The subject matter of the social sciences is frequently identified as purposive human action, directed to attaining various ends or "values," whether with conscious intent, by force of acquired habit, or because of unwitting involvement. A somewhat more restrictive characterization limits that subject matter to the responses men make to the actions of other men, in the light of expectations and "evaluations" concerning how these others will respond in turn. On either delimitation of that subject matter, its study is commonly said to presuppose familiarity with the motives and other psychological matters that constitute the springs of purposive human behavior, as well as with the aims and values whose attainment is the explicit or implicit goal of such behavior.

According to many writers, however, motives, dispositions, intended goals, and values are not matters open to sensory inspection, and can be neither made familiar nor identified by way of an exclusive use of procedures that are suitable for exploring the publicly observable subject matters of the "purely behavioral" (or natural) sciences. On the contrary, these are matters with which we can become conversant solely from our "subjective experience." Moreover, the distinctions that are relevant to social science subject matter (whether they are employed to characterize inanimate objects, as in the case of terms such as 'tool' and 'sentence,' or to designate types of human behavior, as in the case of terms such as "crime" and 'punishment') cannot be defined except by reference to "mental attitudes" and cannot be understood except by those who have had the subjective experience of possessing such attitudes. To say that an object is a tool, for example, is allegedly to say that it is expected to produce certain effects by those who so characterize that object. Accordingly, the various "things" that may need to be mentioned in explaining purposive action must be construed in terms of what the human actors themselves believe about those things, rather than in terms of what can be discovered about the things by way of the objective methods of the natural sciences. As one proponent of this claim states the case, "A medicine or a cosmetic, e.g., for the purposes of social study, are not what cures an ailment or improves a person's looks, but what people think will have that effect." And he goes on to say that, when the social sciences explain human behavior by invoking men's knowledge of laws of nature, "what is relevant in the study of society is not whether these laws of nature are true in any objective sense, but solely whether they are believed and acted upon by the people."

In short, the categories of description and explanation in the social sciences are held to be radically "subjective," so that these disciplines are forced to rely on "nonsubjective" techniques of inquiry. The social scientist must therefore "interpret" the materials of his study by imaginatively identifying himself with the actors in social processes, viewing the situations they face as the actors themselves

---

Excerpted from The Structure of Science (pp. 473–76, 480–85) by Ernest Nagel. © 1961 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. and reprinted with their permission.
the idea of experience.

The idea of experience is not the same as the idea of experience as we understand it in psychology, but it is similar in that it involves a process of learning and development through practice and repetition. The idea of experience is also related to the concept of habituation, which refers to the process of learning to associate certain stimuli with certain responses.

In the context of the current discussion, the idea of experience is important because it suggests that the way we learn and develop our understanding of the world is not simply a matter of acquiring knowledge through reading and listening, but rather a process of actively engaging with the world and developing our understanding through practice and experience.

The idea of experience also raises important questions about the nature of learning and development, and the role of education in facilitating this process. It suggests that education should not simply be about传递 information, but rather about creating opportunities for students to engage with the world and develop their own understanding through practice and experience.

In conclusion, the idea of experience is a key concept in understanding the way we learn and develop our understanding of the world, and it is important for education to be designed to facilitate this process. By creating opportunities for students to engage with the world and develop their own understanding through practice and experience, education can help to create a more informed and engaged society.

References:


discussion is too detailed to permit brief summary. However, the structure of his argument (and of other "meaningful" explanations) can be represented by the following abstract schema. Suppose a social phenomenon $E$ (e.g., the development of modern capitalistic enterprise) is found to occur under a complex set of social conditions $C$ (e.g., widespread membership in certain religious groups, such as those professing Calvinistic Protestantism), where some of the individuals participating in $C$ generally also participate in $E$. But individuals who participate in $E$ are assumed to be committed to certain values (or to be in certain "subjective" states) $V_E$ (e.g., they prize honesty, orderliness, and abstemious [= avoiding self-indulgence] labor); and individuals who participate in $C$ are assumed to be in the subjective state $V_C$ (e.g., they believe in the sacredness of a worldly calling). However, $V_E$ and $V_C$ are also alleged to be "meaningfully" related, in view of the motivational patterns we find in our own personal experiences—for example, by reflecting on how our own emotions, values, beliefs, and actions hang together, we come to recognize an intimate connection between believing that one's vocation in life is consecrated by divine ordinance, and believing that one's life should not be marked by indulgence or self-indulgence. Accordingly, by imputing subjective states to the agents engaged in $E$ and $C$, we can "understand" why it is that $E$ occurs under conditions $C$, not simply as a mere conjunction or succession of phenomena, but as manifestations of subjective states whose interrelations are familiar to us from a consideration of our own affective [= emotional] and cognitive states.

These examples make it clear that such "meaningful" explanations invariably employ two types of assumptions which are of particular relevance to the present discussion: an assumption, singular in form, characterizing specified individuals as being in certain psychological states at indicated times (e.g., the assumption, in the . . . quotation above, that members of the crowd hated the man they were pursuing); and an assumption, general in form, stating the ways such states are related to one another as well as to certain overt behaviors . . . .

However, neither of such assumptions is self-certifying, and evidence is required for each of them if the explanation of which they are parts is to be more than an exercise in uncontrolled imagination. Competent evidence for assumptions about the attitudes and actions of other men is often difficult to obtain; but it is certainly not obtained merely by introspecting one's own sentiments or by examining one's own beliefs as to how such sentiments are likely to be manifested in overt action—as responsible advocates of "interpretative" explanations have themselves often emphasized (e.g., with vigor and illumination by Max Weber). We may identify ourselves in imagination with a trader in wheat, and conjecture what course of conduct we would adopt were we confronted with some problem requiring decisive action in a fluctuating market for that commodity. But conjecture is not fact. The sentiments or envisioned plans we may impute to the trader either may not coincide with those he actually possesses, or even if they should so coincide may eventuate in conduct on his part quite different from the course of action we had imagined would be the "reasonable" one to adopt under the assumed circumstances. The history of anthropology amply testifies to the blunders that can be committed when categories appropriate for describing familiar social processes are extrapolated without further scrutiny to the study of strange cultures. Nor is the frequent claim well founded that relations of dependence between psychological processes with which we have personal experience, or between such processes and the overt actions in which they may be manifested, can be comprehended with a clearer "insight" into the reasons for their being what they are than can any relations of dependence between nonpsychological events and processes. Do we really understand more fully and with greater warranted certainty why an insult tends to produce anger, than why a rainbow is produced when the sun's rays strike raindrops at a certain angle?

Moreover, it is by no means obvious that a social scientist cannot account for men's actions unless he has experienced in his own person the psychic states he imputes to them or unless he can successfully recreate such states in imagination. Must a psychiatrist be at least partly demented if he is to be competent for studying the mentally ill? Is a historian incapable of explaining the careers and social changes effected by men like Hitler unless he can recapture in imagination the frenzied hatreds that may have animated such an individual? Are mild-tempered and emotionally stable social scientists unable to understand the causes and consequences of mass hysteria, institutionalized sexual orgy, or manifestations of pathological lusts for power? The factual evidence certainly lends no support to these and similar suppositions. Indeed, discursive knowledge—i.e., knowledge statable in propositional form, about "common-sense" affairs as well as about the material explored by the specialized procedures of the natural and social sciences—is not a matter of having sensations, images, or feelings, whether vivid or faint; and it consists neither in identifying oneself in some ineffable manner with the objects of knowledge, nor in reproducing in some form of direct experience the subject matter of knowledge. On the other hand, discursive knowledge is a symbolic representation of only certain selected phases of some subject matter; it is the product of a process that deliberately aims at formulating relations between traits of a subject matter, so that one set of traits mentioned in the formulations can be taken as a reliable sign of other traits mentioned; and it involves as a necessary condition for its being warranted, the possibility of verifying these formulations through controlled sensory observation by anyone prepared to make the effort to verify them.
In consequence, we can know that a man fleeing from a pursuing crowd is in a state of fear, that he is fleeing, and that he is fleeing from a pursuing crowd, without having experienced such emotions ourselves. Of course, we do not have the capacity to imagine what it is like to be a man fleeing from a pursuing crowd, but we can know that the state of fear and the behavior of fleeing are observable facts about human beings. According to the theory of symbolic interactionism, we understand these behaviors by observing the behaviors of others and comparing them to our own experiences. In other words, we understand human beings by observing and interpreting their behaviors and the context in which they occur.

What types of factors does the author cite that are both non-subjective and necessary for the explanation and understanding of some kinds of human conduct? What objections does the author cite to the view that understanding others' behavior must be based solely on observers' introspections into their own sentiments?

Questions for Reflection and Research

1. Read Max Weber's 'The Theory of Social and Economic Organization' and Peter Winch's 'The Idea of a Social Science.' Has Nagel fairly represented the authors' views?
2. Is the following true: When we use our native language, we learn to understand human beings? If it is true, why should we need social and behavioral sciences to understand human beings? If it is false, why not? (See selections #30 by Hoepers and #35 by Louch for some opinions on this.)
3. Are the social and behavioral sciences modeled on the physical sciences? What differences are there? (See Nagel #36 and Louch #35.)
4. Do contemporary practicing psychologists and sociologists agree with Nagel's views on the social sciences to comment? Louch #35 in psychology and the social sciences to comment.
5. Do Nagel's views contain any explicit or implicit answer to the views of Land in section #35 with Hoepers' comments on purpose in selection #36 with Nagel's views?

Reading Questions

1. How do Nagel's opponents think the study of human conduct must be carried out? How do they think the methods needed differ from those needed for the natural sciences?