

→ What Is a Social Institution?

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The university, then, is more than just a printing press that churns out diplomas, and, for that matter, it does not merely impart formal knowledge. It fulfills a variety of roles and provides links to many other societal institutions. For example, a college is an institution that acts as a gatekeeper to what are considered legitimate forms of educational advantage by certifying what is legitimate knowledge. It is an institution that segregates great swaths of the population by age. (You won't find a more age-segregated environment than a four-year college; it even beats a retirement home in having the smallest amount of age variation in its client population.) A college is a proprietary brand that is marketed on sweatshirts and mugs and through televised sporting events. Last but not least, it is an informal set of stories told within a social network of students, faculty, administrators, alumni, and other relevant individuals.

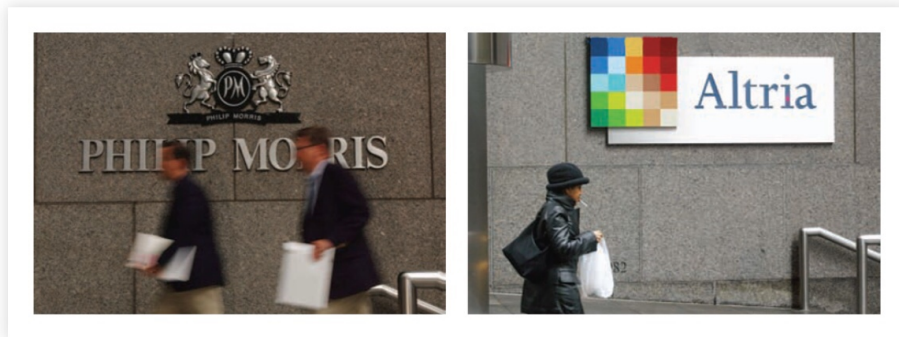
This last part of the definition is key to understanding one of sociology's most important concepts, the social institution. A **social institution** is a complex group of interdependent positions that, together, perform a social role and reproduce themselves over time. A way to think of these social positions is as a set of stories we tell ourselves; social relations are a network of ties; and the social role is a grand narrative that unifies these stories within the network. In order to think sociologically about social institutions, you need to think of them not as monolithic, uniform, stable entities—things that “just are”—but as institutions constructed within a dense network of other social institutions and meanings. Sound confusing? Bear with me as I provide an example: I teach at New York University, or NYU. What exactly is the social institution known as NYU? It is not the collection of buildings I frequent. It certainly cannot be the people who work there, or even the students, because they change over time, shifting in and out through recruitment and retirement, admission and graduation. We might thus conclude that a social institution is just a name. However, an institution can change its name and still retain its social identity. Duke University was once called Normal College and then Trinity College, yet it remains the same institution.

Of course, all such transitions involving a change of name, location, mission, and so on require a great deal of effort and agreement among interested parties. In some cases, changes in personnel, function, or location

may be too much for a social institution to sustain, causing it to die out and be replaced by something that is considered new. Sometimes institutions even try to rupture their identity intentionally. Tobacco company Philip Morris had received such bad press as a cigarette manufacturer for so long that it changed its name to Altria, hoping to start fresh and shake off the negative connotations of its previous embodiment. For that effort to succeed, the narrative of Philip Morris circulating in social networks had to die out without being connected to Altria.

This grand narrative that constitutes social identity is nothing more than the sum of individual stories told between pairs of individuals. Think about your relationship to your parents. You have a particular story that you tell if asked to describe your relationship with your mother. She also has a story. Your story may change slightly, depending on whom you are talking to; you may add some details or leave out others. Your other relatives have stories about your mother and her relationship to you. So do her friends and yours. Anyone who knows her contributes to her social identity. The sum total of stories about your mom is the grand narrative of who she is.

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Tobacco company Philip Morris changed its name to Altria at a stockholders' meeting in January 2003.

All of this may seem like a fairly flimsy notion of how things operate in the social world, but even though any social identity boils down to a set of stories within a social network, that narrative is still hearty and robust. Imagine what it would take to change an identity. Let's say your mom is 50 years old. You want to make her 40 instead. You would not only have to convince her to refer constantly to herself as ten years younger; you would also have to get your other relatives and her friends to abide by this change.

And it wouldn't stop there. You'd have to change official documents as well –her driver's license, passport, and so on. This is not so easily done. Even though your mother's identity (in this case her age, although the same logic can be extended to her name, ethnicity, and many other aspects of her identity) could be described as nothing more than an understanding between her, everyone who knows her, and the formal authorities, the matter is a fairly complicated one. If that sounds hard, just think about trying to change the identity of a major institution such as your university. You'd have to convince the board of directors, alumni, faculty, students, and everyone else who has a relationship to the school of the need for a change. Altering an identity is fairly difficult, even though it is ultimately nothing more than an idea.

I mentioned that if you wanted to change your mother's age, name, or race, you'd have to convince not only her friends but also the formal authorities, which are social institutions with their own logics and inertias. Let's take the example of college once again. Other than the informal ties of people who have a relationship to the grand narrative of a particular college, a number of social structures exist that make colleges, which are themselves made up of a series of stories within social networks, possible:

1. The *legal system* enforces copyright law, making fake diplomas illegitimate.
 2. The *primary and secondary educational system* (i.e., K-12 schooling) prepares students both academically and culturally for college, as well as acting as an extended screening and sorting mechanism to help determine who goes to college and to which one.
 3. The *Educational Testing Service* and *ACT* are private companies that have a duopoly on the standardized tests that screen for college admission.
 4. The *wage labor market* encompasses the entire economy that allows your teacher to be paid, not to mention the administrators, staff, and other outside contractors who maintain the intellectual, fiscal, and physical infrastructure of the school you attend.
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5. *English*, although not the official language of the United States (there isn't one!), is the language in which instruction takes place at the majority of U.S. colleges. Language itself is a social phenomenon; some would argue that it is the basis for all of social life. But a given language is a particular outcome of political boundaries and historical struggles among various populations in the world. It is often said the only difference between a language and a dialect is that a language has an army to back it up. In other words, deciding whether a spoken tongue is a language or merely a dialect is a question of power and legitimacy.

Trying to understand social institutions such as the legal system, the labor market, or language itself is at the heart of sociological inquiry. Although social institutions shape every aspect of our behavior, they are not monolithic. In fact, every day we construct and change social institutions through ordinary interactions and the meanings we ascribe to them. By becoming aware of the intersections between social institutions and your life, you are already thinking like a sociologist.

→ Sociology and Its Cousins

We have already noted that a sociology of sports exists, as can a sociology of music, of organizations, of economies, of science, and even of sociology itself. What then, if anything, distinguishes sociology from other disciplines? Certainly overlap with other fields does occur, but at the same time, there is something distinctive about sociology as a discipline that transcends the sociological imagination discussed earlier. All of sociology boils down to comparisons across cases of some form or another, and perhaps the best way to conceptualize its role in the landscape of knowledge is to compare it with other fields.

History

Let's start with history. History is concerned with the *idiographic* (from the Greek *idio*, "unique," and *graphic*, "depicting"), meaning that historians, at least traditionally, have been concerned with explaining unique cases. Why did Adolf Hitler rise to power? What conditions led to the Haitian slave revolt 200 years ago (the first such rebellion against European chattel slavery)? How did the Counter-Reformation affect the practices of lay Catholics in France? What was the impact of the railroad on civilization's sense of time? How did adolescence arise as a meaningful stage of life? Historians' research questions center on the notion that by understanding the particularity of certain past events, individual people, or intellectual concepts, we can better understand the world in which we live.

Sometimes historians use comparative frameworks to situate their analysis—for example, comparing Hitler's rise and Mussolini's to examine why the Third Reich pursued a genocidal agenda, whereas the Italian fascists had no such agenda and, in fact, somewhat resisted cooperating with Germany's deportation of Jews. Another strategy historians often use, although it is sometimes frowned on, is the notion of the counterfactual: What would have happened had Hitler been killed rather than wounded in World War I? Would World War II have been inevitable even if the victors in World War I had not pursued such a punitive reparations policy after defeating Germany?



Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (on the left) and Nazi leader Adolf Hitler at a 1937 rally in Munich. How do different disciplines provide various tools to analyze the rise of fascism under these leaders?

The preceding description is, of course, an oversimplification of a diverse field. History runs the gamut from “great man” theories (a focus on figures like Hitler) to people’s histories (a focus on the lives of anonymous, disempowered people in various epochs, or on groups traditionally given short shrift in historical scholarship, such as women, African Americans, and subaltern colonials) to historiography (in essence, metahistory examining the intellectual assumptions and constraints on knowledge entailed by the subjects and methods historians choose) in which historians rely on archival material and primary resources.

Sociology, by contrast, is generally not concerned with the uniqueness of phenomena but rather with commonalities that can be abstracted across cases. Whereas the unique case is the staple of the historian, the comparative method is the staple of sociologists. Historical comparative sociologist Julia Adams explained what makes her work different from what a historian would do: “If you define the difference according to whether one is engaged in primary archival research or not, I would . . . also be an historian as well as a sociologist,” but the big difference is that, historical sociologists are “consciously theoretical” and “very keen to explain and illuminate” historical patterns (Conley 2013a). Whether looking at contemporary American life, the formation of city-states in medieval Europe, or the origins of unequal economic development thousands of years ago, sociologists formulate hypotheses and theorems about how social life works or worked.



To see my interview with Julia Adams, go to wnpag.es/SC1a.

Instead of inquiring why Hitler rose to power, the sociologist might ask what common element allowed fascism to arise during the early to mid-twentieth century in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan and not in other countries such as France, Great Britain, or the Scandinavian nations. Of course, sociologists recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all hypothesis that will explain all these cases perfectly, but the exercise of considering competing explanations is illuminating in and of itself. Instead of asking what specific conditions led to the Haitian slave revolt in 1791, the sociologist might ask under what general conditions uprisings have occurred among indentured populations. Instead of asking how the Counter-Reformation affected the practices of lay Catholics in one region of Europe, the sociologist might ask what aspects of the conditions in various regions of Europe made the reaction to the Catholic Church's reforms different. This is a subtle but important difference in focus. Instead of examining the impact of the railroad on our sense of time, the sociologist might compare the railroad to other forms of transportation that both collapsed distances and opened up the possibility of more frequent and longer migrations. And finally, instead of asking how adolescence arose as a meaningful stage of life, the sociologist might compare various societies that have distinct roles for individuals ages 13 to 20 to examine how those labor markets, educational systems, family arrangements, life expectancies, and so on lead to different experiences for that age group.



How does anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll's research on slot-machine gamblers challenge the traditional boundaries between anthropology and sociology?

Whether sociologists are comparing two tribes that died out 400 years ago, two countries today, siblings within the same family, or even changes in the same person over the course of his or her life, they are always seeking a variation in some outcome that can be explained by variation in some input. This holds true, I would argue, whether the methods are interviews, research using historical archives, community-based observation studies of participants, or statistical analyses of data from the U.S. census. Sociologists are always at least implicitly drawing comparisons to identify abstractable patterns.

Anthropology

The field of anthropology is split between physical anthropologists, who resemble biologists more than sociologists, and cultural anthropologists, who study human relations similarly to the way sociologists do. Traditionally, the distinction was that sociologists studied “us” (Western society and culture), whereas anthropologists studied “them” (other societies or cultures). This distinction was helpful in the early to mid-twentieth century, when anthropologist Margaret Mead studied rites of passage in Samoa and sociologists interviewed Chicago residents, but it is less salient today. Sociologists increasingly study non-Western social relations, and anthropologists do not hesitate to tackle domestic social issues.

Take two recent examples that confound this division from either side of the metaphorical aisle: Caitlin Zaloom is a cultural anthropologist whose “tribe” (she likes to joke) is the group of commodities traders who work on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. Natasha Dow Schiill, another anthropologist, has studied gamblers in Las Vegas and how they lose themselves and their money in the machine zone. Meanwhile, recent sociological scholarship includes Stephen Morgan’s study of African status attainment and patronage relations. Another project, spearheaded by business-school professor Doug Guthrie in 2006, investigated the way informal social connections facilitate business in China. Given the era of globalization we have entered, it is appropriate that division on the basis of “us” and “them” has diminished. Many scholars now question the legitimacy of such a division in the first place, asking whether it served a colonial agenda of dividing up the world and reproducing social relations of domination and exclusion—accomplishing on the intellectual front what European imperialism did on the military, political, and economic fronts.

What then distinguishes sociology from cultural anthropology? Nothing, some would argue. However, although certain aspects of sociology are almost indistinguishable from those of cultural anthropology, sociology as a whole has a wider array of methods to answer questions, such as experimentation and statistical data analysis. Sociology also tends more toward comparative case study, whereas anthropology is more like history in its focus on particular circumstances. This does not necessarily imply that sociology is superior; a wider range of methods can be a weakness as well as a strength, because it can lead to irreconcilable differences within the field. For example, demographic and ethnographic studies of the family may employ different definitions of what a household is. This makes meaningful dialogue between the two subfields challenging.

The Psychological and Biological Sciences

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Social, developmental, and cognitive psychology often address many of the same questions that sociologists do: How do people react to stereotypes? What explains racial differences in educational performance? How do individuals respond to authority in various circumstances? Ultimately, however, psychologists focus on the individual, whereas sociologists focus on the supra-individual (above or beyond the individual) level. In other words, psychologists focus on the individual to explain the phenomenon under consideration, examining how urges, drives, instincts, and the mind can account for human behavior, whereas sociologists examine group-level dynamics and social structures.

Biology, especially evolutionary biology, increasingly attempts to explain phenomena that once would have seemed the exclusive dominion of social scientists. There are now biological (evolutionary) theories of many aspects of gender relations—even rape and high-heeled shoes (Posner, 1992). Medical science has claimed to identify genes that explain some aspects of social behavior, such as aggressiveness, shyness, and even thrill seeking. Increasingly, social differences have been medicalized through diagnoses such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and the autistic spectrum of diseases. The distinction between these areas of biology and the social sciences lies not so much in the topic of study (or even the scientific methods in some cases), but rather in the underlying variation or causal mechanisms with which the disciplines are concerned. Sociology addresses supra-individual-level dynamics that affect our behavior, psychology addresses individual-level dynamics, and biology typically deals with the intra-individual-level factors (those within the individual) that affect our lives, such as biochemistry, genetic makeup, and cellular activity. So if a group of biologists attempted to explain differences in culture across continents, they would typically analyze something like local ecological effects or the distribution of genes across subpopulations.

Economics and Political Science

The quantitative side of sociology shares many methodological and substantive features with economics and political science. Economics traditionally has focused on market exchange relations (or, simply, money). More recently, however, economics has expanded to include social realms such as culture, religion, and the family—the traditional stomping ground of sociologists. What distinguishes economics from sociology in these contexts is the underlying view of human behavior. Economics assumes that people are rational utility maximizers: They are out to get the best deal for themselves. Sociology, on the other hand, has a more open view of human motivation that includes selfishness, altruism, and simple irrationality. (New branches of economics are moving, however, into the realm of the irrational.) Another difference is methodological: Economics is a fundamentally quantitative discipline, meaning that it is based on numerical data.

Similarly, political science is almost a subsector of sociology that focuses on only one aspect of social relations—power. Of course, power relations take many forms. Political scientists study state relations, legal structure, and the nature of civic life. Like sociologists, political scientists deploy a variety of methods, ranging from historical case studies to abstract statistical models. Increasingly, political science has adopted the rational actor model implicit in economics in an attempt to explain everything from how lobbyists influence legislators to the recruitment of suicide bombers by terrorist groups.

Having explained all of these distinctions, we should keep in mind that disciplinary boundaries are in a constant state of flux. For example, Stanford English professor Franco Moretti argues that books should be counted, mapped, and graphed. In his research, Moretti statistically analyzes thousands of books by thematic and linguistic patterns. Economist Steven Levitt has explored how teachers teach to the test (and sometimes cheat) and how stereotypically African American names may or may not disadvantage their holders. Historian Zvi Ben-Dor Benite has assembled a global, comparative history of how different societies execute criminals. It all sounds like sociology to me! For now, let's just say that significant overlap exists between various arenas of scholarship, so that any divisions are simultaneously meaningful and arbitrary.