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Editor's Notebook: Yes, But What Do You Really Do?

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Though I love what I do for a living, I regret that I must report a small occupational glitch. It's just that non-sociologists, who greatly outnumber us lucky folks, don't seem to know what sociology is, and don't seem to care that they don't. I understand that those who have not studied sociology may find it vaguely defined at best. But put yourself in my position. Telling a new acquaintance that I am a sociologist is a sure-fire conversation stopper. It's almost as bad as having to admit you're a poet.

I have decided, therefore, to try to do something about this. So, given the luxury of writing in this space pretty much what I please, I plan to plug my field, without turning current readers into "formers." To accomplish this, I will simply hitch my explanation of sociology to the discipline of physics which, though not normally understood by the general public any better than is sociology, never has its legitimacy questioned.

The physical forces that operate in our world are normally invisible. You can't see gravity, though you can observe its influence on objects. Apples fall (bless them for their consistency in doing so) and the rate of their descent to earth can be measured. From such events the existence of a physical force was inferred by Isaac Newton several hundred years ago. A person who denies the existence of gravity, merely because it cannot be directly observed, does so at his or her own peril. Although our understanding of how physical forces influence everyday events, such as flying on jet planes or boiling water, is typically vague, our respect for physics is assured by our faith that such forces exist.

Sociology should be understood in the same way. Just as there are physical forces that influence the behavior of objects, there are social forces that influence the way we deal with one another. Like gravity, social forces cannot be directly observed. Their existence must be inferred from the behavior of people toward one another, which is just what Emile Durkheim recognized in the Nineteenth Century.

Just as surely as Newton discovered gravity, Durkheim (and others) discovered social forces. Much of our behavior toward one another is due to our membership in groups, the sociological view, however, focuses on what Emile Durkheim recognized in the Nineteenth Century.

You have just stood in line at the Motor Vehicle Bureau for two hours only to find that you lack one measly form to complete your registration. The lady behind the counter seems almost gleeful to be given the chance to inform you of this fact. Most Americans would say she was a rotten person. They would point to her individual qualities, such as they are.

The sociological view, however, focuses on the situation in which she works. Bureau clerks are, we inevitably focus our attention and energies on a very limited range of ways to explain and deal with divorce. We need additionally to understand the powerful social forces which are the sociologist's special area of expertise.

I admit that in this space I can only provide a sketchy explanation for why I find sociology compelling. Then again if you only had this much space to learn about physics you wouldn't get beyond the story of falling apples. I'm afraid you will have to take my word for the fact that attention to social forces can provide powerful and absorbing explanations for everyday human behavior. It is a greatly underutilized resource.