

Discuss "verstehen" in the context of interpretive approach in social sciences. How the concept of verstehen shaped Max Weber's understanding to gain knowledge about society and social actors?

1) Introduction:-

Verstehen or interpretive understanding is a revolutionary concept introduced by Max Weber in sociological methodology, which posits seeking the subjective meaning or motive behind social actions. This concept sharply contrasts with positivistic approach of sociology. Weber, being the pioneer of this approach, strongly based his ideas on verstehen. His ideas about social actions and society in general deeply showcase his subjective understanding of the society.

2) The Approach of Verstehen:-

The word "verstehen" itself is of German origin and means "to understand". It refers to interpretive understanding in the lexicon of sociology. It is

a methodology of sociological research that stresses subjective understanding of social actions and society instead of empirical or objective research.

"The objective of verstehen is to interpret social action and understand it casually."
— Max Weber

3) Applying Verstehen in Social Sciences:

The approach of Verstehen in social sciences allow the social scientists to get a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. It focus not on objective facts and figures but on study of goals, objectives and motives behind the social realities.

a) Encouraging the Researcher into the Frame of Mind of the Subject:-

The aim of verstehen is to encourage the researcher to delve into the frame of mind of the subject i.e. to walk a mile in their shoes.

Verstehen

↓
Focus

Subjective
understanding
of social
action

↓

View of Society

using subjective
lens to see
goals, motives

↓

Example

Why people
protest?

b) Avoid Biases

Verstehen can be an incredible way in interpretive research to avoid biases. These researches are often in the form of empathetic interviews or case studies that allow researchers to see social realities ~~from~~ through the words or perspective of the subjects thus allowing them to avoid inbuilt biases.

c) ~~Studying~~ Social Action
in its natural habitat i.e. Society

The real habitat of social action is society and verstehen allows us to study this action in its very habitat

4) How Verstehen Shaped Weber's Understanding of Society :-

Throughout the work of Max Weber, we see a clear influence of verstehen. A glimpse of interpretive understanding is evident in every theory he has presented during the course of his career.

a) Topology of Social Action

His famous topology of social action focuses on categorizing action based on the subjective meanings that people attach to their behavior. He gives the following categories

i) Zwekrational: This is the 'instrumentally rational' action based on definitive goals and efficient means

ii) Wertrational:-

This action is based on

the inherent belief in the value of act

iii) Affective Action

This action is solely driven by emotions and feelings.

iv) Traditional Action

This form of action is inspired by longstanding customs.

b) Theory of Religion — Religion as Inspiring force behind Economic and Political Action

His work on Religion in his work "The Protestant Ethic & the Spirit of Capitalism" is another manifestation of his inspiration from verstehen. In this work he propounds that it was religion that motivated people to work for economic benefit eventually leading to rise of capitalism.

c) Theory of Ideal Types — Also a Subjective Construct to Study Action

Weber's idea of "Ideal types" is also inspired ~~not~~ from verstehen where he uses an ideal mental construct to measure the

reality. According to him, ideal types offers an idea that is "normatively desirable". ~~that~~ and can be used to measure social actions or realities.

In short we see that every one of his works is inspired by the idea of verstehen that aims not at calculating social statistics but studying social realities through subjective understanding.

Conclusion:-

Verstehen is a social idea that aims at interpretive understanding of social reality by looking at the motives of social actors and how they construct reality through their actions. The work of Max Weber demonstrates this idea by delving into the subjective reasoning of social actions and actors.