

## Editorial

# The Queens have No Clothes: Sociology's Level of Scientific Analysis

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) founded and named the social science of sociology, famously referring to it as the ultimate science, or the "queen of the sciences." But he also infamously practiced "cerebral hygiene," in which he refused to read the work of other scholars in order to avoid contaminating his mind with their ideas. Furthermore, he fancied sociologists as the priests of the new "religion of humanity," and himself as its high priest. Ironically, Hans Christian Anderson published *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1837), his famous literary folktale about a vain emperor who gets exposed before his subjects, exactly during the years of the Romantic Era in which Comte was publishing his six-volume magnum opus, *The Positive Philosophy* (1830-1842).

The moral of both stories is that self-proclaimed pre-eminence is always suspect, and susceptible to humiliating debunking. Comte's "queen" has never reigned over the sciences, just as Anderson's emperor actually had no clothes. However, sociology's position among the sciences is not so much about its relative importance, but rather about its comparative location, its level of academic analysis.

All phenomena occur at multiple levels of reality. As the saying goes, reality is not flat. According to the meta-theoretical position of critical realism, the empirical realm is but one level of reality, with much of reality existing independently from human awareness of it (Sayer 2000). Yet even within the empirical realm of human beings alone, reality exists as subatomic particles, atoms, molecules, organelles, cells, tissues, organ systems, persons, families, communities, (sub)cultures, societies, nations, globality, and biosphere. As levels, each stratum is unavoidably described as lower or higher, though this by no means implies evaluative judgements of hierarchy. Each stratum is also intricately connected to the level below and above it. Therefore,

each increasing level includes and transcends the previous level, and displays emergent phenomenon appearing at each novel level that are non-reducible to previous levels. Fundamental levels are necessary but not sufficient for the organization of higher levels. Thus, [for example].... groups are composed of individuals, but group processes and behavior are not captured in the study of any single person in the group. Causality can move up and down the levels of analysis, and a phenomenon at one level may have correlates at different levels. (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005:31)

Sophisticated separate sciences examine each level of reality somewhat separately. The challenge for the sciences is to avoid the reductionism that says to humans, as Francis Crick, co-discoverer of DNA structure, opined, “You’re nothing but a pack of neurons” (Crick 1994:3). Known colloquially as “nothing buttery,” reductionism is the claim “that some property observed at one level can be fully accounted for and explained by properties, structures, or dynamics operating at a lower level” (Smith 2010:36). Human phenomena are indeed operative at more than one level, and they cannot be reduced completely to presumably more fundamental processes. “One can no more invalidate an experience because its physiology is known than one can invalidate physiology because its biochemistry has been identified” (Hood and Chen 2014:428). For example, mystical experience of oneness with the universe cannot be reduced to changes in neurotransmitter levels in the brain. Instead, ecstatic or terrorizing spiritual experiences must be understood at multiple levels: “cellular changes, brain system changes, cognitive-affect-behavioral changes, social changes, cultural changes and global changes” (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005:31).

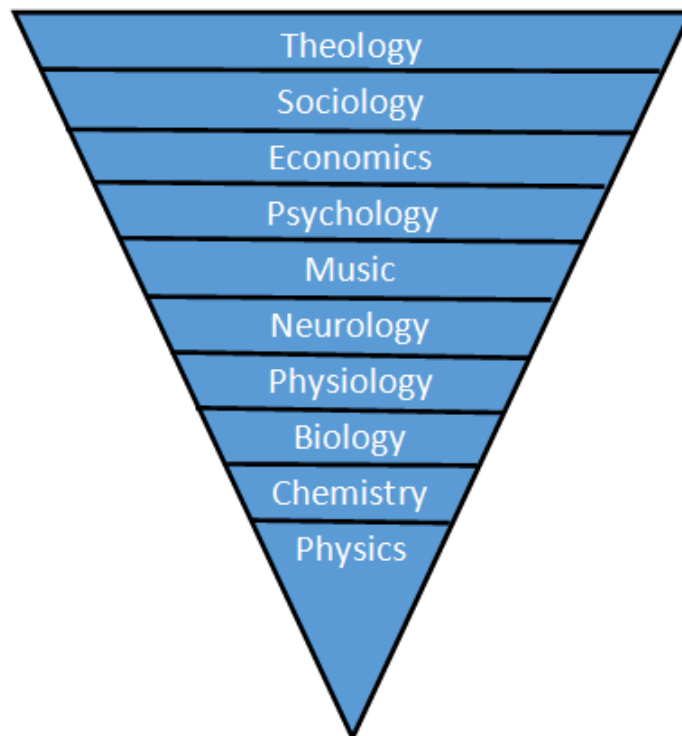
Anything less than a multi-level analysis of human experience and social phenomena is clearly less than the total picture. The three sub-levels of sociological analysis include the personal and interpersonal micro level, the organizational and institutional meso level, and the cultural and societal macro level. For comparison, the three sub-levels of psychological analysis include the biological which examines physical aspects of the brain, the cognitive which examines the cognitive processes of the brain, and the socio-cultural which examines the effect of the social environment on behavior. Overlap between sociological and psychological analysis occurs at all three levels, perhaps most unexpectedly at the third—the cultural level. Extending the example of spirituality, psychologists themselves recognize that

to conceptualize spirituality as a solely personal phenomenon is to ignore the cultural context in which this construct has emerged. Spirituality as an individual expression is not culture-free; it is neither interpreted nor expressed in a social vacuum. As a movement toward individualism, a rebellion against tradition, or a reaction to hierarchically arranged social organizations, spirituality is still embedded within a cultural context. (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005:27)

From the perspective of psychology alone, “religiousness is not just beliefs about God. Spirituality is not just oneness with life. Both constructs contain multiple dimensions including, but not limited to, biology, sensation, affect, cognition, behavior, identity, meaning, morality, relationships, roles, creativity, personality, self-awareness, and salience” (Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005:32). Yet even a cross-disciplinary scientific examination of the multi-dimensionality of spirituality cannot account for the metaphysical, spiritual dynamics that may also be operative.

The following illustration, adapted from ethicist James Peterson (2001), demonstrates the levels of scientific analysis, and both the power and limitations of scientific explanation.

While a physicist might identify an instance of molecule movement, a chemist might observe that this movement can further be explained as glucose converting to lactic acid to generate adenosine triphosphate (ATP). A biochemist might then describe the event as being part of the contraction and release of a particular muscle. Next, a physiologist adds another layer by noticing that the muscle is increasing the tension within a human vocal cord. Then, a neurologist clarifies that a deliberate attempt is being made to produce sound, namely a musical note. If a musician were on the scene, she would recognize the sound as singing, because the person is performing a piece from an oratorio called *The Messiah*. A psychologist might note the emotions evoked when singing by observing the facial expressions of the singer. Her singing may, in turn, be described from an economic perspective, because the singer is a professional musician being paid to perform. But then a sociologist suggests that something larger is taking place, because the singer is performing with a choir and derives meaning and fulfillment from her relationships with other people in the choir. Finally, a theologian observes that she is singing sacred music and that the whole exercise is deeply spiritual, being situated within the singer's personal faith in God.



This illustration and its diagram suggest two notable aspects of human reality. First, science examines humans as physio-bio-psycho-social beings, each dimension being no more determinative than the others. Different sciences explicate different dimensions of the myriad aspects of humanness at different levels of analysis, none entirely independent of the others. The philosophical anthropology of the social sciences maintains that neurological, behavioral, cognitive, sociocultural, and evolutionary perspectives and approaches all contribute to our knowledge of ourselves. However, Christians expand this understanding by insisting that humans are more; humans are physio-bio-psycho-socio-spiritual beings, creatures in *imago Dei* who are fallen and finite, in need of redemption and renewal. Theological anthropology is built on the Christian Reformed meta-narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration (Entwistle 2021), and any adequate understanding of humans must take the whole story into account.

The second notable aspect of the diagram above is that theology, not sociology, is here crowned the “queen of the sciences.” This ascribed royal status of theology has a historical lineage long pre-dating Comte’s similar claim for sociology, though its genealogy is contested. Thomas Aquinas is frequently cited as its progenitor. In the first question of his great *Summa Theologica*, written between 1265 and 1274 of the High Middle Ages, he argued that theology—“sacred doctrine”—not only is a science, but “from every standpoint . . . is nobler than other sciences” (Aquinas 5). Many Christian scholars today continue to pay such homage to theology, arguing that theology rules as queen while all other sciences serve as handmaidens (Porter 2010), that the sciences must serve theology in a ministerial rather than a magisterial capacity (McGrath 2001), or that theology should disregard the social sciences entirely because they are hopelessly modern, secular, and plebeian (Milbank 2006). For them, theology always plays a governing, regulating, and controlling role, always retains the right to critique the sciences in ways the sciences are not permitted to reciprocate, and always preserves the privilege of having the last word.

One significant problem with granting theology monarchical status is that, though its object of study may be exceptional and beyond the empirical, the veracity of its findings is no greater than any other field of study, and likely lesser because of its limited methodology. Theology too, and perhaps more than any other academic discipline, is interpretive, and thus ultimately less than absolutely reliable. The critique that social science is “sinful human beings thinking sinfully about sinful human beings” applies at least as equally to theology. Furthermore, there persists “a mistaken assumption that the spirit of God is more active/operational, and thus, truth more readily discernable, when humans read the Bible than when they read nature, that theologians are more privileged by the Spirit in their task than social scientists are in theirs” (Hiebert 2008:213). But in truth, both proclaimed queens of the sciences have no clothes capable of concealing their fragile, fallen finitude.

Regrettably, when theology is hailed as the queen of the sciences, its relationship with the sciences becomes imperial colonization. David Entwistle (2021) has articulated a spectrum of six models of integrative approaches to psychology and Christianity that apply equally to sociology and Christianity: enemies, spies, colonialists, rebuilders, neutral parties, and allies as subjects of one sovereign. Many Christians today seemingly feel more threatened by sociology than by any other academic discipline. By illuminating the social construction of reality, revealing structural injustice, and critiquing institutionalized religion, sociology becomes their greatest enemy. For other Christians who do accept some selective insights from sociology but nevertheless give primary allegiance to theology, sociology becomes foreign territory to rule and plunder. “The telos of the colonialists is the appropriation of [sociological] methods or findings that can illustrate or buttress the claims of their theological proclamations” (Entwistle 2021:192), all without admitting that those proclamations can be fatally flawed interpretations.

Only when both theology and sociology are dethroned and understood as allies subject to one actual sovereign, to one God beyond our ideological interpretations, will the ultimate unity of all truth be grasped, even if not fully comprehended. Only when Francis Bacon’s two books of God’s Word (scripture – special revelation – God’s workings in the world) and God’s Works (creation – general revelation – the workings of God’s world) are granted equality because of their common Author will it be understood that they describe a single reality. “Science and theology tell us different kinds of things about the same things” (Bube 1995:167). And only when the ubiquity of human limitation, imperfection, and finitude of scholars in both Athens and Jerusalem is acknowledged will all the disciplines see themselves in proper relationship to God.

Despite their location at the upper levels of academic analysis, neither sociology nor theology hold the supposed divine right and religious esteem of kings or queens. Indeed, after the recent death of long-lived British Queen Elizabeth II, the very idea of monarchy is now nigh anathema. Underneath whatever regalia in which we may clothe sociology or theology, they remain equal, ordinary commoners like the rest of us, as beneficial as they nevertheless clearly are. Honesty begets humility. “[God] is before all things, and in [God] all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

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