Philosophy of Social Science
The Methods, Ideals, and Politics of Social Inquiry

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Sorting data into kinds

The facts gathered through interviews or experiments are sorted and organized. The subjects of these interviews and experiments are kinds of subjects. They are selected, observed, tested, or interviewed as subjects with a sexual preference, marital status, educational history, religious affiliation, occupation, income, wealth, or employment record. Sociologists who study suicide, stress, personality disorders, addiction, or depression among single and married adults over 65 sort their subjects by age, marital status, and state of mind. Political scientists who study the political party loyalty of Polish Americans and Irish Americans in a Presidential election sort theirs by political affiliation, ethnicity, and level of political interest.

Every social scientist sorts her subjects by one set of kinds or into one set of categories rather than another – for example, by race rather than sex, sex rather than class, or class rather than education – and chooses one definition of sex, race, class, or educational level over many possible others. The practice of sorting, I argue in this chapter, is not value-neutral. Nevertheless, Weber’s distinction between value-relevance and value-freedom does nothing to reveal or highlight the partisanship or role that values play in sorting the data and organizing the facts; for the selection of kinds is a matter neither of selecting a question to study nor of remaining silent on questions of value, but rather of deciding who the subjects of the study are and how they are to be represented.

My purpose in this chapter is to highlight the partisanship – to show how values influence the choice of kinds in the social sciences and how kinds play a role in normalizing human subjects and regulating social practice. First, however, I survey some recent discussions of natural kinds in science and consider whether any of the kinds in the social sciences are natural kinds. Second, I consider the claim that social scientists do not discover, but rather invent or construct, the categories or kinds into which they sort their data. Next, I explain how, in sorting their data
into kinds, social scientists pass the values of the community on to the data and how, in employing the kinds to observe, examine, and train their subjects, social scientists pass the values back to the community.

Naturalism and nonnaturalism

What is the relationship between the social sciences and the kinds into which they classify or sort their subjects? Are the kinds in the social sciences invented or discovered by the social scientist? On one view of the social sciences, the naturalistic view, most are discovered; for they are natural kinds and exist independently of the social scientists' efforts to identify or sort individuals, groups, practices, or institutions by kind. Kinds like age, race, or sex, on this view, are independent of the scientists' practice of sorting subjects by age, race, or sex.

According to the naturalist, social scientists discover what kinds their subjects are — homosexuals, alcoholics, adolescents, blacks, whites, or middle class — just as natural scientists discover electrons, atoms, molecules, elements, planets, volcanoes, and biological species, and both adolescents and planets are naturally occurring and proper subjects for science to study. There were adolescents, on the naturalist view, just as there were planets before there was a science to identify, record, compare, classify, measure, or understand them.

On another view of the social sciences, the nonnaturalist view, most of the kinds of the social sciences are invented, constructed, or made up rather than discovered, detected, or unearthed. The kinds of people, roles, aspirations, life-styles, sexualities, ideologies, sexes, races, affinities, statuses, and relationships described in the social sciences would not be as they are had the practice of collecting, recording, comparing, organizing, and analyzing anthropological, sociological, economic, historical, psychological, or political data been different or not existed. The kinds the social scientists identify, on this view, do not represent an independently existing social reality or any real unity between things, but a reality made up by the scientists' own practices or a diffuse motley held together by the scientists' own projects and interests.

Abnormal psychology is a source of many of the nonnaturalist's examples. In the nineteenth century, it seems, psychiatrists made up many different kinds of sexual perversion. As Michel Foucault writes:

The homosexual was now a species... So too were all those minor perverts whom nineteenth-century psychiatrists entomologized by giving them strange baptismal names: there was Kraftf-Ebing's zoophiles and zoearasts, Rohleder's auto-monosexualists; and later, mixoscopophiles, gynecomasts, presbyophiles, sexoesthetic inverts, and dyspereunist women. These fine names of heresies referred to a nature that was overlooked by the law, but not so neglectful of itself that it did not go on producing more species, even where there was no order to fit them into. The machinery of power that focused on this whole alien strain did not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies, slipped in beneath modes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a raison d'être and a natural order of disorder. Not the exclusion of these thousand aberrant sexualities, but the specification, the regional solidification of each one of them. The strategy behind this dissemination was to strew reality with them and incorporate them into the individual.

On Foucault's view, Kraftf-Ebing did not discover zoophiles and zoearasts but invented them. If auto-monosexualists and sexoesthetic inverts were kinds of patients in Rohleder's examining rooms, their aberrant sexualities were due as much to Rohleder's practice of sorting them as to anything in their minds or out in nature; and if Foucault is correct, then zoophiles, zoearasts, auto-monosexualists, and sexoesthetic inverts are not natural kinds studied by psychologists but nonnatural kinds invented by them in the course of diagnosing and treating the ills of their clients.

Natural kinds

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, biologists wondered whether their taxonomies of plants and animals were natural. Were kingdoms, phyla, classes, orders, families, genera, species, and varieties in nature or merely in the way that biologists had chosen to think or talk about nature? If vertebrates are a natural kind of animal, then biologists discover them; but if they are merely an assortment of animals that biologists have chosen to lump together for practical reasons, like animals amusing to children, run over by cars, or eaten by Englishmen, then vertebrates are the biologists' invention.

A similar question arises in chemistry. The periodic table of chemical elements includes 103 kinds of elements. Did chemists discover the table or invent it? If the elements are natural kinds, then the chemists discovered the table; but substances can be sorted in many ways — by atomic number or by more tangible properties like color, luster, hardness, ductility,
corrosiveness, odor, and toxicity. The question is, which reflect the order of nature and which the nature of the interests of the chemists who are sorting them. Kinds that are in nature or reflect the natural order of things are called “natural kinds,” while those that reflect some human interest or the way a group of people have chosen to think or talk about nature are nonnatural or constructed. The distinction between natural and nonnatural kinds is important in natural sciences like biology and chemistry, for a central aim of these sciences is to discover the laws of nature, and the laws of biology and chemistry cannot be true of any odd mix or assortment of things – for example, silver-colored metals, soda pop, weeds, house pets, or road kills – but only of things with some common, underlying causal history or structure – for example, platinum, potassium, and polonium, or orchids, oaks, and oaks.

The distinction between kinds – natural versus made up – does not travel well from the natural to the social sciences; for most of the kinds into which the social sciences sort their subjects are based on human interest or invention and seem not to reflect nature at all, but rather the way in which communities of men and women have chosen to organize and regulate their lives. Subjects of the social sciences may be sorted by age, sex, race, class, gender, marital status, occupation, religion, political affiliation, citizenship, school grade, or criminal record, but the existence of most if not all of these kinds depends as much on the surrounding social conventions or legal regulations as on anything in the subjects themselves. In a state of nature – that is, in the absence of all social and political regulation and authority – people would have no marital status, gender, occupation, citizenship, religion, race, or class and arguably even no sex.

The kinds of crimes enumerated in our criminal codes are the result of our efforts or our ancestors’ efforts to devise and maintain a particular system of criminal justice. Forgers, swindlers, arsonists, pornographers, and extortionists were created, not discovered, in the course of drafting and enforcing criminal laws and regulations. Marital status is a kind in the social sciences, but since it relies on the social and legal institutions of marriage and divorce, we can hardly call it “natural.” Had the laws or conventions that give people a marital status not been invented or adopted, no one would be single, married, widowed, or divorced, and there would be no husbands or wives for sociologists or psychologists to sort. If natural kinds must be independent of human interest and invention, few of the kinds into which social scientists sort their subjects are natural kinds or kinds in nature.

To speak of natural kinds in the social sciences, the notion of “natural” must be adjusted to reflect the fact that how a social scientist sorts her subjects almost always depends on some past or present choice of norms or regulations. A distinction between natural and nonnatural kinds must be a distinction between kinds discovered and kinds invented by the social sciences. Both sociology and criminal law sort people as minors or adults, as swindlers, forgers, arsonists, or sex offenders, but if the existence of these kinds was established by the law before people were sorted thus by the sociologist, then, in relation to sociology, the kinds could be called “natural.” What the one institution invents, the other can discover or observe; so, once the law invents the forger and the arsonist, sociology can discover them.

A kind that is made up or invented by the state or the Church, on this view, can be naturally occurring in relation to a science. Relative to sociology, for example, the distinction between minors and adults is naturally occurring if sociology has no hand in the laws or regulations that invent and sustain that distinction. In relation to the voting rights and regulations of a community, the distinction between eligible and ineligible voters is not naturally occurring; but if the rights and regulations are free of the hand of political science, the distinction is naturally occurring relative to the science. The distinction is no longer between invented and discovered kinds but between kinds invented and those discovered in the course of doing social science.

Evolutionary biologists, in treating a cluster of characteristics as a trait and asking whether it is adaptive, are treating the cluster as a natural kind. Richard Lewontin questions whether these clusters are natural kinds by calling attention to the role of human interest in drawing the characteristics together as a kind.

Hidden in adaptive analyses are a number of assumptions that go back to theistic views of nature and to a naive Cartesianism. First, it must be assumed that the partitioning of organisms into traits and the partitioning of the environment into problems has a real basis and is not simply the reification of intuitive human categories. In what natural sense is a fin, leg or wing an individual trait whose evolution can be understood in terms of the particular problem it solves? If the leg is a trait, is each part of the leg also a trait? At what level of subdivision do the boundaries no longer correspond to “natural” divisions? . . . . As we move from anatomical features to descriptions of behavior, the danger of reification becomes greater. Animal behavior is described by such categories as aggression, altruism, parental investment, warfare, slave-making, and cooperation, and each of these “organs of behavior” is provided with an adaptive explanation by finding the problem to which it is a solution.
Alternatively, "the problems" to be solved in adaptation also may be arbitrary reifications.

If the parts of a fish that make up a fin or the stretches of behavior that constitute warfare do not have any real basis but are reifications of intuitive human categories, then fins and warfare are not natural kinds. Moreover, adaptive explanations of fins or warfare would be explanations not of any natural occurring phenomena but only of phenomena as interpreted or individuated to serve some human purpose or interest.

Nevertheless, fins and warfare could be natural kinds in relation to biology; for we could ask whether the phenomena were individuated thus before biologists began to study them. Here the distinction is not between invented and discovered kinds but between kinds invented and kinds discovered by the biologist. However, only biological traits are subject to biological evolution, and a cluster of characteristics is not a biological trait unless the characteristics form a natural kind tout court — that is, a kind discovered by the biologist and invented by no one before her. Fins, for example, are not biological traits or selected for by evolution if the practice of sorting parts as fins was invented by taxidermists or fishermen; and aggression is not a biological trait if the practice of sorting behavior as aggressive was invented by policemen or psychologists.

Lewontin’s point is that many traits that biologists call "adaptive" are not biological traits at all, because the cluster of characteristics is a kind held together not by nature but only by human and often ideological interests.

A cluster of characteristics not held together by nature — not a natural kind tout court — is not a proper subject for a biological theory, but can be a proper subject for a theory in the social sciences. Fencers, swindlers, and arsonists are nonnatural kinds. The individuals who are sorted together as criminals or criminals of a certain kind are held together not by nature but by the criminal laws and the various interests served by the laws. The kinds were invented; but as long as they were not invented by the particular science, the scientist can offer a theory about them. Her theory will have limited application; it will be relevant only in the presence of the laws and only within a society in which criminals are so finely sorted. Nevertheless, within these limits, the social scientist can use her theory to predict or explain facts about forgers, swindlers, and arsonists; outside the limits, however, her theory predicts and explains nothing at all.

On Michel Foucault’s view, the hands of the social scientists are everywhere, for most of the kinds they employ they have some hand in devising. The kinds of aberrant sexualities described by psychiatrists in the nineteenth century were made up by the psychiatrists and then adopted by their subjects. Many kinds of deviant behavior are recognized by both the law and the social sciences — for example, sexual assault, drug abuse, and clinical depression — but, as Foucault sees it, the sciences did not discover what the law invented but invented what the law subsequently discovered. Foucault’s views are controversial, not only because he says that so many kinds of people are made up but also because he says that so many are made up by the social sciences. The role of the sciences in making up kinds of people or traits can be made clearer by employing the philosopher’s distinction between nature and convention.

Institutional and brute facts

In the Republic, Plato draws a distinction between brute facts — nature — and institutional facts — convention. Socrates wants to know whether moral facts — that is, facts about what constitutes a just man or a just action — are brute or institutional. The existence of institutional facts, as John Searle explains:

presupposes the existence of certain human institutions. It is only given the institution of marriage that certain forms of behavior constitute Mr. Smith's marrying Miss Jones. Similarly, it is only given the institution of baseball that certain movements by certain men constitute the Dodgers' beating the Giants 3 to 2 in eleven innings. And, at an even simpler level, it is only given the institution of money that I now have a five dollar bill in my hand. Take away the institution and all I have is a piece of paper with various gray and green markings.

The issue for Socrates is whether justice is like a five-dollar bill, whether the facts about who is just and unjust remain the same when human institutions and conventions change. Is giving each man his due just when the norms and regulations are those of Sparta, he asks, or only when they are those of Athens?

Plato’s distinction between brute and institutional facts is useful in sorting the kinds employed in the social sciences. The fact that anyone under the age of 21 is a minor is an institutional fact. It is only in virtue of our present laws that people in this age-group are minors rather than adults. As a result, the fact that people can be sorted into the two kinds, minors and adults, is an institutional fact. On the other hand, the fact that they can be sorted into the two kinds — those under and those not under 21 years of age — is not an institutional but a brute fact. Natural
kinds are brute, while nonnatural or constructed kinds are institutional.

Most of the kinds in the social sciences are institutional, since the fact that they sort the subjects of the sciences is a fact only in relation to some social institution(s). Social scientists cannot expect to find that people are either minors or adults, employed or unemployed, voters or nonvoters, married or unmarried, in every society or culture they study. The distinction between being an employed and an unemployed person, for example, as important as it is to the study of capitalist societies, has no application to a hunting-gathering society.

Kinds, I am suggesting, can be brute (natural) in the context of one institution and institutional (made up) in the context of another. Nuns, for example, are natural kinds in relation to US law but made up in relation to the Church; for the fact that no males are nuns or that no nuns are married is a brute fact in the context of US law but an institutional fact in the context of the Church. To sort a kind in a social science as natural, it is not necessary that the supporting facts be brute, but only brute in relation to that science.

To take an extended example, childhood as a period or stage in life is treated as a brute fact by a number of social sciences. Psychologists and sociologists sort the ages between 4 and 12 as ages of childhood, and formulate and test hypotheses about people in this stage of their lives — for example that the first stages of morality are acquired during childhood. In terms of traits important to the science, each person between 4 and 12 is thought to be more like every other than like any person either older or younger.

The social historian Philippe Aries maintains that during the Middle Ages there was no childhood and that the years between 4 and 12 were not a stage in life; hence childhood is not a brute but an institutional fact. In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, as the young were weaned, so they began to take on the burdens, dress, and roles of adults, he says, and there was no period of transition between child-in-arms and adulthood:

The men of the tenth and twelfth centuries did not dwell on the image of childhood, and the image had neither interest nor even reality for them. It suggests too that in the realm of real life, and not simply in that of aesthetic transposition, childhood was a period or transition which passed quickly and which was just as quickly forgotten.

The group of people between 4 and 12 were not seen as forming a kind; no one’s identity was tied to being at this stage in his or her life.

At the end of the Middle Ages, as the demands of adult life began to change, it came to be believed that 4- to 12-year-olds were not ready for adult life and should be subjected to special treatment and afforded special care before being allowed to join adults. The core of this special treatment, according to Aries, was schooling; and at the beginning of the fifteenth century, there was a great growth of interest in education among churchmen, lawyers, and scholars. The school removed 4- to 12-year-olds from adult life and helped to construct a stage in life between child-in-arms and adult where there had been none before. Childhood as a kind was further shaped by the invention of modern sciences such as psychology and pediatrics which adopted childhood as a category. "New sciences such as psycho-analysis, pediatrics and psychology devote themselves to the problems of childhood, and their findings are transmitted to parents by way of a mass of popular literature. Our world is obsessed by the physical, moral and sexual problems of childhood." The existence of childhood as a kind is due, on Aries’s view, to changes or developments in a number of social institutions, including education and science.

Childhood, on Aries’s analysis, is not a natural kind, for the fact that 6-year-olds are in their childhood is not a brute but an institutional fact. Churchmen, lawyers, scholars, educators, and scientists did not discover childhood but invented it. But if churchmen deserve most of the credit and science very little, then there is reason to say that childhood was nonnatural and made up in relation to the Church but natural and discovered relative to the sciences.

As a second example, consider prostitution. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, prostitution in Europe was something poor women moved in and out of as they did other forms of labor. As one social historian writes about fifteenth-century France:

By the age of thirty, most prostitutes had a real chance of becoming reintegrated into society. . . . Since public opinion did not view them with disgust, and since they were on good terms with priests and men of the law, it was not too difficult for them to find a position as servant or wife. To many city people, public prostitution represented a partial atonement for past misconduct. Many bachelors had compassion and sympathy for prostitutes, and finally, the local charitable foundations of the municipal authorities felt a charitable impulse to give special help to these repentant Magdals and to open their way to marriage by dowering them. Marriage was definitely the most frequent end to the career of communal prostitutes who had roots in the town where they have publicly offered their bodies.
A prostitute was seen not as a kind of woman – the way a noble or aristocratic woman might have been – but as a poor woman trying to support herself through work. As Carol Pateman writes, "Prostitutes were not seen as a special class of women, nor were they isolated from other workers or working-class communities; there was no specialized 'profession' of prostitution." But attitudes towards prostitution changed as a result of changes in the way in which prostitution was regulated.

In Britain, for example, prostitution in the contemporary sense emerged from developments precipitated by the Contagious Disease Acts (1864, 1866, 1869). Under the Acts, women in military towns could be identified as "common prostitutes" by plain-clothes policemen, compulsorily subjected to gynaecological examination for venereal disease and, if infected, confined to a lock hospital. The new laws and the practices of observation, examination, separation, and incarceration that served to enforce them created a new way for a woman to be a woman: she could be a prostitute, but as such she would be unfit for other womanly work or marriage and unsuited for compassion or sympathy. As a prostitute, she would deserve special attention, supervision, treatment, or punishment and be made to stand apart from other women who were in most respects – young, poor, and powerless – the same.

The study and regulation of prostitution after the passage of the Contagious Disease Acts became a cottage industry, and prostitutes came to be seen increasingly in social scientific terms – for example, as sociopaths and psychological deviants – and less in medical terms – for example, as carriers of venereal disease.

There is a huge literature on the subject of prostitution, including many official reports, and a good deal of attention has been devoted to the psychology and psychopathology of the prostitute. In 1969 a pamphlet widely read by probation officers in Britain talked of the "proof that prostitution is a primitive and regressive manifestation"; and a Home Office report in 1974 stated that the "way of life of a prostitute is so remarkably a rejection of the normal ways of society as to bear comparison with that of a drug addict."

With the flood of literature, reports, and studies of prostitution, prostitutes became important subjects in the social sciences as well as prominent objects of legal control and regulation. They were now a kind of woman in the laboratories and examining rooms of the sciences, as well as in the law courts and prisons of the state.

Before the passage of the Contagious Disease Acts, women were not sorted as prostitutes, but after passage they were. Parliament and the Home Office didn't discover but invented prostitutes. Of course, there was prostitution before laws were passed to regulate and control it, but the laws did more than attempt to control acts of prostitution; they attributed the acts to a kind of woman and devised means to make her a major object of public policy and law enforcement. Whereas, before the regulation, there had been only acts of prostitution, after the regulation, there were prostitutes – a kind of person for the individuals who engaged in prostitution to be.

Prostitutes, if Pateman is right, are not a natural kind; for the fact that women who receive money for sex are prostitutes is not a brute but an institutional fact. The invention of prostitutes was motivated by an interest in controlling the sexual lives of women and preventing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. If Parliament and the Home Office deserve most, and psychology little, of the credit for the invention, there is reason to say that prostitutes are nonnatural or made up in relation to law but natural and discovered in relation to psychology.

The issue raised by Foucault's work is whether kinds invented by the modern state are ever invented without some assistance from the social sciences, or, in other words, whether the institutional fact that two people share the same marital status, religious affiliation, academic degree, criminal record, or tax bracket would have been a fact had the social sciences not existed or had they not sorted people by marital status, religious affiliation, and so on. On Foucault's view, the institutions of the state – the schools, clinics, military, and prisons – are dependent on the social sciences, and would not be able to sort people the way they do without the work done by these sciences. As a result, on his view, few if any of the kinds into which social scientists sort their data are natural in relation to the social sciences.

Social reality

Though few of the kinds or categories of the social sciences reflect the natural order of things – one that exists independently of anyone's attempts to classify or sort them – they are not myths or fictions; for the social world adjusts to fit our descriptions of it in a way that the natural world does not. As Foucault writes about the category of the individual:

The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an "ideological" representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this
specific technology of power that I have called “discipline.” We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” or “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” or “conceals.” In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.

The same point could be made about the category of childhood. The invention of childhood influenced attitudes towards 4- to 12-year-olds, and the attitudes, in turn, influenced the way they behaved. The invention was also enforced by regulations. The sexuality, dress, play, and training of people in this age-group were directed and limited by regulations governing the treatment and behavior of children. Over time, people in this age-group accommodated themselves to these regulations and became the kind of people that educators and churchmen had decided they ought to be. As Ian Hacking explains, categories of people can come into existence, and kinds of people can come into being to fit them.

The social world changes to fit our ways of classifying it, because the world is constituted of agents, and agents interpret some classifications as norms to which to conform their behavior. As people at the end of the Middle Ages conformed to the regulations of childhood, those called “children” came to share a distinctive cluster of characteristics. Moreover, the characteristics seemed to hang together and form a trait, because each was sustained by the same system of regulation governing the behavior and treatment of 4- to 12-year-olds.

The categories of homosexual and heterosexual offer another example of how people can change to match the way in which authoritative people talk about them. According to Foucault:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was his insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature.

Though men have had sex with one another from the earliest times, those actions did not identify a kind of person until the nineteenth century. There were no homosexuals, heterosexuals, or bisexuals in ancient Greece, despite the facts of man–boy love and sodomy; for there was no practice there of sorting people by how and with whom they were sexually active.

In the nineteenth century, as Foucault tells it, sex was spoken, written, speculated, fantasied, confessed, warned, worried, complained, and cautioned about in new ways and in infinite and intimate detail.

Rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of language, what distinguished these last centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak for itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse. Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal proprieties imposed by the Age of Reason, what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse.

As part of the new preoccupation with sex and the profusion of language about sex came a technology for observing, comparing, measuring, detecting, unmasking, revealing, recording, collecting, examining, and investigating facts about sex. The devices intended to prohibit people from becoming certain kinds of sexual subjects — for example, lusty women or homosexual men — made it possible for them to become nymphomaniacs or homosexuals; just as the devices for protecting children, according to Aries, had the effect of making it possible for them to become children in need of protection. The language, the preoccupation, and the technology gave rise to new ways for people to be sorted and new kinds for people to be. The homosexual was one of these new kinds, and the regulatory force of the language used to describe him made men who have sex with one another into homosexuals.

Value-neutrality and the invention of kinds

Value-freedom is an ideal for naturalists and nonnaturalists alike. Social scientists like John Stuart Mill, who believe that the social scientist's kinds are discovered, and nonnaturalists like Weber, who believe that they are invented, both believe that social scientists should describe but not prescribe the facts of social life. The issue between Mill and Weber
is not whether the social sciences should include judgments of political value but whether only ordinary class-terms should be employed in the social sciences. Weber, as I explain in chapter 2, maintains that the social sciences should employ ideal-types as well as ordinary class-terms but that, when employing the types, social scientists should not say that their subjects ought to conform to them.

Foucault agrees with Weber that kinds in the social sciences are ideal-types and so are invented rather than discovered, but he believes that kinds are laden with political values. On his view, when social scientists employ their ideal-types, they prescribe how society ought to be, as well as how it is. The choice of kinds and the practice of sorting people in economics, psychology, and sociology, according to Foucault, are part of the rise and deployment of a form of political power and control – the decentralized and anonymous power characteristic of the modern industrial state. Since their rise in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the social sciences, he argues, have been a part of a “regime of power” – along with the Church, the military, the school, the prison, and the clinic – that have introduced new ways of maintaining social control and public order.

The social sciences are disciplines, branches of knowledge and teaching, but the knowledge they offer is knowledge with which to discipline – that is, isolate, examine, treat, regulate, and manage their subjects.

The juridico-anthropological functioning revealed in the whole history of modern penalty did not originate in the superimposition of the human sciences on criminal justice and in the requirements proper to this new rationality or to the humanism that it appeared to bring with it; it originated in the disciplinary technique that operated these new mechanisms of normalizing judgment.

On Foucault’s view, there is no distinction between pure and applied research or between theory and practice in the social sciences, for in sorting subjects as criminals, inmates, and sexual deviants, social scientists are engaging in a form of politics. No boundary can be drawn between where the work of the social sciences ends and the work of the other centers of power, such as schools, clinics, and prisons, begins.

Whereas on the liberal’s view, the choice of kinds in the social sciences serves every political interest or program equally well; on Foucault’s, the choice depends on how well the kind serves the society’s interests in social control. Because the social sciences are an instrument of a particular kind or variety of political power, they are not, on Foucault’s view, politically neutral.

The issue, for Foucault, is not whether social scientists personally favor the political practices or arrangements served by their inventions but whether their inventions favor these arrangements. On Foucault’s account, the inventions not only favor the rise and growth of the bureaucratic state; they favor the ideals of such a state by making up people as clients, patients, welfare-recipients, legal and illegal aliens, employed and unemployed, graduates and dropouts.

Liberals would separate the social scientists’ reasons for inventing or choosing their ideal-types from the values served by their use in the context of a political practice. The types are free of political values, on their view, unless the values on which social scientists base their choice of types are political. Foucault denies such a separation. On his view, the scientists’ own reasons or intentions matter less than the ends their choices serve. Since, on his view, they serve the ends of domination and control – for example, of children by adults, the mentally incompetent by the competent, the sexually maladjusted by the sexually adjusted, the law enforcer over the lawbreaker, doctors over patients, teachers over students – the ideal-types or kinds invented or chosen in the social sciences are not neutral on the value of one kind of person dominating or being dominated by another.

Normalizing judgments and invented kinds

Weber’s quarrel is with social scientists who advocate or attempt to impart political values from their pulpits. On Foucault’s view, there can be no neutrality from the pulpit, for the kinds employed in the social sciences do not merely sort the subjects of the science but normalize and regulate them as well. Kinds like the insane, the juvenile delinquent, the learning-disabled, the alcoholic, the sexual abuser, or the rational economic man are not merely organizing but normalizing concepts, for they do not merely draw together what is; they prescribe what ought to be and bridge the division liberals draw between the realms of fact and value.

Take as an example the category of public opinion, which is often cited to legitimate the policies of the modern democratic state. Opinion research presents itself as an objective way of measuring public opinion. Social scientists teach that opinion research enables institutions to operate more democratically, for it can be used to supplement the market and the voting booth as a ground for democratic, public choice.

However, public opinion is not a natural kind, even in relation to the
science or discipline of opinion research. The individual opinions that opinion research samples and records are constructed, rather than discovered, by the procedures that record them; for subjects are encouraged to express opinions even when they have none, and the opinions they express are often stereotypes offered in place of, rather than as a reflection of, any understanding or convictions of their own. Finally, there is nothing really public about the opinions collected in opinion research, for, as the social scientist uses the term, “public” means no more than a collection of individual or private opinions. Opinions are sorted as public even though they are not based on any process of public discussion or debate. In short, the fact that public opinion supports American policies in the Middle East is an institutional rather than a brute fact about the attitudes and values of American citizens, and the institutions that invent the fact include the discipline of opinion research.

Though public opinion is invented rather than discovered by opinion research, it serves as a norm against which public policy and choice are judged to be legitimate or illegitimate. Policies on taxes, health care, child care, housing, employment discrimination, privacy, flag burning, pornography, and mergers and acquisitions are formulated, revised, and defended in light of public opinion, and the scientists’ invention is offered in support of the practices of business and government. Though the researcher does not recommend public policy or argue that public policy should reflect public opinion, her practice of devising opinion surveys and sorting public responses is not neutral on questions of political legitimacy, for it creates the illusion of a democratic process in the absence of the reality.

Once subjects are sorted into one of a fixed number of kinds, the kinds guide those with the authority to administer public policy or regulate public life. Teachers, lawyers, doctors, managers, and government officials observe, examine, treat, counsel, discipline, advise, employ, or educate the subjects as if they fit smoothly and neatly into the scientific categories. As Murray Edelman observes:

Any categorization scheme that consigns people to niches according to their actual or potential accomplishments or behavior is bound to be political, no matter what its scientific function is. IQ’s; psychiatric labels; typologies of talent, skills, or knowledge; employment statuses; criminal statuses; personality types – all exemplify the point... Once established, a categorization defines what is relevant about the people who are labelled. It encourages others to seek out data and interpret developments so as to confirm the label and to ignore, discount, or reinterpret counter-evidence.

Housing, clothing, entertainment, employment, education, social work, law enforcement, publishing, broadcasting, art, medical care, religion, and politics are tailored, pitched, shaped, adjusted, or developed to respond to the subjects of the liberal sciences as if they were completely and accurately described as child-abusers, psychotics, co-dependents, prostitutes, rational economic men, homosexuals, alcoholics, underachievers, overachievers, or handicapped – that is, by the idealized language of the sciences.

The sorting carried out by the sciences is reproduced and reinforced by the labelling and targeting of the helping professions, business, government, and the media, and the more the categories direct public and private response to the subjects and affect their standing in the community, the more they serve as a norm.

The language of “reinforcement” and “help” evokes in our minds a world in which the weak and the wayward need to be controlled for their own good. The language of “authority” and “repression” evokes a different reality, in which the rights of the powerless need to be protected against abuse by the powerful. Each linguistic form marshals public support for professional and governmental practices that have profound political consequences for the status, the rights, and the freedom of professionals, of clients, and of the wider public as well.

The cutting, trimming, and molding of the subject begun in the course of pure research is continued when the findings are used to administer public policy, engage in clinical practice, or carry out the work of a profession.

Moreover, the kinds are guides not only as to how others should treat or view the subjects but also as to how the subjects should comport or view themselves; they serve as norms against which the subjects correct and appraise not only the behavior of others but their own as well. When economists sort firms by how well they maximize profits, sales, or market share, the firms take increased profits, sales, or market share as the norm; for within schools of business, banks, brokerage houses, and offices of government they are a measure of the health or quality of the firm. Economists need not say that a firm ought to increase profits, for, in the context of the prevailing teaching and writing about the market behavior of firms, sorting firms by profit is to appraise them.

The inventions of the social scientist influence her subjects, and those that are used in the helping professions to discipline, reform, cure, or educate students, clients, patients, or inmates serve to evaluate them as
well. In sorting subjects as heterosexual or homosexual, social scientists not only make up people; they also direct the helping professions to change them and make them better, for in the clinic, barracks, church, and school, homosexuality is treated as a pathology or deviation from an accepted and valued norm. When people are sorted as homosexuals, the clinic has a reason to treat them, the military a reason to exclude them, and the Church a reason to deny them grace.

Psychiatry, until recently, defined homosexuality as a mental illness, and, given the aims of psychiatry — namely, to treat the mentally ill and adjust the psychologically maladjusted — a judgment made in a psychiatric clinic that a patient was homosexual was a recommendation for treatment. For the psychiatrist, homosexuals were not only a kind of person, they were a kind of ill or maladjusted person — one in need of a cure. To describe a person as a homosexual was not itself a reason for a doctor's intervention; but to so describe him in the examining room of a psychiatric clinic was a reason, and the description directed doctors to remake their patients into new, more acceptable kinds of sexual beings.

According to the liberal view of the social sciences, the meaning of a kind can always be distinguished from its use. As a result, the fact that the kinds of the social sciences are used in partisan ways to examine, treat, or discipline some subjects does not show, liberals would say, that the kinds are themselves partisan. In merely sorting men as homosexuals, the psychiatrist is not endorsing any of the practices that await those men as a result of their being so sorted.

In chapter 9, I raise general objections to the liberal's distinction between the meaning and use of kinds or categories in the social sciences; but here, where the kinds in question are nonnatural or invented by social scientists, the distinction is especially lame, for the kinds were invented for a use and, as a result, when the social scientists sort their subjects, they endorse the uses their inventions are intended to serve. If psychiatrists invent a category of sexual deviants in order to diagnose and treat some of their clients, they can't maintain, while sorting the latter as deviants, that they don't endorse the diagnosis or support the treatment.

**Normalizing judgments and discovered kinds**

According to his critics, Foucault overestimates the influence of the social sciences in creating and sustaining the modern state. But even if Foucault's critics are correct, the question of whether kinds like the homosexual or the alcoholic are invented remains open; for even if they were discovered by the social scientist, they were invented by other authorities as part of the practice of medicine, religion, schooling, or the law. Even if there are bigamists, adulterers, sodomites, prostitutes, pornographers, forgers, swindlers, arsonists, or perjurers in possible worlds that do not include the social sciences, there are none in worlds that do not include a criminal justice system. A person can be one of these kinds of offenders only because authorities within the criminal justice system sort violators of the law in this way.

Kinds invented in the practice of religion, law, or schooling are not value-neutral. They serve the political values and policies of the Church, legislature, courts, offices of law enforcement, prison system, and schools. For example, according to Foucault, in the eighteenth century governments began to sort groups of people as a population, and the practice of sorting influenced and was influenced by policies designed to maintain a new form of social and political order.

One of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of “population” as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded. Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with a “people,” but with a “population,” with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illness, patterns of diet and habitation. All of these variables were situated at the point where the characteristic movements of life and the specific effects of institutions intersected.32

In calling subjects or a people “a population,” governments were not only describing them but recommending that they be continuously observed, surveyed, measured, recorded, registered, and documented; and their interest in recommending such treatment was in making the surveillance and discipline of parents, children, debtors, paupers, tradesmen, churchmen, laborers, citizens, and aliens easier, more reliable, and exacting.

In taking kinds over from the law, the schools, and the Church, the social sciences accept their normalizing judgments and help to maintain the discipline. Consider, for example, the one kind of domestic partnership recognized by the law — namely, marriage. Governments sort adults who share a household into one of two categories: married or unmarried. Public policy is not neutral on marriage, for married couples are accorded powers and statuses and are eligible for benefits unavailable to unmarried
she can decide not to sort her subjects as heterosexual or homosexual or as married or unmarried and sort them instead into kinds she approves of. Instead of studying whether men who live with wives are less likely to suffer some pathological condition -- for example, clinical depression or hypertension -- than those who don't, she can study whether men with domestic partners are less likely to suffer the condition.

However, social scientists cannot through their own efforts alone invent kinds like "domestic partners" for couples to be; in order for the partners to be a kind of couple, more is needed than a scientist's label. The partners must be seen by others in the community and see themselves as deserving of special consideration and respect. They must be placed in the community's records -- medical, employment, tax, school, credit, criminal, police, military, and financial records -- as domestic partners and be eligible for benefits that the community reserves for relationships that it recognizes officially and takes seriously.

The scientist cannot invent "domestic partners" and decide to study whether the incidence of clinical depression in some community is higher for men with domestic partners than for men without them. To study the question, the fact of domestic partnerships has to be a fact for members of the partners' community; for unless the partnerships have some social standing, there will be no data to collect -- no records of which men do and do not have domestic partners and no way to determine which men to examine or investigate -- and no reason to suspect that the partnerships have any effect on the physical or mental condition of men in that community.

The social scientist who does not approve of the way in which men are sorted by the government or in the economy cannot merely interpose her values between the men and the practice of sorting them; she must undertake to change the practice itself. She cannot remain disinterested and stand apart from the lives of her subjects, but must join forces with them and work for social change. To add domestic partnerships to the categories of her science, she must see that the government or economy adds them to the ways it records, examines, normalizes, and regulates people.

The idea that a scientist should join forces with her subjects -- give them power and authority over the conduct of her research or work with them to bring about changes in their lives -- opposes the ideals of liberal science. In particular, it opposes the ideals of value-neutrality and objectivity and the distinction between studying the world -- that is, observing it as it is -- and trying to change it -- that is, trying to make it as it ought to be -- that lies at the heart of a liberal philosophy of science. A social scientist who does not wish to limit herself to the kinds she
has discovered, because she does not wish to affirm the values that lie behind them, must trade her liberal ideal for a perfectionist one. She cannot merely change her scientific practice; she must also change the aims and ideals of her science.

In chapter 10, I take up the matter of perfectionist science and explain how some perfectionist approaches to science require the scientist to be more than an observer and her subjects to be more than objects of observation. However, what matters here is that there is a way for the social scientist to sort her subjects that does not affirm values she does not approve of; but it is a way that she can find only by giving up the myth of nonpartisanship and the ideal of neutrality.

Conclusion

Social scientists must decide how to sort their data. Usually they decide to be uncritical and to merely appropriate the categories employed in their subjects' own community; but sometimes they invent their own categories and sort their subjects differently from the way they are sorted at home. In either case, their decisions are not value-neutral, for they normalize the subject and support those political or social policies that are made possible by the norms. Social scientists are not only describing their subjects when they sort them by kind; they are directing their treatment by others and limiting the choices that it is reasonable for those subjects to make.

NOTES

1 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, pp. 44–5.
3 For a discussion of whether sex is a natural or nonnatural kind, see S. J. Kessler and W. McKenna, Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach (University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 42–80.
4 See chapter 4 for a discussion of adaptive explanations in biology and the social sciences.
6 For more on Lewontin's criticisms of adaptationism, see chapter 4.
7 See Plato, Republic, Book I, 338c–354c.
11 Ibid., p. 34.
12 Ibid., p. 411.
13 Aries's history is controversial. Most of his evidence concerns the representation of children in paintings of the Middle Ages. He writes, e.g., "Medieval art until about the twelfth century did not attempt to portray [childhood]. It is hard to believe that this neglect was due to incompetence or incapacity; it seems more probable that there was no place for childhood in the medieval world" (p. 33). Since there are other explanations for his observations about paintings that do not suggest that there was no place for childhood in the medieval world, there is reason to doubt his claim about the absence of childhood. My interest is not in the truth of the claim but in its usefulness in illustrating my discussion of kinds. For a critical discussion of Aries's history, see D. Herlihy, "Medieval Children," in The Walter Prescott Webb Memorial Lectures: Essays on Medieval Civilization (University of Texas Press, 1978), pp. 109–42.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Whether he is correct or not is a historical question best answered by studying the exact role of the social sciences in the genealogy of each of the kinds employed in those sciences. Many historians believe that Foucault, like Aries, has overstated the case for complicity.
19 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 194.
22 Foucault talks about homosexuals but seems to equate homosexuality with male homosexuality and, on the topic of sexuality, as on most others, pays little attention to females.
23 Foucault, History of Sexuality, vol. 1, p. 34.
Foucault would not accept the liberal's distinction between scientific and political values. See Discipline and Punish, pp. 170–95.

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault offers a functional analysis of the kinds employed in “the objectifying social sciences” and in The History of Sexuality an analysis of those employed in the “subjectifying or interpretive social sciences.” The interpretive social sciences deal with meanings that are hidden from the subjects of the science but accessible to interpretation by an expert. They make the subjects into therapeutic individuals and support a system of regulations and institutions for controlling them. Psychoanalysis is the prime example of a subjectifying social science, and the classifications and kinds of psychoanalysis function to produce a human being who can be treated in ways that he might not consciously approve of. While the function of the interpretive sciences is to produce “docile minds,” the function of the objectifying social sciences is to produce “docile bodies.” They make it possible to regulate and train bodies in new ways and to individuate subjects who, from the perspective of the state, had been indistinguishable. See H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, 2nd edn (University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 178–9, for a discussion of the distinction between objectifying and subjectifying sciences.

Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 183.


See, e.g., Pollock, “Empirical Research.”


Ibid., p. 45.

Foucault, History of Sexuality, vol. 1, p. 25.

8

Explaining the data

When social scientists maintain that their explanations are value-neutral, they usually mean that they are value-free – free of value-judgments. Explanation 1 is value-free, but 2 is not.

1 The legislator voted against the tax cut because she believed the cut to be unjust.

2 The legislator voted against the tax cut because the cut is unjust.

While 2 includes a judgment of the justice of the tax cut, 1 does not; it reports a fact about the legislator’s beliefs. Most social scientists would say that 2 is value-neutral. But explanations can be value-free and partisan. They can be partisan in favoring a particular conception of the good or in opposing the possibility of any one of a number of different conceptions of the good.

For example, in his book A Theory of Justice, John Rawls describes the circumstances under which justice is a moral virtue – what he calls “the first virtue of social institutions.” The circumstances of justice obtain, he says, when mutually disinterested persons put forward conflicting claims for the distribution of social advantages under conditions of moderate scarcity. In the absence of these circumstances, there is no occasion for the virtue. Imagine, then, that a social scientist offers explanations of the behavior of the members of a social group according to which the members are not mutually disinterested or never put forward conflicting claims for the distribution of social advantages. That is, the explanations, if true, show that the circumstances of justice do not obtain. Though the explanation says nothing about justice, it is not neutral on whether some distribution of advantages to members is just; for the explanation is incompatible with every judgment of the justice or injustice of a distribution of advantages to the members of the group. The explanation is neutral between whether the tax cut is just or unjust, but partisan on the question of whether the cut is a matter of justice at all.