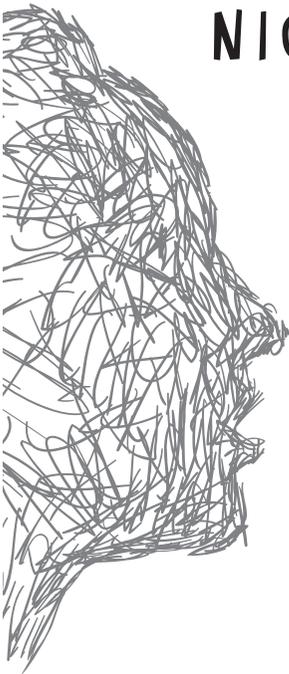


BIG IDEAS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

DAVID EDMONDS &
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3 Church Street
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Singapore 049483

Editor: Kiren Shoman
Editorial assistant: Matt Oldfield
Production editor: Katherine Haw
Marketing manager: Michael Ainsley
Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY



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First published 2016

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2015948264

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-1379-0
ISBN 978-1-4739-1380-6 (pbk)

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ROM HARRÉ ON WHAT IS SOCIAL SCIENCE



Rom Harré was for many years the University Lecturer in Philosophy of Science at the University of Oxford. Moving from the philosophy of the physical sciences in the mid-seventies, he began a long series of studies of the metaphysics and related methods of research in the human sciences. He has been much involved in the Spanish world, including South America. Currently he is a member of the Psychology Department of Georgetown University, Washington DC.

David Edmonds: *Before setting out on a series of interviews on the social sciences, some rather fundamental questions need addressing. What is social science? How do the social sciences differ from the so-called 'hard' sciences, like physics and chemistry? Can social science be held to the same standards of rigour as 'hard' science and can we expect it to be predictive, and falsifiable? Who better to answer these questions than polymath Rom Harré, a distinguished philosopher, psychologist, and social scientist?*

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we're focusing on is 'What is social science?'. Could you give a broad definition of social science?*

Rom Harré: It's pretty hard to do that, but we could start with the idea that everybody lives in a society. That is, they live in families, in towns, in nations, and, of course, they want to know what it is they're living in. And suddenly, around two millennia ago, someone, namely Aristotle, thought to himself, 'Let's look at

this world that we live in.' It's a bit like fish discovering the sea. We live in a society, and suddenly we can start to ask ourselves, what is it and how does it work?

- NW:** *But that, in a way, is the kind of question that some historians might ask themselves: 'what is the nature of our world in relation to the way it has been?' But most people don't think of history, straightforwardly, as social science.*
- RH:** Well, over the centuries, sociology and economics have come to be the study of contemporary society. There is, of course, historical sociology where we ask ourselves what society was like in, say, the Middle Ages or medieval Japan. Gradually these two aspects have come closer and closer together. In the kind of work I do, I wouldn't dream of attempting to study a contemporary phenomenon without studying its historical antecedents. Years ago, my students and I did a study of football hooliganism and when we were working out the theory behind this, we thought, let's look in the past and see when similar things happened: apprentice riots in London, the battles between the supporters of the different horse-racing teams in ancient Rome – it's happened before. So sociology opens up into the past, and of course some people think it should also open up into the future.
- NW:** *So social science has a link to the past and you've said it involves focusing on social relations. It's also got the sense of being a science; how do you see the relationship between the social sciences and the natural sciences?*
- RH:** Both are in the same kind of enterprise; that is, they're trying to give us a picture of how things are in some domain of the universe. The difference is the social sciences are concerned with something we make ourselves: we create societies, but of course we don't create the solar system; we don't create the particles we study in the Hadron Collider. But in sociology we're looking at our own work, our own artefact.
- NW:** *So does that produce special problems in terms of achieving an impersonal stance or repeatable experiments?*
- RH:** There's one enormously important problem in dealing with sociology and social sciences generally. Because we create these

social objects, we have to ask ourselves what's the instrument with which we create them? In the last 50 or 60 years, language has come to be seen as the key element in all of this. Now, once again another aspect of the human sciences, particularly linguistics – sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics – gets into the story. You can't draw a sharp separation. For example, if you want to understand the sociology of life in France, you'd better understand the grammatical difference between 'tu' and 'vous'.

NW: *That's intriguing. Obviously language isn't the only means of cultural transmission, so there must be many other ways into the social sciences.*

RH: There are lots; some of these are so small scale we don't even notice them: terms of address, costume, hairstyles, flags, monuments. If anybody wants to say anything important in the United States, like Martin Luther King, they go to the Lincoln Memorial, a gigantic chunk of marble, at the end of the Mall. There it is, America personified. So there are all kinds of carriers of social reality.

NW: *Let's return to the science question. How do the social sciences relate to other sciences?*

RH: It's first of all a matter of method. By and large social scientists and natural scientists are in the same game. They're trying to find, or develop, a system of classification: the sort of categories that you need to identify what it is that you're studying. Then you need to try to develop an explanatory theory, how it comes about that things happen the way that they do. In the natural sciences, you build working models, either in the laboratory or in your head, as to how the world works. In social sciences you try to do the same thing. However, you are part of the operation. Suppose you're making a working model of some aspect of social life, say family life, or say diagnostic activities in a clinic, that in itself is a piece of social life. The first thing you have to learn is the art of stepping back – well, stepping forward and stepping back. You have to be a participant observer in one way – to have a sense of what's going on. But you have to step back and pretend you're not part of that reality, to take a bird's eye

view of it. This is why it's so important to think back to Aristotle, who was the first to step back and study the constitutions of the Greek states. But he was a member of a Greek state and he was seeing it within his own frame of reference, and of course within his own language.

One further point: English is the language of sociology. It used to be German, then it was French. Now it's English. I go to lots of countries. Everywhere I go, except South America, English is the *lingua franca* of the academic world. The social force of English is becoming part of the topic of sociology.

NW: *When we look back at the social scientists of the 19th century, we can easily see their biases: they have the assumptions of imperialism, for example. In the present it's quite difficult to be aware of our own biases. How would a social scientist go about eliminating, or allowing for, those sorts of prejudices?*

RH: I think we're aware that those prejudices exist. So one of the things you start training undergraduates, when they're doing a course in this kind of thing, is to get them to have a sense of their own world. I'm just about to set off to the States to teach a course in qualitative psychology, which is largely concerned with social matters, and the first exercise we're going to have is standing back; they will ask themselves what is it to be a member of Georgetown University, particularly those who support the basketball team? They should not take it for granted that they already know this explicitly. Much of sociological research is making explicit what we know implicitly.

NW: *With the natural sciences we often have the possibility of repeating experiments, manipulating variables, so we can get very accurate information about what's going on. If you were investigating an outburst of violence at a particular football match, you couldn't just go back and tweak the variables. So what does a social scientist do in that sort of situation?*

RH: There's a long-running controversy about whether the experimental method has any place at all in the social world. I'm one of those who are very suspicious of the attempt to hammer social life into shape in a laboratory, with three or four people trying to replicate the social behaviour of millions. I think it's a

huge mistake. The issue then is how to produce useful, valuable material that's not just vignettes of the passing scene. You're trying to slide upwards a little bit towards some sort of level of generality. The way that people act in families is enormously different all over the world, but there are going to be certain sorts of commonality. The great mistake in the past, I think, particularly in social psychology, was to presume that you knew what the commonalities were, and then you could simply go around and see how many cultures exemplified them. Take the nuclear family. Well, if you go to New Guinea or Zimbabwe, there isn't anything very much like the nuclear family. In some societies all the boys leave Mum when they're nine or so, and go to live with dad, and they may not have much to do with Mum again for years and years. Something similar occurred in the English-speaking world with the public school institutions. It's a very different sort of life from other schools and tends to produce a different sort of person, I believe. So we have to be very cautious about the extent to which we generalise.

NW: *There's obviously a certain amount of descriptive work done in the social sciences, but it's often meant to be predictive of how people will behave, not just accounting for how they have behaved. How do you make that move from the past to the future?*

RH: It's extremely problematic and, notoriously, social scientists, economists, are very bad at doing this, because the amount of variation of human society is simply enormous. Things happen when we haven't got the faintest expectation that they will. For example, who would have imagined the last seven or eight years of chaos in the banking system? How is it possible for intelligent people to do the things they did? There they were, highly educated, well-established, brilliant people, with all the technology in the world, and they were taken by surprise. Who could have guessed that the Islamic Spring would turn so violent and chaotic?

NW: *So what is the value of social science research?*

RH: Well, I think it does give you a grasp of the world as it is at this moment, or rather as it was a little while ago. And that's not a bad thing: those who know no history are doomed to repeat it. But there's no guarantee that that knowledge is

going to function like Newton's laws of motion. There is a kind of intuition that really brilliant social analysts or brilliant politicians have, in which they're drawing on millions and millions of tiny pieces of data, organising them somehow, coming up with a sense of what's going to happen.

NW: *There's been a huge change in the sources for social scientists with the internet, and with statistics and data being made free online. How is that changing the nature of the social sciences?*

RH: I think it may have a profound effect on sociology. This huge amount of data has led to a kind of despair. And we might find ourselves going back more often to micro-studies again, looking at how small groups of people function.

NW: *It strikes me that the best social scientists are also very skilful narrators: they know not just what's going on but they can tell the story in interesting ways to reach a wider public.*

RH: Well, yes, the great sociologists can tell stories. In fact, it's another aspect of contemporary sociology: the idea of narratology, looking at the way in which people can build their lives around story lines. One of the most recent specialties is called positioning theory: the sociologist studies the way people assign rights and duties to each other in terms of the stories that they persuade each other to believe and tell. For instance, you might think about a family quarrel in terms of the story of that particular family, how Mum and Dad came to meet, what's the history of their ancestry, the sort of things you see on the television, with people going back to find a family story. And of course that story is going to feed into a family itself and transform it. Discovering your ancestors is a way of changing the lives of your successors, because now there's a whole new story to tell.

NW: *Given the social sciences aren't always great predictors of what's going to happen, how can you tell good sociology, good social science, from bad?*

RH: Again that's very difficult to do. There's very little place for the methods you would use in the natural sciences. One way that has been talked about quite a bit over the last 20 or 30 years is bringing the research findings back to the people you are investigating and asking them 'Does this illuminate your life?'

It's kind of psychiatry on a large scale, where you bring the story back to the person who came to you with anxiety or suffering of some kind, and the person becomes convinced that this was so, and perhaps achieves some sort of relief. It doesn't matter whether the story is true or not: it's a matter of making sense of things. Years ago a group of us began to ask this question about plays. Are plays sociology? A very well-known sociologist, the late Stanford Lyman, thought they were, and he devoted quite a lot of time to studying the plays of Shakespeare, seeing Shakespeare as a sociologist. His idea was that the people of the time found Shakespeare convincing because he was telling stories that they recognised as the stories of their lives. So the way Hamlet and Ophelia behave is something that they recognised. So that's one way in which we can tell good sociology from bad. If you don't recognise it as part of your life, or the life of people you know, it's not likely to be convincing.

NW: *Social science is often thought of as including most anthropology, a lot of psychology, economics, sociology. Is there anything common to all these different enterprises?*

RH: The one thing there is in common is their attempts to understand a group of people and how they behave. Human societies are very complex, and there are many different aspects to their behaviour. We've said nothing about medicine, and about, for example, epidemics. Epidemics are a phenomenon in biology, but they have profound social consequences. A chemical discovery will transform the lives of millions of people socially. We now have ways of keeping people alive much longer than before: that's the result of medicine, a bit of biology – but with profound social consequences. So the one item that is in common to all these disciplines is the social world. Linguistics, history, economics, anthropology, geography, even geology are all part of sociology in a sense. The object of study is the same, but the methods of study are vastly different.

NW: *From outside the social sciences, there is often the prejudice that social scientists tend to be relativists. Whereas natural scientists think, on the whole, that they are discovering something about the way the world is, social scientists are prone to say 'Well, there are many different ways of describing the world, there's no one God's-eye view that we can discover.'*

RH: Well, certainly, half a century ago, the natural scientists were gung-ho, going for the truth, and it didn't matter where you did it, or who you were, or which laboratory you worked in; you were 'on the road to the truth'. But in sociology it gradually became clear that the societies you were looking at were very different from one another. What counted as a good marriage in Namibia wouldn't count as a good marriage in New York. So the idea that there were societies so different that each one had to be tackled separately was an important insight.

But suddenly, about 40 to 50 years ago, natural sciences began to ask themselves the question: 'If I'd been brought up in a different way and worked in a different laboratory with a different set of instruments with different assistants helping me, would I have come up with the same answer?' What we're getting in the natural sciences is a series of snapshots around a common core – which is the world out there. In the physical sciences I'm notorious as a philosophical realist: I think we're studying reality. But we're taking shots from different points of view. That's not true in the social sciences because there isn't a world out there: there are any number of different practices that people are engaged in. It's not that there's a series of snapshots; the snapshots *are* the object of enterprise. As I said at the beginning, the social world is a world we create, and in studying it we're continuing to recreate it. Karl Marx sat in the British Museum studying British industrial society: of course what he then wrote down in *Das Kapital* became an instrument for the transformation of society itself.

FURTHER READING

- Jerome S. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Harvard University Press, 1994)
 Rom Harré and Paul F. Secord, *The Explanation of Social Behaviour* (Blackwell, 1973)
 Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhove, *Positioning Theory* (Blackwell, 1999)