*'. According to the idea that the scientific ability of a study about human activities is eroded by values, it has been identified that since the sociologist is also a person who lives in the society, values are considered as an inalienable part and parcel of him. Therefore, it is demonstrated that the conclusions given by a sociologist following his study on human activities, may get influenced by the values by which he is bound. In that light Weber emphasis that the sociologist should be more logical in conducting his studies where as he is required to deviate temporary from the values by which he is deeply bound. It is also highlighted that the sociologist should declare his conclusions while deviating himself from his own value analysis, but by understanding the human activities in the spirit of the meaning, given to them by doers of the activities.

However, as argued by Weber, that among a vast of social facts and fields, the sociologist should select a specific social activity, phenomenon or a field, in conducting studies on the society. The sociologist is required to be in accordance with his social values in selecting a research proposition. As such, Weber highlights that an exact empirical analysis cannot be done on social phenomena or culture. Under the above circumstances, in Weber's methodology, the relationship between the sociologist and the values has been explained with reference to the relationship between 'value freedom' and 'value relevance'. As the sociologist does his studies on social phenomena called 'value free', he should be able to do his analysis while being free from his deeply rooted values. It is meant that as a sociologist selects a specific research proposition called the 'relevance to values' that specific selection is done according to his own system of values.

Weber has shown in his methodology that a clear and scientific guide is given to the empirical studies by this specific dichotomous relationship of the values within the process of socio-cultural studies. Another idea derived through this particular situation is the fact that the researcher should not be misled by approaching an illogical research proposition based on his values, but should be guided towards a clear path where the selected problem could be well addressed. A very good example taken from his another study bears testimony to this specific fact. The question 'How did Western Capitalism Begin?' on Weber's study on the raise of capitalism and protestant values is a research proposition which he selected in accordance with his values. In addition to that, it could also be highlighted that it is 'The Role of Protestantism' which is in accordance with weber's cultural background is the correct direction in order to approach with the study of this specific question (Allen, 2004, p. 75).

Weber's vision on 'value free sociological methodology' could be summarized as given below. Weber emphasizes that the sociologist who does studies on human activities and behaviors should be able to study and understand the social activities not

being bias by his own value analysis, but by being entirely deviated himself from those values. It is vehemently emphasized that the sociologist should temporary put aside his own values in his attempt of understanding the meanings given by the other people who are quite like him in the society about their behaviors and activities in order to reach at an accurate conclusion (Allen, 2004, p. 73). In that context, Weber believes in the fact that the sociologist is able to have an exact specific and realistic approach on the human activities.

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