



---

## **LESSON 4 SCOPE OF SOCIOLOGY**

---

### **TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

4.0 OBJECTIVES

4.1 SCOPE OF SOCIOLOGY

4.2 SPECIALISTIC/FORMALISTIC/PARTICULARISTIC  
SCHOOL

4.3 SYNTHETIC SCHOOL

4.4 SUMMING UP

4.5 REFERENCES





## 4.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Scope of Sociology
- Schools of thought which define scope of Sociology
- Comparison between the Formalistic School and Synthetic school of thought

### 4.1 Scope of Sociology

Every science has its own areas of study or field of inquiry. In the broadest sense, Sociology is the study of human interactions and inter-relations, their conditions and consequences. There are two main schools of thought among sociologists on scope of sociology.

One group of sociologists headed by German sociologist, Simmel, demarcates Sociology clearly from other branches of social study and confines it to the enquiry into certain defined aspects of human relationship. They regard sociology as pure and independent.

The other group maintains that the field of social investigation is too wide for any one science and that if any progress is to be made there must be specialisation and division and insists that in addition to special social sciences such as Economics, Anthropology, History etc. there is need also of a general social science, i.e. Sociology whose function it would be to inter-relate the results of the special social sciences and to deal with the general conditions of social life. According to this group Sociology is a general science. These two different views about the scope of Sociology are as follows:

**Formalistic vs. Synthetic Schools of Thought:** Sociology, as the systematic study of society and social interaction, endeavors to understand the underlying principles and patterns of human behavior, institutions, relationships, and development. Since its inception as a distinct academic discipline in the 19th century, sociology has grappled with defining its precise scope and methodological approach. Central to this discourse is a long-standing debate regarding whether sociology should be a narrowly focused discipline dealing solely with specific, abstract social forms or a broad, inclusive field integrating insights from related social sciences to understand society in its entirety.

This debate gave rise to two major schools of thought concerning the scope of sociology: the Formalistic School and the Synthetic School. The Formalistic School, largely shaped by the contributions of Georg Simmel and others, posits that sociology should concern itself strictly with formal aspects of social





interactions—universal patterns like cooperation, competition, and conflict—while eschewing the study of specific institutions or cultural phenomena. Conversely, the Synthetic School, represented by scholars such as Émile Durkheim, L.T. Hobhouse, and Morris Ginsberg, contends that sociology should be a comprehensive science of society, embracing a multidisciplinary methodology that incorporates data and theories from history, economics, political science, and anthropology.

## 4.2 The Formalistic School: Sociology as a Specialized Science

The Formalistic School, also known as the Specialistic or Particularistic School, seeks to establish sociology as a discipline with a clearly defined, limited scope. Proponents of this approach argue that sociology should not be burdened with the vast complexities of all societal elements. Instead, it should study the pure forms or patterns of social interactions, abstracted from their specific content or historical context. This approach emphasizes form over content and universality over particularity.

The main principles of the Formalistic School include:

- Sociology should investigate the forms of social relationships, such as conflict, subordination, exchange, and cooperation.
- It should avoid the study of specific institutions (e.g., marriage, religion) that are better analyzed by other disciplines like anthropology or political science.
- Sociology's goal is to identify and classify universal social patterns.

### Major Thinkers of the Formalistic School

#### (A) Georg Simmel (1858–1918): The Pioneer of Formal Sociology

Georg Simmel is the leading figure of the Formalistic School. He introduced the idea that sociology should focus on the forms of social interaction rather than their content. According to Simmel, sociology should examine patterns such as domination, exchange, competition, and conflict in a generalized manner.

In his essay "The Stranger," Simmel explored how someone who is part of a group but not fully accepted (a stranger) functions within social settings. His work "The Metropolis and Mental Life" analyzed how city life alters human interactions and personal identity.

Simmel believed that abstraction allows sociologists to uncover general principles of human interaction, making sociology a pure and independent science.



**Criticism of Simmel:**

- His approach was considered too abstract and disconnected from empirical realities.
- Critics argued that neglecting the substantive content of social life weakened sociology's explanatory power.
- Marxist scholars criticized Simmel for ignoring material and class-based power structures.

**(B) Albion Small (1854–1926): Social Relationships as Core of Sociology**

Albion Small viewed sociology as the science of social relationships. He emphasized generic social forms like cooperation and adaptation, advocating that sociology should concentrate on these foundational elements of interaction.

He believed that including the study of political or economic structures would dilute sociology's unique focus and cause overlap with other disciplines.

**Criticism:**

- The approach was seen as overly narrow, excluding cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions vital to understanding society.

**(C) Alfred Vierkandt (1867–1953): Mental Relationships and Social Forms**

Vierkandt proposed that sociology should concentrate on ultimate forms of social bonding, such as authority and solidarity, and exclude the study of specific societal events or structures. He argued that the mental and emotional connections in relationships should be the key object of sociological inquiry.

**Criticism:**

- Vierkandt's exclusion of historical and cultural specificities was seen as a major limitation.
- Real-world societies are shaped by their context, which cannot be ignored in social analysis.

**(D) Max Weber (1864–1920): Sociology as an Interpretive Science**

Although not a formalist in the strictest sense, Weber contributed significantly to this school by conceptualizing sociology as the science of interpretative understanding of social action. He emphasized that sociology should seek to understand the subjective meanings individuals attach to their actions.

His method, called *Verstehen* (German for "understanding"), encouraged sociologists to interpret the motives and intentions behind behaviors. For





example, a market transaction is not just economic but trust and mutual understanding, which are sociological.

involves

#### **Criticism:**

- Weber's approach was critiqued for its subjectivity and lack of standardization, especially by positivists like Durkheim.

### **(E) Leopold von Wiese (1876–1969): Classification of Social Relationships**

Von Wiese attempted to provide a systematic classification of social relationships. He divided them into two categories:

- **Associative processes** (e.g., cooperation, accommodation)
- **Dissociative processes** (e.g., competition, conflict)

He advocated for analytical rigor in defining the types of social interactions, believing this classification could form the basis of a scientific sociology.

#### **Criticism:**

- The model was seen as overly rigid and mechanical.
- Critics pointed out that human behavior and social relationships are often more fluid and context-dependent.

## **4.3 The Synthetic School: Sociology as a General Science**

The Synthetic School rejects the narrow specialization advocated by the Formalists. It argues that sociology should function as a comprehensive science of society, encompassing all aspects of social life. This school emphasizes interdisciplinarity, integrating insights from economics, political science, history, anthropology, and psychology.

Key principles of the Synthetic School include:

- Sociology should study both abstract forms and concrete social institutions.
- It must develop general laws of society through empirical and comparative methods.
- The approach should be holistic and useful in solving real-world social problems.

### **Major Thinkers of the Synthetic School**

#### **(A) Emile Durkheim (1858–1917): Sociology as Study of Social Facts**





Durkheim, a founding father of sociology, introduced the concept of *social facts* – external and constraining norms, values, and structures that influence individual behavior. He believed sociology should adopt scientific methods similar to those used in the natural sciences.

In his work "Suicide" (1897), Durkheim demonstrated how suicide rates varied systematically with levels of social integration and regulation, proving that even personal acts are shaped by societal conditions.

He divided sociology into:

- **Social Morphology:** Study of population, geographic distribution.
- **Social Physiology:** Institutions like religion, law, and economy.
- **General Sociology:** Theoretical generalizations and universal laws.

#### **Criticism:**

- Critics argued that Durkheim's positivist approach treated society too mechanistically, overlooking individual agency and subjective meaning.

#### **(B) L.T. Hobhouse (1864–1929): Sociology as a Synthetic Science**

Hobhouse viewed sociology as an integrative discipline that should analyze specific institutions such as the family and the state while incorporating knowledge from economics, psychology, and history.

He believed that such a synthetic approach would allow sociology to develop a comprehensive understanding of the interrelations among different social elements.

#### **Criticism:**

- Critics felt his approach lacked focus and risked making sociology indistinct from other social sciences.

#### **(C) Morris Ginsberg (1889–1970): Sociology's Practical and Analytical Functions**

Ginsberg has summed up the chief functions of sociology as follows.

Firstly, Sociology seeks to provide a classification of types and forms of social relationships especially of those which have come to be defined institutions and associations.





Secondly, it tries to determine the relation between different parts of factors of social life, for example, the economic and political, the moral and the religious, the moral and the legal, the intellectual and the social elements.

Thirdly, it endeavours to disentangle the fundamental conditions of social change and persistence and to discover sociological principles governing social life.

Ginsberg argued that sociology should:

- Classify and study social institutions.
- Understand interrelationships between different aspects of society.
- Discover general laws of social development.

He viewed sociology as both analytical and practical, capable of addressing social problems like poverty, unemployment, and crime through empirical investigation.

### **Criticism:**

- Some scholars believed Ginsberg's ideas blurred the lines between sociology and other disciplines, making it hard to maintain methodological clarity.

Both schools of thought have significantly contributed to the development of sociology as a distinct academic field. The Formalistic School is particularly valuable for its clarity and focus, helping to distinguish sociology from related disciplines. Its emphasis on abstract forms has enriched theoretical sociology and provided useful conceptual tools for analyzing recurring patterns in human interaction.

The Synthetic School, on the other hand, offers a more comprehensive and inclusive perspective. Its strength lies in its interdisciplinary approach and applicability to real-world problems. By examining both the structural and dynamic aspects of society, the Synthetic School has paved the way for applied sociology and policy-oriented research.

Modern sociology does not strictly adhere to either school but rather synthesizes both perspectives. For instance, theoretical studies may draw from Simmel's formalism to understand patterns, while empirical research may adopt Durkheimian methodologies to investigate societal functions. Today, sociologists employ multiple methods—quantitative, qualitative, and comparative—depending on the nature of their research question.

Ultimately, the debate between the Formalistic and Synthetic Schools reflects sociology's richness and methodological diversity. Instead of viewing these approaches as oppositional, they should be seen as complementary. Together,





they provide a fuller understanding of society,  
abstract theoretical insight with grounded empirical analysis.

combining

## Summing Up

In this lesson you have learn about the scope of sociology refers to the extent, subject matter, and boundaries of the discipline—what it studies and how it does so. As a systematic and scientific study of society, sociology encompasses various aspects of human social life, from everyday interactions to large-scale institutions and historical transformations.

Scholars have debated whether sociology should focus narrowly on general forms of social relationships or adopt a broader, synthetic approach. This debate has resulted in two principal schools of thought.

While the Formalistic School offers clear theoretical tools for understanding social forms, the Synthetic School provides a practical, inclusive framework suitable for policy-making and applied research.

Modern sociology does not align strictly with either school. Instead, it integrates both approaches—using formal classifications when analyzing interactions and employing synthetic methods when studying complex social phenomena. The discipline today is dynamic, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to understand and address issues like inequality, development, migration, identity, and globalization.

Thus, the scope of sociology is broad and flexible, allowing it to adapt to changing social realities while maintaining scientific rigor. It ranges from micro-level studies of interpersonal relations to macro-level analysis of social systems, institutions, and global processes.

## 4.5 REFERENCES

1. Inkeles Alex (2001), What is Sociology: An Introduction to the discipline and profession, Prentice-Hall of India, New Delhi
2. Bierstedt, Robert (1959). *The Social Order: An Introduction to Sociology*. New York: McGraw-Hill
3. Bottomore T.B (1962) *Sociology: A Guide to Problems & Literature* London: George Allen & Unwin.
4. N. Jayaram (2021), *Introductory Sociology*, Laxmi Publication Limited, New Delhi.
5. Rawat H.K. (2017), *Sociology: Basic Concepts*, Rawat Publication.





6. Giddens Anthony (2009), 'Sociology' Polity Press,

Cambridge.