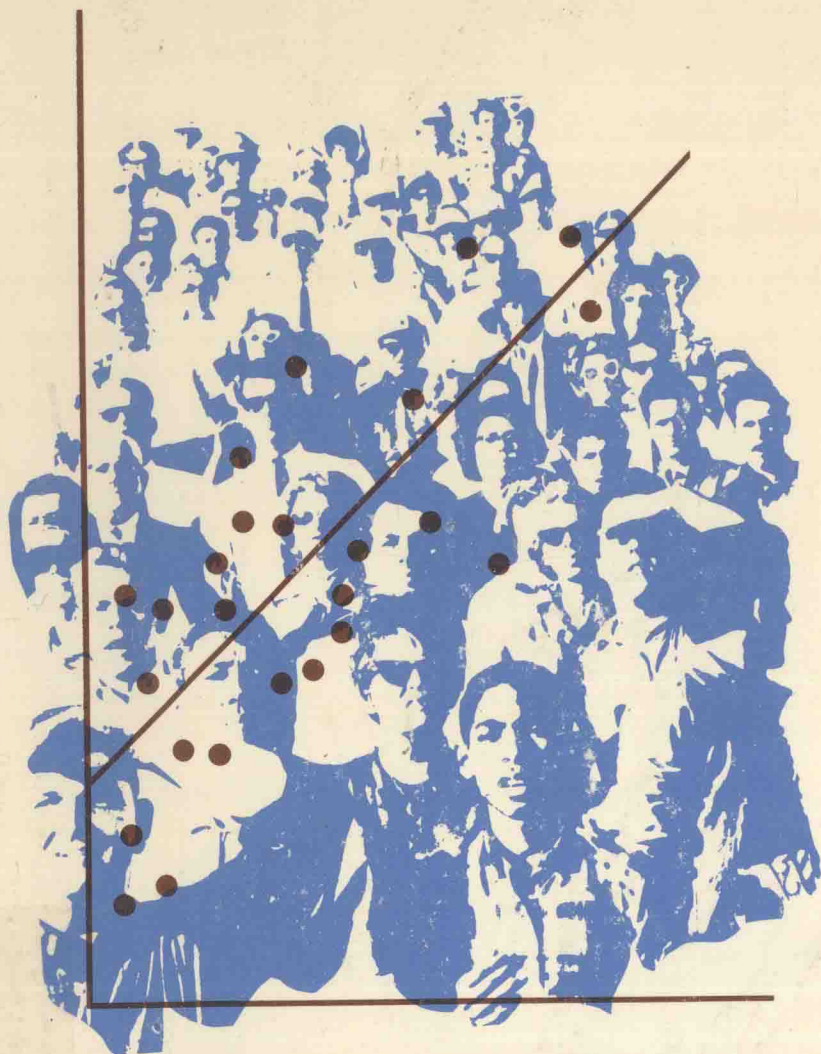


# THE SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD

## An Introduction to the Science of Sociology

Stephen Cole



Third Edition

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## **An Introduction to the Science of Sociology**

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Third Edition

**Houghton Mifflin Company • Boston**

Dallas • Geneva, Ill. • Hopewell, N.J.  
Palo Alto • London

*For Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton*

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Printed in U.S.A.  
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 81-83060  
ISBN: 0-395-30857-7

# THE SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD

## Preface

This book is an introduction to the science of sociology written primarily for students in introductory sociology courses. It is designed to give the beginning student a conceptual understanding of empirical social research and emphasizes the logic employed in the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative empirical data.

In the course of 15 years of experimentation with the teaching of introductory sociology and research methods, I have come to believe that introductory courses in sociology should have two main goals: to teach the students what is distinctive about the sociological interpretation of human behavior and to teach them the methods sociologists use to determine whether their ideas are right or wrong. This book is *not* aimed at teaching the students how to do research themselves, but rather at teaching the students how to understand empirical studies that they will read. To do this, I have focused on methodological procedures in terms of their

underlying logic and have avoided the use of mathematical formulas, complex terminology, and precise statistical definitions.

Since the end of World War II, sociology has undergone a revolution. It has changed from a discipline that was more similar to the humanities than to the natural sciences to one that is more similar to the natural sciences than to the humanities. The substance of this revolution has been an increasing emphasis on the use of empirical data, mostly quantitative, to describe and explain social behavior. In principle, sociology always was supposed to have been an empirical science; but, in fact, up until recently, it was dominated by theoreticians who used carefully selected examples to illustrate their ideas but who rarely collected empirical data to test them.

Evidence for this revolution is abundant. The most eminent founding fathers of American sociology, persons such as Charles Cooley and George Herbert Mead, were almost exclusively theoreticians, as were the two dominant figures in American sociology in the fifties and sixties, Robert K. Merton and Talcott Parsons. Yet, a recent survey I conducted indicated that currently the three sociologists who are believed by their colleagues to have contributed the most to the discipline in the last decade are Otis Dudley Duncan, James S. Coleman, and Hubert Blalock—all known for their quantitative work and their contributions to quantitative methods.

Today in sociology it is difficult to think of an eminent sociologist under the age of 50 who would be called a "theoretician." For other evidence of the quantitative revolution, one may simply count the proportion of articles using quantitative data that are published in the major journals. Whereas before World War II only about one quarter of the articles were based upon quantitative data, today more than three quarters are.

Perhaps the single most important factor contributing to this revolution in sociology has been the development of computers, which enable the sociologist to do now in a few minutes what not too long ago would have taken hundreds or even thousands of hours.

The fact that sociology has become more quantitative does not mean that qualitative research and theory are no longer crucial components of sociological study. In fact, as I shall point out in Chapter 4, there are many topics that can be more effectively

studied using qualitative methods or a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. And theory or substantively interesting ideas are necessary for any type of research.

Unfortunately, one by-product of the quantitative revolution has been the development of "methodological fadism." Many sociologists have paid so much attention to developing sophisticated quantitative methods that they have lost sight of the goal of increasing our deep understanding of human social behavior. Thus, although the articles published in the journals employ very sophisticated statistical techniques, many of them are not focused on either substantively or theoretically-engaging topics. Since an understanding of theory is necessary both to do and appreciate good research, this book begins with a chapter describing the theoretical perspective taken by sociologists.

This edition contains two new chapters. Chapter 3, "The Sociological Research Project," is aimed at giving the student an overall view of how research is done from the inception of the topic to the writing up of the results. Both applied and basic research are discussed. Chapter 5, "Science and Sociology," is aimed at explaining to the student what science is and the extent to which sociology is different from the natural sciences. This chapter includes a discussion of the views of Thomas Kuhn and of some research that I have done applying Kuhn's views in studying the relationship between theory and empirical research in sociology.

In writing this book I owe a large intellectual debt to my teachers in graduate school, Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld. Merton taught me how to apply the sociological perspective to a wide range of empirical problems. Paul Lazarsfeld taught me the logic of data analysis and, more importantly, that doing quantitative analysis could be fun. In recent years I have learned a good deal of methodology from my colleagues Hanan C. Selvin, Judith M. Tanur, and Eugene A. Weinstein. Judith Tanur advised me on the section on sampling. Gerald D. Suttles offered many useful suggestions for the chapter on qualitative methods. Ann H. Cole and Lorraine Dietrich criticized an earlier draft. Appreciation is also due the many users of the first and second editions, who offered me suggestions that have been very useful in preparing this edition. Any inadequacies that remain are, of course, my responsibility.

I would also like to thank John Applegath for suggesting that the first edition of this book be written and Lorraine Wolfe for an extremely competent editorial job.

*Stephen Cole*  
*Stony Brook, New York*  
*October 1979*



# Contents

## Preface v

### 1

#### **The Sociological Perspective 1**

##### **Sociological View of Individual Behavior 1**

Durkheim's Theories of Suicide 1

A Study of Self-Perceived Happiness 8

Fear During a Teachers' Strike 11

Illness and Welfare Recipients 12

##### **Sociological View of Societal Developments 16**

Societal Change 16

The Growth of Culture 22

##### **Summary 24**

### 2

#### **Testing Ideas with Data 25**

Descriptive Research 25

Explanatory Research 27

Use of Tables in Explanatory Analysis 31

Arranging Data in Tables 31

Using Tables to Test Hypotheses 37

Linear Regression Analysis 41

Causal Analysis 45

Summary 49

Exercises 50

**3**

**The Sociological Research Project 55**

**Deciding What to Study 55**

Applied Research 56

Basic Research 56

**Who Shall Be Studied: Sampling 57**

Simple Random Sample 58

Systematic Sample 61

**Sampling Methods for Political Polls 62**

**Measurement 64**

Frame of Reference 64

Validating Measures 66

**Data Analysis 69**

Preparing the Data 69

Analyzing the Data 71

**Writing Up Results 73**

**Summary 74**

**4**

**Qualitative Research 76**

**Purpose of Using Qualitative Research 79**

Description 79

Formulation of Hypotheses 80

Understanding Causal Processes 81

**Types of Qualitative Research 82**

Participant Observation of Urban Communities 82

In-Depth Interviewing 101

Community Studies 112

Qualitative Experiments 118

**Summary 121**

**5**

**Science and Sociology 123**

**What Is Science? 123**

Pre-1950s View 123

Recent Research 125

<b>Relationship Between Theory and Research in Sociology</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>Is Sociology a Science?</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>Can Sociological Studies Be Objective?</b>	<b>137</b>
Value-Free Sociology?	137
Sociologist as Technician or Reformer?	139
Summary	141

<b>Credits</b>	<b>144</b>
----------------	------------

<b>Index</b>	<b>145</b>
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# ***Chapter 1***

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## **The Sociological Perspective**

The goal of doing sociological research is to increase our deep understanding of human social behavior. There is virtually a limitless number of aspects of human behavior that one can study; yet sociologists study only some of these aspects, and they study them in a distinctive way. Sociological theory, which in its most general sense is called the "sociological perspective" or the "sociological orientation," serves as a guide for what to study and how to study it. The way in which sociologists have studied suicide, for example, may be instructive.

### **SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR**

**Durkheim's Theories of Suicide** Suppose one of your friends were to call you this evening to tell you one of your mutual friends committed suicide. You would probably be shocked and upset.

Later, however, you might wonder why your friend committed suicide. In fact, why would anybody commit suicide? (At this point, jot down on a piece of paper some of the reasons why you think people commit suicide. Then, after you read this section, look at your list and see if you have a different view of suicide.)

When persons without a background in sociology think of the reasons why people commit suicide, they usually point out circumstances that create intense unhappiness or dissatisfaction with their individual circumstances while disregarding those persons' relationships within groups. A woman commits suicide when she learns her child has leukemia. A man commits suicide when his business goes bankrupt. A girl commits suicide when she flunks out of college and her boyfriend breaks off with her at the same time. Such individual emotional states undoubtedly play a significant role in generating suicidal impulses; however, state-of-mind explanations fail to explain some interesting facts about suicide.

If we examine suicide rates (the number of suicides per 100,000 people in a particular category), we find that not all people are equally apt to commit suicide. For example, men are much more likely to commit suicide than women, Protestants more likely than Catholics, single men more likely than married men, people with a substantial amount of education more likely than people with little education, and soldiers more likely than civilians. Why? Do you suppose that men are less happy than women; highly educated people less happy than those with less education; or Protestants less happy than Catholics? This is quite unlikely. In fact, in this chapter, we will cite a study showing that there is no difference in the happiness of men and women and that people with a substantial amount of education are, on the average, actually happier than those with little education. We must conclude that differences in rates of suicide among various groups probably cannot be explained by different degrees of unhappiness in each group but rather by the *social* meaning of belonging to a particular group.

In a book entitled *Suicide*, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim tried to explain the differences in rates of suicide among various groups.<sup>1</sup> Durkheim's theory of why people commit suicide is a prime example of the sociological perspective at work. In order

<sup>1</sup>Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (1897; reprint ed., Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951).

to demonstrate the value of the sociological perspective, Durkheim wanted to prove that rates of suicide in social groups could not be explained by individual unhappiness. He did find that people were more likely to commit suicide during periods of economic depression, which seemed to supply evidence in support of the unhappiness explanation. If people suffer economically, they will be unhappy and, therefore, more likely to commit suicide. Durkheim also noticed, however, that suicide rates went up during periods of great economic prosperity. How could the unhappiness theory explain this? Or how could the unhappiness theory explain the fact that middle-class people are more likely to commit suicide than lower-class people? We will present data below that show middle-class people actually consider themselves to be happier than lower-class people.

After studying much data on suicide, Durkheim concluded that there are several types of suicide. The first two types, *altruistic* and *egoistic* suicide, concern the extent to which the individual is integrated into meaningful and cohesive social groups. If the individual is not integrated into meaningful groups, he or she will not have any goals and will not receive support in times of stress. Individuals who commit suicide because they perceive themselves as isolated are called egoistic suicides. On the other hand, it is possible to be overly integrated into groups. When the group becomes all important, individual life becomes less important. Individuals who commit suicide because they perceive their lives as insignificant are what Durkheim called altruistic suicides. Too much or too little social integration creates conditions conducive to suicide.

Do Durkheim's theories mean that individual unhappiness has nothing to do with suicide? Of course not. Obviously, almost by definition, people who commit suicide are intensely unhappy. The sociological and individualistic perspectives are not mutually exclusive views of human behavior; they are complementary. Sociologists can tell us what social conditions raise or lower the probability of committing suicide. Thus, sociologists can tell us that a Catholic is less likely than a Protestant to commit suicide, but they cannot tell us exactly which Protestant will commit suicide. Here, psychologists, with their study of the individual's personality and unique situation, are useful. Sociologists do not attempt to explain unique individual behavior; rather, they want

to explain the behavior of groups of people and how the behavior of the individual is influenced by membership in social groups.

At this point, let us be more explicit about how sociological theory determined the types of data Durkheim looked for in his research. Durkheim had the theory that over- or under-integration into social groups influenced the suicide rate. Therefore, he needed suicide statistics for groups that had a very high or a very low level of solidarity or cohesion. As you can see, a sociological *theory* is a *hypothesis* concerning the causes of social phenomena. This hypothesis serves as a guide to the kinds of data we should look for.

***Altruistic suicide.*** Let us first look closely at the reasoning and data Durkheim used to develop his theory of *altruistic* suicide. In one type of altruistic suicide, the individual is required by rules or norms of the group to commit suicide. For example, in some Indian castes, a widow was expected to burn herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre. The women were not forced to commit suicide; they wanted to; they believed that this was the proper behavior for persons in their position. Similarly, during World War II, Japanese pilots who flew on kamikaze missions considered it an honor to commit suicide for the glory of their country. (Of course, Durkheim, writing in 1897, could not have used these Japanese pilots as an example.)

For the Indian widows and the Japanese kamikaze, then, membership in a group led them to commit suicide. Suicide was, in a sense, obligatory; it was required by the norms of the group. The individuals involved were so committed to the group that they were willing to give up their lives in order to live up to group expectations.

Durkheim's theory suggested he look for a situation in which commitment to a group was excessively strong but suicide was not obligatory. If the theory were correct, Durkheim would find a high suicide rate for people in such a situation. One example can be found in the military, an organization in which the importance of the individual is downgraded and the importance of the collectivity is stressed. In every European country, Durkheim found the suicide rate to be higher among the armed forces than among the civilian population. This isolated fact, however, is not conclusive proof of the altruistic suicide theory because it also could be used

to support the unhappiness theory. Certainly men in the armed forces suffer many more hardships than civilians and, thus, might be considered to be less happy than civilians. However, if military life leads to suicide because of hardship, we would expect enlisted men to be more likely to commit suicide than officers. It turns out, however, that the suicide rate among officers is *higher* than it is among enlisted men. This finding contradicts the unhappiness theory and supports the altruistic suicide theory, for officers are generally more committed to the army than are enlisted men.

Similarly, Durkheim found that volunteers were more likely than draftees to commit suicide and that men who reenlisted were more likely to commit suicide than were men who enlisted for the first time. In every case, those who were more attached to the army were more apt to commit suicide.

Durkheim's general point is that, when you belong to a group in which the importance of the group and the insignificance of the individual is stressed, the significance of life declines. Individuals who belong to such groups will not value their own lives as strongly as those who belong to less cohesive groups and may commit suicide because of provocations that would not motivate others to commit suicide.

***Egoistic suicide.*** *Egoistic* suicide is the opposite of altruistic suicide. When individuals do not belong to any cohesive groups, they do not receive group support during difficult periods. Also, most of the goals we have and the things we value are attained through our membership in groups—whether it is a family, an occupational group, an academic group, or a religious group. The less integrated an individual is into such groups, the less significance life will have and the more often life will seem meaningless. We would expect, then, that married people would be less likely to commit suicide than single people. And this is indeed true. Furthermore, married people with children are less likely to commit suicide than those who are childless.

Durkheim is also able to use this theory of egoistic suicide to explain the different rates of suicide among people of various religious denominations. The two denominations that Durkheim analyzed—Protestantism and Catholicism—have explicit taboos against suicide; therefore, differences in suicide rates between these religious groups must be explained by the way in which



membership influences life. In Protestantism, great emphasis is placed on the self-reliance of the individual. The individual is responsible for his or her behavior and must face God alone. In Catholicism, on the other hand, the church mediates the relationship between the individual and God. The rituals of the Catholic Church tend to make it a more supportive, socially cohesive group. It is for this reason that Catholics are less likely than Protestants to commit suicide.

Would you guess that Jews have a high or low suicide rate? They have a low suicide rate. This is largely because they have long been a persecuted minority and have been forced to band together in a tightly knit group. Durkheim was able to back up this interpretation by showing that Protestants were less likely to commit suicide when they were in a minority, as in France, than when they were in a majority, as in Germany. When Protestants were in a minority, they were forced to stick together, and this cohesion countered the Protestant emphasis on the individual. The data on religious suicide rates lend support to Durkheim's theory of egoistic suicide.

**Anomic suicide.** One other major type of suicide that Durkheim discusses is *anomic* suicide. According to Durkheim, individuals are most satisfied with their lives when their day-to-day behavior is oriented toward a set of meaningful goals and is regulated by a set of rules or norms. When goals lose their meaning, the individual becomes disoriented, life seems aimless, and the probability of suicide increases. Durkheim posited that a rapid change either in the society as a whole or in an individual's social situation would create *anomie* (normlessness) and increase the probability of committing suicide.

The theory of anomic suicide can explain the increase in suicide during periods of economic instability—whether it is boom or bust. It is easy for us to comprehend why a person may commit suicide after losing a fortune, because this fits in with our commonsense view of the world; but it may be difficult for us to understand why a person may commit suicide after making a fortune. Consider, however, the following hypothetical case:

Jim Peters, the son of an immigrant, grew up in a New York City slum. To escape poverty, he worked very