



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

ALLISON L. HURST

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY
CORVALLIS, OR



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology by Allison Hurst is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/), except where otherwise noted.

Download for free at <https://open.oregonstate.edu/sociologicaltheory>

Publication and on-going maintenance of this textbook is possible due to grant support from [Oregon State University Ecampus](https://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/).

[Suggest a correction](#)

Contents

Part I. Weber

1. Methodological Foundations of Sociology (1921) 9

PART III
WEBER

I. Methodological Foundations of Sociology (1921)

“To explain, we must first understand.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from the posthumous 1921 collection of essays, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, first translated into English by Talcott Parsons in 1947 as *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*. It was later translated by Eric Mathews and published, along with other pieces on sociological method, as “The Nature of Social Action” in Runciman’s *Weber: Selections in Translation* (1978). The passage here is a loose translation of the original German, condensed for easier reading. A more exact and complete translation can be found in Runciman.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Weber belonged to the generation, along with Durkheim, that championed and defined the new discipline of sociology. It is thus useful to compare Weber’s definitions of sociology with Durkheim’s. Although they share a general interest in understanding and analyzing “society,” the way they set up doing so is quite different. For Weber, an empathetic understanding of the meanings human actors bring to their interactions with one another was key, as the following passage explains.

Methodological Foundations of Sociology (in 11 Points)

Sociology, in the sense we adopt here, is a science that interprets the meaning of social action and through that interpretation clarifies the causal procedures and effects of those actions. Actions here are those acts, whether active, refraining from action, or allowing actions to take place, when and only when done with subjective intent. They are “social” actions when they involve the subjective intentions relative to another person’s actions and when that social relation orients the action.

Point 1. Meanings are Empirically Situated

The meaning may either refer to the meaning of a particular individual on a particular occasion or as an average meaning in a given set of cases or even a typical meaning attributed in the abstract (e.g., “capitalists replace workers with machinery with the intention of increasing profits”). It does not signify

that the intended meaning is true or correct. Herein lies the difference between the empirical sciences of sociology (and history) and disciplines such as jurisprudence, logic, ethics, or aesthetics that seek the “correct” rule or meaning from their objects of study.

Point 2. We cannot always find the intentions of the actors; the line between intentional and reactive behavior is blurred

There is not a sharp line between meaningful action and reactive action, actions for which actors do not intend a meaning. A great deal of interesting and important behavior for the sociologist to study, especially when we talk about traditional actions, lies between intentional and reactive action. In some cases, such as mystical experiences, we cannot hope to understand the meanings of the action because the actors do not understand the actions themselves. It is often necessary to separate out those aspects which can be understood from those elements which cannot.

Point 3. The goal of interpretation is to generate evidence about the world, and we can do this both rationally and empathetically

The goal of all our interpretations is to find evidence. This evidence can take a rational or an empathetic form. Rational evidence is obtained in the case of actions in which the intended meanings can be intellectually understood wholly and clearly. Empathetic evidence is obtained when actions and their attendant feelings and lived experience are completely relived in the sociological imagination. For the first, every interpretation of a rationally directed purposive action, is quite clearly evidence.

we can say with some assurance that introduction of machinery operates to increase the profits of capitalists.

But even of the second, we can learn almost as much about the world from this empathetic understanding. For example, we can try to relive empathetically actions of extreme religious devotion, even as they go against our own beliefs. We can gain some understanding of the intended meanings through empathy, allowing for the influence of various emotions (anxiety, anger, ambition, envy, jealousy, love, pride, lust, etc.) on the course of the action and the means used to perform the action. It is even possible to understand many irrational and emotional actions as deviations from pure types of action that would happen if everything proceeded in a rationally purposive way.

For example, capitalists in a panic when the stock market crashes may sell their machinery even though such may reduce their profits in the long run.

Point 4. Meaningless actions are still important insofar they impact social actions

Operations and actions which are meaningless must still be taken into account if they cause or are caused by, promote or place obstacles in the way of, social actions. Even inanimate objects, such as machines, can have meanings related to their use by humans in social interactions. The flooding of a river may be a natural occurrence, but the way humans respond (for example, by moving away from areas likely to flood) is an important object of sociological study. Or take the way we deal with death, and entire cycle of life, from infancy to old age. In all cases, the sociologists' task is to interpret the meanings humans give to their actions and by doing so to understand the actions themselves.

Point 5. Sociological understanding is explanatory

Understanding can mean two things. In the first, direct understanding, we comprehend the meaning an actor gives. For example, we understand an outburst of anger, seeing evidence of it in a red face or exclamation. We can directly understand the action of aiming a gun. But understanding can be more than direct; it can be explanatory. We understand something aiming a gun not merely directly but also more deeply in terms of motive, if we know other facts about why the person is aiming the gun. If he has been ordered to do so in battle, for example, that is a rational motive; on the other hand, if he is aiming at someone out of fear, this is an irrational motive. To understand sociologically means to grasp the complex of meanings surrounding the specific observed action.

Point 6. Sociological understanding is hypothetical

The goal of every interpretation is the creation of evident facts about the world.

For example, in times of panic, capitalists often take actions that harm their profitability in the long run; in normal times, however, they seek to increase profits, and one way they may do this is by replacing workers with machinery.

But all of our interpretations are *hypotheses* about the world. We cannot know for sure if our interpretation is correct. As with all hypotheses, it is crucial to have some way of checking our interpretation. The best way to do this would be by experiment, using the scientific method. Statistical methods can give some approximate results, but only in cases that are measurable in which numerical relationships are possible to establish. Apart from these methods, then, the best option is to compare as many events as possible, keeping as many things similar as possible and investigating one particular point, motive or cause.

Point 7. Motives of actions are crucial to sociological interpretation because they are related to causality

A motive is a set of meanings which prompts the actor to act in a certain way (either from her perspective, or the sociological observer's perspective). To give a correct causal interpretation of a particular act is to see the action and the motive for the action as related to each other in a way whose meaning can be understood. Sociological laws only exist where statistical generalization fit our interpretation of the intended meaning of a social action. Sociology proceeds by constructing models of intelligible action which apply to real-world situations. Note the difference between meaningless and meaningful (hence, sociological) statistics. Death rates, or the output of machinery are examples of the former. Crime rates and occupational distributions are examples of the latter.

Point 8. Meaningless actions are not unimportant, but they are not sociological facts

Certain facts of life, such as *birth and death or the flooding of a river*, do not count as sociological because they lack the meaningfulness derived from motives described above. This does not mean they are less important, however. But they do operate in an area distinct from that of meaningful social action. They are conditions of action, or obstacles to action, or promoters of action, but not social actions themselves.

Point 9. Individuals, and individuals alone, are the intelligible performers of meaningful actions

Action for our purposes must refer only to the behavior of one or more individuals. Other disciplines may refer to states or whole societies as individual cases and actors, but from the standpoint of sociological understanding of the meaning of actions we must see these systems as the outcomes of interactions between individuals. For the sociologist, individual human beings are the only intelligible performers of meaningful

actions. When a sociologist does speak of something like “the state” or “the family” or any other collectivity, she means a structured outcome of the social actions of individuals, either in actual reality or ideally constructed.

This way of proceeding is quite different from the “organic sociology” proposed by others. In this view, the sociologist is like a natural scientist who examines individuals as so many cells in the body of society. The methods of sociology we present here are quite different. The sociologist does not work like a biologist, who observes organisms at the cellular level. A biologist may observe cells and make inferences about the way they operate in functional terms (e.g. *the spleen filters blood*), but the biologist cannot interpret the action of the cells involved in the spleen. In contrast, the sociologist can understand the behavior of the individuals involved in a way that simply cannot be done by natural scientists. This interpretation comes with a cost, however. Our interpretations of the social actions of individuals are by nature more hypothetical and partial than those of direct observation of action/function. But this is exactly what sets sociology apart from the natural sciences.

Point 10. Sociology is distinct from psychology

Sociological laws are but theories generated by interpretative sociology. They are observationally verified statements of the likelihood of an expectation of a certain outcome from a particular social action. Sociological laws are most intelligible when the outcome results from a rational pursuit of a clear goal and when the means-end context is clear.

e.g., *capitalists are constantly seeking to replace workers with machinery to enable higher profits.*

Psychology would add nothing to our sociological interpretation here. When a capitalist deliberates in a rational way whether his profits would increase by replacing workers with machinery, thinking rationally in terms of likely consequences of this action, and comes to the conclusion that, yes, he thinks he will make more money this way, then there is nothing that ‘psychology’ will add to our understanding. Now, when the sociologist attempts to explain *irrational* elements in action (e.g., the panicked capitalist who sells off his machinery during an economic crisis), she can learn a thing or two from psychology, based on its keener understanding of such irrational elements.

Point 11. Sociology is distinct from the discipline of history

The sociologist seeks to formulate general statements about what happens. This is in contrast with historians, who seek to provide a causal analysis of a specific historic event.

We sociologists may study the rise of capitalism to learn more about how cultural beliefs affect the adoption of new practices, whereas a historian is interested in knowing about these particular early adopters of capitalism.

There are pros and cons to this approach. As with any generalizing science, the abstract nature of the concepts of sociology means that there is relatively less content here than in historical analyses. In return, sociology offers greater conceptual clarity. Sociology abstracts from reality. She does this often by creating “ideal types”, stripped of their historical particularities.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. How does Weber’s method for doing sociology (social action) differ from Durkheim’s emphasis on social facts?
2. In point six, how would you go about devising an experiment using the scientific method to test the interpretation that capitalists’ behavior becomes more irrational during times of stock market volatility? Why is it nearly impossible for sociologists to conduct such experiments? Given the difficulties of using experiments, how would you arrange a comparative case study of capitalist actions during panics?
3. In point seven, what makes crime rates sociological, where death rates are “meaningless statistics”?
4. In point nine, compare and contrast “organic sociology” with Weber’s interpretative sociology
5. Explain how sociology is distinct from psychology and history. Durkheim, too, compared sociology with these disciplines. How do the distinctions drawn by Weber and Durkheim compare?

Concepts

Sociology

Social Action

Ideal Type

Verstehen