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## What Is Sociology? Comparing Sociology and the Social Sciences

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Introductory students often wrestle with the question of what sociology is. If you continue your sociological studies, however, that vagueness of definition—"Sociology is the study of society" or "Sociology is the study of social groups"—that frequently so bothers introductory students will come to be appreciated as one of sociology's strengths and one of its essential attractions. That sociology encompasses almost all human behavior is, indeed, precisely the appeal that draws many to sociology.

To help make clearer at the outset what sociology is, however, Henslin compares and contrasts sociology with the other social sciences. After examining similarities and differences in their approaches to understanding human behavior, he looks at how social scientists from these related academic disciplines would approach the study of juvenile delinquency.

### *Science and the Human Desire for Explanation*

HUMAN BEINGS ARE FASCINATED with the world in which they live, and they aspire to develop ways to explain their experiences. People appear to have always felt this fascination—along with the intense desire to unravel the world's mysteries—for people in ancient times also attempted to explain their worlds. Despite the severe limitations that confronted them, the ancients explored the natural or physical world, constructing explanations that satisfied them. They also developed an understanding of their social world, the world of people with all their activities and myriad ways of dealing with one another. The ancients, however, mixed magic and superstition to explain their observations.

Today, we are no less fascinated with the world within which we live out our lives. We also investigate both the mundane and the esoteric. We cast a quizzical eye at the common rocks we find embedded in the earth, as well as at some rare variety of insect found only in an almost inaccessible region of remote Tibet. We subject our contemporary world to the constant probings of the instruments and machines we have developed to extend our senses. In our

attempts to decipher our observations, we no longer are satisfied with traditional explanations of origins or of relationships. No longer do we unquestioningly accept explanations that earlier generations took for granted. Making observations with the aid of our new technology—such as electronic microscopes, satellites, and the latest generation of computers and software—we derive testable conclusions concerning the nature of our world.

As the ancients could only wish to do, we have been able to expand our objective study of the world beyond the confines of this planet. In our relentless pursuit after knowledge, we no longer are limited to speculation concerning the nature of the stars and planets. In the last couple of centuries the telescope has enabled us to make detailed and repetitive observations of the planets and other heavenly bodies. From these observations we have reached conclusions startlingly different from those which people traditionally drew concerning the relative place of the earth in our galaxy and the universe. In just the past few years, by means of space technology, we have been able to extend our senses, as it were, beyond anything we had before dreamed possible. We now are able to reach out by means of our spaceships, observational satellites, and space platforms to record data from other planets and—by means of computer-enhanced graphics—to gain a changing vision of our physical world. We have also been able to dig up and return to the earth samples of soil from the surface of the moon as well as to send probes to the radiation and magnetic belts of Jupiter, over a distance so great (or, we could say, with our technology still so limited) that they must travel eighteen months before they can send reports back to earth. Having discovered evidence of water and recent volcanic activity on Mars, we have begun to draw up plans to dig into its surface to find out if life exists on our “sister” planet.

A generation or so ago such feats existed only in the minds of “mad” scientists, who at that time seemed irrelevant to the public but whose ideas today are producing fascinating and frequently fearful consequences for our life on earth. Some of those scientists are giving serious thought to colonizing space, opening still another area of exciting exploration, but one whose consequences probably will be only inadequately anticipated. Others are drawing plans for real space wars, with potential outcomes so terrifying we can barely imagine them. For good and evil, science directly impinges on our contemporary life in society, leaving none of us unaffected.

### *The Natural and the Social Sciences*

In satisfying our basic curiosities about the world, we have developed two parallel sets of sciences, each identified by its distinct subject matter. The

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first is called the *natural sciences*, the intellectual-academic endeavors designed to comprehend, explain, and predict the events in our natural environment. The endeavors of the natural scientists are divided into specialized fields of research and are given names on the basis of their particular subject matter—such as biology, geology, chemistry, and physics. These fields of knowledge are further subdivided into even more highly specialized areas, each with a further narrowing of content—biology into botany and zoology, geology into mineralogy and geomorphology, chemistry into its organic and inorganic branches, and physics into biophysics and quantum mechanics. Each of these divisions, in turn, is subdivided into further specialized areas. Each specialized area of investigation examines a particular “slice” of the natural world.

In their pursuit of a more adequate understanding of their world, people have not limited themselves to investigating nature. They have also developed a second primary area of science that focuses on the social world. These, the *social sciences*, examine human relationships. Just as the natural sciences are an attempt to understand objectively the world of nature, so the social sciences are an attempt to understand objectively the social world. Just as the world of nature contains ordered (or lawful) relationships that are not obvious but must be abstracted from nature through controlled observations, so the ordered relationships of the human or social world are not obvious but must be abstracted by means of controlled and repeated observations.

Like the natural sciences, the social sciences also are divided into specialized fields based on their subject matter. The usual or typical divisions of the social sciences are anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, and sociology, with history sometimes included in the enumeration, depending primarily on the preference of the person drawing the list. To be inclusive, I shall count history as a social science.

Like the natural sciences, the social sciences also are divided into further specialized fields, with these branches being named on the basis of their particular focus. Anthropology is divided into cultural and physical anthropology, economics into its macro and micro specialties, history into ancient and modern, political science into theoretical and applied, psychology into clinical and experimental, while sociology has its quantitative and qualitative branches. Except for sociology, we shall not be concerned with these finer divisions.

### *Sociology Contrasted with the Other Social Sciences*

Since our focus is sociology, we shall take a brief look at each of the social sciences and contrast each with sociology. I should point out that the differences

I shall elaborate are not always so clear in actual practice, for much that social scientists do as they practice their crafts greatly blurs the distinctions I am making.

Let's begin with *history*, the social science focusing on past events. Historians attempt to unearth the facts surrounding some event that they feel is of social significance. They attempt to establish the context, or social milieu, of the event—the important people, ideas, institutions, social movements, or preceding events that in some way appear to have influenced the outcome they desire to explain. From this context, which they reconstruct from records of the past, they abstract what they consider to be the most important elements, or *variables*, that caused the event. By means of those “causal” factors or variables, historians “explain” the past.

*Political science* focuses on politics or government. The political scientist studies the ways people govern themselves—the various forms of government, their structures, and their relationships to other institutions of society. The political scientist is especially interested in how people attain ruling positions in their society, how they maintain those positions once they secure them, and the consequences of the activities of rulers for those who are governed. In studying a government that has a constitutional electorate, such as ours, the political scientist is especially concerned with voting behavior.

*Economics* is another discipline in the social sciences that concentrates on a single social institution. Economists study the production, distribution, and allocation of the material goods and services of a society. They want to know what goods are being produced at what rate at what cost, and the variables that determine who gets what. They are also interested in the choices that underlie production—for example, why with limited resources a certain item is being produced instead of another. Some economists, but not nearly enough in my judgment, also are interested in the consequences for human life of the facts of production, distribution, and allocation of goods and services.

The traditional focus of *anthropology* has been on tribal and peasant peoples. Although there are other emphases, the primary concern of anthropologists is to understand *culture*, the total way of life of a group of people. Culture includes (1) the artifacts people produce, such as their tools, art, and weapons; (2) the group's structure, that is, the hierarchy and other group patterns that determine people's relationships to their fellow members; (3) ideas and values, especially the belief system of a people, and their effects on people's lives; and (4) their forms of communication, especially their language. The anthropologists' traditional focus on past societies and contemporary tribal peoples has widened, and some anthropologists study groups in industrialized and post-industrialized settings. Anthropologists who focus on contemporary societies are practically indistinguishable from sociologists.

*Psychology* concentrates on processes occurring within the individual, within what they call the "skin-bound organism." The psychologist is primarily concerned with what is sometimes referred to as the "mind." Although still regularly used by the public, this term is used with reservation by some psychologists, probably, among other reasons, because no physical entity can be located that exactly corresponds to "mind." Psychologists typically study such phenomena as perception, attitudes, and values. They are also especially interested in personality, in mental aberration (or mental illness), and in how individuals cope with the problems they face.

*Sociology* is like history in that sociologists also attempt to establish the social contexts that influence people. Sociology is also similar to political science in that sociologists, too, study how people govern one another, especially the consequences for people's lives of various forms of government. Sociology is like economics in that sociologists also are highly interested in what happens to the goods and services of a society, especially the social consequences of production and distribution. Sociology is similar to anthropology in that sociologists also study culture and are particularly interested in the social consequences of material goods, group structure, and belief systems, as well as how people communicate with one another. Sociology is like psychology in that sociologists also study how people adjust to the problems and challenges they face in life.

With these overall similarities, then, where are the differences? Unlike historians, sociologists are primarily concerned with events in the present. Unlike political scientists and economists, sociologists do not concentrate on only a single social institution. Unlike anthropologists, sociologists primarily focus on contemporary societies. And unlike psychologists, to determine what influences people sociologists stress variables external to the individual.

### *The Example of Juvenile Delinquency*

Because all the social sciences focus on human behavior, they differ from one another not so much in the content of what each studies but, rather, in what the social scientists look for when they conduct their studies. It is basically their approaches, their orientations, or their emphases that differentiate the social sciences. Accordingly, to make clearer the differences between them, it might be helpful to look at how different social scientists might approach the same topic. We shall use juvenile delinquency as our example.

Historians interested in juvenile delinquency would examine juvenile delinquency in some particular past setting, such as New York City in the 1920s or Los Angeles in the 1950s. The historian would try to interpret the

delinquency by stressing the social context (or social milieu) of the period. For example, if delinquent gangs in New York City in the 1920s were the focus, historians might emphasize the social disruption caused by World War I; the problems of unassimilated, recently arrived ethnic groups; competition and rivalry for social standing among those ethnic groups; intergenerational conflict; the national, state, and local political and economic situation; and so on. The historian might also document the number of gangs, as well as their ethnic makeup. He or she would then produce a history of juvenile delinquency in New York City in the 1920s.

Political scientists are less likely to be interested in juvenile delinquency. But if they were, they would want to know how the existence of juvenile gangs is related to politics. For example, are the children of people who have less access to political decision making more likely to join gangs? Or political scientists might study the power structure within a particular gang by identifying its leaders and followers. They might then compare one gang with another, perhaps even drawing analogies with the political structure of some legitimate group.

Economists also are not likely to study delinquent gangs or juvenile delinquency. But if they did, they, of course, would emphasize the economic aspects of delinquency. They might determine how material goods, such as "loot," are allocated within a gang. But they would be more inclined to focus on delinquency in general, emphasizing the relationship of gangs to economic factors in the country. Economists might wish to examine the effects of economic conditions, such as booms and busts, on the formation of gangs or on the incidence or prevalence of delinquency. They might also wish to determine the cost of juvenile delinquency to the nation in terms of property stolen and destroyed and wages paid to police and social workers.

Anthropologists are likely to be highly interested in studying juvenile delinquency and the formation of juvenile gangs. If anthropologists were to study a particular gang, they might examine the implements of delinquency, such as tools used in car theft or in burglary. They would focus on the social organization of the gang, perhaps looking at its power structure. They would study the belief system of the group to see how it supports the group's delinquent activities. They would also concentrate on the ways in which group members communicate with one another, especially their *argot*, or special language. Anthropologists would stress the larger cultural context in order to see what it is about a culture, such as the ways in which it marks entry into manhood, that leads to the formation of such groups. They would compare their findings with what anthropologists have discovered about delinquency in other cultures. In making such a *cross-cultural comparison*, they probably would note that juvenile delinquency is not a universal phenomenon but is

largely a characteristic of industrialized and post-industrialized societies. They would point out that these societies require many years of formal education for their youth. This postpones the age at which young men and women are allowed to assume the role of adults, and it is during this "in-between status" that delinquency occurs. The emphasis given by anthropologists in such a study, then, would be true to their calling; that is, anthropologists would be focusing on culture.

Psychologists also have high interest in juvenile delinquency. When psychologists approach the subject, however, they tend to focus on what exists *within* the delinquent. They might test the assumption (or *hypothesis*) that, compared with their followers, gang leaders have more outgoing personality traits, or greater hostility and aggressiveness. Psychologists might also compare the personality traits of adolescent males who join gangs with boys from the same neighborhood or in the general population who do not become gang members. They might give a series of tests to determine whether gang members are more insecure, dominant, hostile, or aggressive than nonmembers.

Sociologists are also interested in most of the aspects emphasized by the other social scientists. Sociologists, however, ordinarily are not concerned with a particular gang from some past period, as historians might be, although they, too, try to identify the relevant social context. Sociologists focus on the power structure of gangs, as would political scientists, and they also are interested in certain aspects of property, as an economist might be. But sociologists would be more interested in the gang members' attitudes toward property, why delinquents feel it is legitimate to steal and vandalize, and how they divide up the property they steal.

Sociologists would also approach delinquency in a way quite similar to that of anthropologists and be interested in the same sorts of things. But sociologists would place strong emphasis on *social class* (which is based on occupation, income, and education). They would want to know if there is greater likelihood that a person will join a gang if his or her parents have little education, and how gang membership varies with income. If sociologists found that delinquency varies with education, age, sex, religion, income, or race-ethnicity, they would want to know the reasons for this. Do children of unskilled workers have a greater chance of becoming delinquent than the children of doctors and lawyers? If so, why?

The sociologists' emphases also separate them from psychologists. Sociologists are inclined to ignore personality, the primary focus of psychologists, and instead to stress the effects of social class on recruitment into delinquency. Sociologists also examine group structure and interaction. For example, both sociologists and psychologists would be interested in differences between a gang's leaders and followers. To discover these, however, sociologists are not

likely to give paper-and-pencil tests. They are much more likely to observe *face-to-face interaction* among gang members (what they do in each other's presence). Sociologists would want to see if leaders and followers uphold the group's values differently; who suggests their activities; and who does what when they do them—whether the activity be simply some form of recreation or a criminal act. For example, do leaders maintain their leadership by committing more acts of daring and bravery than their followers?

Compared with other social scientists, sociologists are more likely to emphasize the routine activities of the police, the courts, and changing norms. The police approach their job with preconceived ideas about who is likely to commit crimes and who is not. Their ideas are based on what they have experienced "on the streets," as well as on stereotypes nurtured within their occupation. The police typically view some people (usually lower-class males living in some particular area of the city) to be more apt to commit crimes than males from other areas of the city, males from a higher social class, or females in general. How do the police develop their ideas? How are such stereotypes supported in their occupational subculture? What effects do they have on the police and on those whom they encounter? In other words, sociologists are deeply interested in finding out how the police define people and how those definitions help to determine whom the police arrest.

Sociologists are also interested in what occurs following an arrest. Prosecutors wield much discretion. For the same act they can level a variety of charges. They can charge an individual with first degree burglary, second degree burglary, breaking and entering, or merely trespassing. Sociologists want to know how such decisions are made, as well as their effects on the lives of those charged with crimes. Sociologists also study what happens when an individual comes before a judge, especially the outcome of the trial by the type of offense and the sex, age, or race-ethnicity of the offender. They also focus on the effects of detention and incarceration, as well as how people adjust when they are released back into the community.

*Norms*, the behaviors that people expect of others, obviously change over time. What was considered proper behavior a generation ago is certainly not the same as what is considered proper today. Consequently, the law changes, and acts considered to be law violations at one time are not necessarily considered criminal at another time. Similarly, acts not now considered criminal may become law violations at a later date. For example, at one point in our history drinking alcohol in public at age sixteen was within the law in many communities, while today it would be an act of delinquency. In the same way, a person under sixteen who is on the streets after 10 P.M. unaccompanied by an adult is breaking the law in some communities. But if the law is changed or if the sixteen-year-old has a birthday or moves to a different community,



the same act is not a violation of the law. With marijuana, the case is similar. Millions of Americans break the law when they smoke grass, but for several years Alaska allowed possession of marijuana for personal use, a legal right later revoked.

Perhaps more than any of the other social scientists, the sociologist maintains a crucial interest in the effects of changing legal definitions in determining what people are arrested for and charged with. In effect, sociologists are interested in what juvenile delinquency is in the first place. They take the definition of delinquency not as obvious but as problematic, something to be studied in the context of lawmaking, lawbreaking, and the workaday world of the judicial system.

By means of this example of juvenile delinquency, it is easy to see that the social sciences greatly overlap one another. Sociology, however, is an *overarching* social science, because sociologists are, for the most part, interested in the same things that other social scientists are interested in. They are, however, not as limited in their scope or focus as are the others. Except for its traditional concerns with tribal societies, anthropology is similarly broad in its treatment of human behavior.

### *Types of Sociology: Structural and Interactional*

As sociologists study human behavior, they focus on people's *patterned* relationships; that is, sociologists study the recurring aspects of human behavior. This leads them to focus on two principal aspects of life in society: (1) *group membership* (including the *institutions* of society, the customary arrangements by which humans attempt to solve their perennial problems, such as the need for social order or dealing with sickness and death) and (2) *face-to-face interaction*, that is, what people do when they are in one another's presence. These twin foci lead to two principal forms of sociology, the structural and the interactional.

In the first type of sociology, *structural*, the focus is placed on the *group*. Structural sociologists are interested in determining how membership in a group, such as a religion, influences people's behavior and attitudes, such as how they vote, or perhaps how education affects the stand they take on social issues. For example, are there voting differences among Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Jews, Baptists, and charismatics? If so, on what issues? And within the same religion, do people's voting patterns differ according to their income and education?

Also of interest to sociologists who focus on group memberships would be how people's attitudes toward social issues (or their voting) differ according to their age, sex, occupation, race or ethnicity, or even geographical residence—

both by region of the country and by urban or rural setting. As you probably have gathered, the term “group” is being used in an extended sense. People do not have to belong to an actual group to be counted; sociologists simply “group” together people who have similar characteristics, such as age, height, weight, education, or, if it is thought relevant, even those who take their vacations in the winter versus those who take them during the summer. These are known as *aggregates*, people grouped together for the purpose of social research because of characteristics they have in common.

Note that sociologists with this first orientation concentrate on how group memberships affect people’s attitudes and behavior. Ordinarily they do not simply want to know the proportion of Roman Catholics who vote Democratic (or, in sociological jargon, “the correlation between religious-group membership and voting behavior”) but may try to determine what difference being a Roman Catholic makes in people’s dating practices, in premarital sex, in birth control, in abortion, in what they do for recreation, or in how they treat their spouses and rear their children.

In the second type of sociology, the *interactional*, greater emphasis is placed on individuals. Some sociologists with this orientation focus on what people do when they are in the presence of one another. They directly observe their behavior, recording the interaction by taking notes or by using tape, video, or film. Other sociologists tap people’s attitudes and behaviors more indirectly by interviewing them. Still others examine social records—from diaries and letters to court transcripts, even memorabilia of pop culture from *Playboy* and *Playgirl* to science fiction and comic books. They may systematically observe soap operas, children’s cartoons, police dramas, situation comedies, or MTV. Sociologists who focus on interaction develop ways of classifying the *data*—what they have observed, read, recorded, or been told. From their direct and indirect observations of people, they draw conclusions about their attitudes and what significantly affects their lives.

### *Types of Sociology: Qualitative and Quantitative*

Another important division among sociologists is based on the *methods* they use to study people. Some sociologists are statistically oriented, attempting to determine *numbers* to represent people’s patterns of behavior. They stress that proper measurement by the use of statistical techniques is necessary if one is to understand human behavior. Many refer to this emphasis as *quantitative* sociology.

A group of sociologists who strongly disagree with this position concentrate instead on the *meaning* of what is happening to people. They focus on

how people construct their worlds, how they develop their ideas and attitudes, and how they communicate with one another. They attempt to determine how people's meanings (called symbols, mental constructs, ideas, and stereotypes) affect their ideas about the self and their relationships to one another. Many refer to this emphasis as *qualitative* sociology.

### *Conclusion*

From chicken to sociology, there are many ways of dividing up anything in life. And just as those most familiar with chicken may disagree about the proper way of cutting up a chicken, so those most familiar with sociology will disagree about how to slice up sociology. From my experiences, however, the divisions I have presented here appear to reflect accurately what is taking place in sociology today. Inevitably, however, other sociologists would disagree with this classification and probably would present another way of looking at our discipline. Nonetheless, I think you will find this presentation helpful for visualizing sociology.

It is similarly the case when it comes to evaluating the divisions within sociology. These are *not* neutral matters for sociologists. For example, almost all sociologists *feel strongly* about whether a qualitative or quantitative approach is the *proper* way to study human behavior.

Certainly my own biases strongly favor qualitative sociology. For me, there simply is no contest. I see qualitative sociology as more accurately reflecting people's lives, as being more closely tied into the realities that people experience—how they make sense of their worlds, how they cope with their problems, and how they try to maintain some semblance of order in their lives. Because I find this approach fascinatingly worthwhile, the qualitative approach is stressed in this book. You should note, however, that many sociologists find the quantitative approach to be the most rewarding way to study social life.

Wherever and whenever people come into one another's presence, there are potential data for the sociologist. Sunday School and the bar, the street and the classroom—even the bedroom—all provide material for sociologists to observe and analyze. Nothing is really taboo for them. Sociologists regularly raise questions about most aspects of social life. Simply overhearing an ordinary conversation—or catching a glimpse of some unusual happening—is enough to whet the curiosity of many sociologists. In following that curiosity, they can simply continue to “overhear” conversations, but this time purposely, or they can conduct an elaborate study with a scientifically selected random sample backed by huge fundings from some agency. What sociologists study

can be as socially significant as an urban riot or as common but personally significant as two people greeting with a handshake or parting with a kiss.

In this sense, then, the world belongs to the sociologist—for to the sociologist everything is fair game. The all-inclusiveness of sociology, indeed, is what makes sociology so intrinsically fascinating for many: Sociology offers a framework that provides a penetrating perspective on almost everything that we do in life.

Some of you who are being introduced to sociology through this essay may find the sociological approach to understanding human life rewarding enough to take other courses in sociology and, after college, to be attracted to books of sociological content. A few, perhaps, may even make sociology your life's vocation and thus embark on a lifelong journey that takes you to the far corners of human endeavor, as well as to people's more familiar pursuits. Certainly some of us, already captivated by sociology's enchantment, have experienced an unfolding panorama of intellectual delight in the midst of an intriguing exploration of the social world. And, in this enticing process, we have the added pleasure of constantly discovering and rediscovering our changing selves.