



The pluralistic character of sociological theory: A conceptual review

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Abstract

Sociology has developed as a discipline marked by profound theoretical plurality rather than by a single unified framework. This paper examines the meaning and nature of this plurality by drawing primarily on the analytical framework. It argues that theoretical diversity in sociology arises from systematic differences in subject matter, underlying assumptions, methodological orientations, and intellectual objectives. By engaging with macro-meso-and micro-level analyses, the paper demonstrates how sociological theories focus on different dimensions of social reality, ranging from large-scale structures and institutions to organizations, groups, and everyday interactions. It further shows that divergent assumptions about social order, human agency, and knowledge production generate methodological diversity and varied goals such as explanation, interpretation, critique, and social change. Far from representing theoretical weakness, the paper concludes that plurality is an intellectual necessity that enables sociology to address the complexity and multi-dimensionality of social life.

Keywords: Theoretical plurality, plurality in subject matter, plurality of assumption, methodological plurality, plurality of objective

Introduction

Sociology is distinctive among the social sciences because it has never developed around a single, unified theoretical framework. From its very inception, sociological thought has been marked by diversity in perspectives, concepts, and methods. This plurality of sociological theories is not accidental, nor does it represent a failure to achieve consensus. Rather, as Ruth A. Wallace and Alison Wolf (1995) ^[13] argue, theoretical diversity is a defining characteristic of sociology because of the complex and multifaceted nature of its subject matter—society itself. Unlike the natural sciences, sociology deals with a social world that is dynamic, historically variable, and shaped by human meanings and actions. Society is not a fixed object that exists independently of those who inhabit it; instead, it is constantly produced and reproduced through social interaction. Because of this, sociologists often disagree not only about explanations of social phenomena but also about what constitutes a legitimate problem for sociological inquiry. Wallace and Wolf have emphasized that sociological theory is best understood as a structured field of multiple perspectives, each grounded in different subject matter, assumptions, methods, and goals (Wallace & Wolf, 1995) ^[13].

One of the central reasons, therefore, for the plurality of sociological perspectives lies in differences regarding subject matter. Some theories focus on large-scale social structures such as institutions, classes, and systems, while others concentrate on everyday interactions, meanings, and subjective experiences. For example, functionalist and conflict perspectives primarily operate at the *macro level*, examining how social order, inequality, and power are organized within society. On the other hand, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology emphasize *micro-level* processes, such as face-to-face interaction and the construction of meaning (Ritzer, 2017; Abraham, 2010) ^[10].

¹¹. Wallace and Wolf (1995) ^[13] argue that these perspectives should not be seen as competing accounts of the same

reality, but as complementary lenses that illuminate different aspects of social life. The plurality of sociological theory, however, is also rooted in differing assumptions about human nature and society (agency vs. structure). Some theoretical traditions assume that human behaviour is largely shaped by social structures, norms, and institutional constraints. Others stress human agency, creativity, and the capacity to interpret and redefine social situations. Rational choice theory, for instance, assumes that individuals act strategically to maximize rewards, whereas structural approaches highlight how social action is guided by shared meanings rather than purely instrumental calculations (Coleman, 1990 'quoted from Adams and Sydie, 2001: p. 528-532; Collins, 1994) ^[5, 2, 6]. According to Wallace and Wolf (1995) ^[13], such assumptions are foundational to theory-building and strongly influence how social phenomena are explained.

Methodological diversity further reinforces theoretical plurality in sociology. Different theories favour different ways of producing sociological knowledge. Positivist and functionalist approaches often rely on deductive reasoning, quantitative data, and large-scale comparisons to identify general patterns in social life. Interpretive and phenomenological traditions, on the other hand, tend to adopt inductive methods, qualitative research, and detailed descriptions of lived experience (Elliott, 2014; Turner, 2013) ^[9, 11]. Methodological choices, therefore, are not neutral tools but are closely tied to theoretical assumptions about reality and knowledge (Wallace & Wolf, 1995) ^[13]. Last but not least, sociological theories differ in their objectives. While some aim at explanation and prediction, others prioritize understanding, interpretation, or social critique. Critical traditions, including conflict theory and feminist sociology, seek not only to analyse society but also to expose relations of domination and contribute to social change (Cuff *et al.*, 2006; Collins, 1994) ^[8, 6]. Wallace and Wolf (1995) ^[13] argue that these differing objectives reflect

the multiple roles sociology plays—as a scientific discipline, an interpretive enterprise, and a critical project. This paper, therefore, examines the meaning and nature of the plurality of sociological perspectives by systematically analysing differences in subject matter, assumptions, methodology, and objectives. Rather than viewing theoretical diversity as a weakness, the paper argues that plurality is essential for understanding the complexity of social reality. By drawing on the works major contemporary theorists and scholars, this review demonstrates that sociological theory remains pluralistic because society itself is diverse, contested, and constantly changing.

Objectives of the Study

The present study is a theoretically grounded review that seeks to examine the pluralistic nature of sociological theory as a defining feature of the discipline. The present paper does not attempt to evaluate individual theories in isolation, but rather aims to understand how multiple theoretical perspectives coexist within sociology and why such plurality persists.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the meaning and nature of theoretical plurality in sociology.
2. To demonstrate that theoretical diversity in sociology is not a weakness but an intellectual necessity.

Methodology

The present paper is based on a qualitative review of sociological literature and adopts an interpretive and analytical approach to the study of sociological theory. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the study systematically examines existing theoretical writings to understand the pluralistic nature of sociological perspectives. Review-based studies are particularly suitable for theoretical sociology, as they allow for comparative analysis, conceptual clarification, and synthesis of diverse intellectual traditions.

The analysis follows a comparative and thematic approach. Rather than evaluating each theory separately, the paper compares how different theoretical traditions address similar sociological concerns while differing in their assumptions, methods, and goals. It is important to note that this methodology distinguishes between two related but different issues: first, the methodological approach of this paper, which is based on literature review and conceptual analysis; and second, the methodological diversity within sociological theories, which is examined as part of the analysis. By maintaining this distinction, the study ensures conceptual clarity and methodological consistency.

Analysis and Discussion

a. Plurality of Subject Matter in Sociological Theory

One of the most fundamental reasons for the plurality of sociological perspectives lies in differences regarding the subject matter of sociology. Sociological theories do not merely offer alternative explanations of the same social reality; they often begin by defining which aspects of social life are most significant and worthy of analysis. Wallace and Wolf (1995)^[13] argue that theoretical diversity in sociology arises partly because sociologists focus on different levels, units, and dimensions of social reality, rather than on a single, unified object of study. At the broadest level, some sociological theories prioritize macro-level structures, such

as social institutions, economic systems, class relations, and power structures. Functionalist theory, for example, treats society as a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain order and stability. From this perspective, the subject matter of sociology consists of institutions such as family, education, religion, and polity, and the functions they perform for the maintenance of the social system as a whole (Turner, 2013)^[11]. Similarly, conflict theories focus on large-scale patterns of inequality, domination, and struggle, emphasizing class relations, state power, and structural contradictions within capitalism (Collins, 1994)^[6].

In contrast, other sociological perspectives locate the subject matter of sociology at the micro level of social interaction. Symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and phenomenological sociology emphasize everyday encounters, face-to-face interaction, and the meanings individuals attach to their actions. From this viewpoint, society is not an external structure imposing itself on individuals but an ongoing process continuously produced through interaction and interpretation (Blumer, 1969; Ritzer, 2017)^[3, 10]. It must be noted that such perspectives redefine the subject matter of sociology as social action and meaning rather than social structure alone (Wallace & Wolf, 1995)^[13]. Between these macro and micro orientations, however, lies an important meso-level of sociological analysis, which focuses on intermediate social units such as groups, organizations, communities, and formal institutions, as well as categorical units like class, ethnicity, gender, and occupational memberships. Ritzer identifies this level as crucial for understanding how large-scale structures are linked to everyday social interactions, noting that meso-level analysis often bridges abstract macro theory and detailed micro studies (Turner, 2014, p. 5)^[12]. Robert K. Merton's concept of middle-range theory is especially relevant here, as it directs sociological attention toward specific social structures and processes—such as bureaucracy, reference groups, and social roles—without aspiring to all-encompassing grand theory. This meso-level focus highlights how social life is organized through collective units that mediate between individual action and systemic forces.

The recognition of macro, meso, and micro levels illustrates how sociological theories differ not only in content but also in the scale at which they analyse social reality. Wallace and Wolf (1995)^[13] emphasize that these differences should not be understood as theoretical rivalry over a single “correct” subject matter. Instead, they reflect the fact that society operates simultaneously at multiple levels. Social structures shape individual lives, organizations and groups channel social action, and individual interactions, in turn, sustain or transform broader social arrangements. The plurality of subject matter also becomes evident when examining how different theories define key sociological problems. For functionalists, the central problem may be social order and integration; for conflict theorists, it is inequality and power; for interactionists, it is meaning-making and identity formation; and for critical theories, it is domination, ideology, and emancipation (Craib, 2015; Abraham, 2010)^[7, 1]. Each perspective selects its subject matter based on what it considers most significant about social life.

Importantly, theoretical plurality does not imply relativism or intellectual fragmentation. Rather, it reflects sociology's engagement with a multi-dimensional social world. The

same social phenomenon—such as education, family, or religion—can be studied as a macro-level institution, a meso-level organization or community, and a micro-level site of interaction and identity formation. Different theories thus illuminate different dimensions of the same phenomenon, enriching sociological understanding rather than undermining it (Wallace & Wolf, 1995) ^[13]. Thus, the plurality of subject matter in sociological theory demonstrates that sociology is not a discipline with a narrowly defined object of study. Instead, it deliberately accommodates multiple levels of analysis—macro, meso, and micro—in order to address the complexity of social life. This diversity of focus constitutes the first pillar of theoretical plurality and lays the foundation for further differences in assumptions, methodology, and objectives.

b. Plurality of Assumptions in Sociological Theory

The second major source of theoretical plurality in sociology lies in the different assumptions that sociological theories make about society and human beings. Wallace and Wolf (1995) ^[13] argue that every sociological theory rests on a set of basic assumptions that shape how social reality is perceived, explained, and evaluated. These assumptions are often implicit, but they strongly influence theoretical arguments, methodological choices, and research outcomes. One important axis of difference concerns assumptions about social order and social conflict. Some theories assume that society is fundamentally ordered and integrated, while others view it as inherently unequal and conflict-ridden. Functionalist perspectives, for instance, assume that social institutions tend toward equilibrium and that shared norms and values are central to maintaining social cohesion. From this viewpoint, social problems are often seen as temporary disruptions or maladjustments within an otherwise stable system (Turner, 2013) ^[11]. In contrast, conflict-oriented theories begin with the assumption that society is characterized by enduring inequalities, power struggles, and competing interests. Social order, from this perspective, is not the result of shared values but of domination and control exercised by powerful groups. Inequality is therefore not an abnormal condition but a normal and persistent feature of social life (Collins, 1994) ^[6]. Wallace and Wolf note that these contrasting assumptions lead to very different interpretations of the same social phenomena, such as education, law, or the state (Wallace & Wolf, 1995) ^[13].

Another crucial area of divergence concerns assumptions about human nature and agency. Some sociological theories assume that individuals are largely shaped by social structures, cultural norms, and institutional constraints. Structural functionalism and certain strands of Marxist theory, for example, emphasize how individuals internalize social roles and expectations, often leaving limited room for personal autonomy. In these approaches, human action is frequently explained in terms of social position rather than individual choice (Ritzer, 2017) ^[10]. By contrast, interpretive and interactionist perspectives assume that human beings are active, creative, and meaning-making agents. Symbolic interactionism, for instance, views social action as guided by meanings that are constructed and negotiated through interaction. Individuals are not passive recipients of social norms; they interpret, modify, and sometimes resist them in everyday life (Blumer, 1969; Craib, 2015) ^[3, 7]. Wallace and Wolf emphasize that such assumptions fundamentally alter

how sociologists understand social order, deviance, identity, and change (Wallace & Wolf, 1995) ^[13].

Sociological theories also differ in their assumptions about social reality and knowledge. Positivist approaches tend to assume that social reality exists independently of individuals and can be studied objectively using methods similar to those of the natural sciences. Interpretive and phenomenological approaches, on the other hand, assume that social reality is socially constructed and can only be understood by examining the meanings actors attach to their experiences (Elliott, 2014) ^[9]. These contrasting assumptions shape not only theoretical arguments but also methodological preferences, which Wallace and Wolf (1995) ^[13] regard as inseparable from theoretical foundations.

Again, we must be cautious against ranking these assumptions as right or wrong. Each set of assumptions highlights particular dimensions of social life while obscuring others. Assumptions about structure, agency, order, conflict, and meaning act as starting points for inquiry rather than final answers. As a result, theoretical plurality persists because no single set of assumptions can adequately capture the full complexity of social reality. Thus, the plurality of assumptions in sociological theory reflects deeper philosophical disagreements about how society works and how human beings relate to it. Rather than fragmenting sociology, these differences expand its analytical capacity. By engaging with multiple assumptions, sociology remains capable of addressing diverse social questions, historical contexts, and forms of social experience.

c. Plurality of Methodology in Sociological Theory

The plurality of sociological perspectives is strongly reinforced by methodological diversity, which reflects deeper theoretical and epistemological differences within sociology. As emphasized by Wallace and Wolf (1995) ^[13], sociological theories differ not only in their subject matter or assumptions but also in the ways they seek to produce knowledge about social reality. Alan Bryman (2016) ^[4] similarly argues that methodology is never a purely technical matter; rather, it is closely linked to theoretical orientations, assumptions about social reality, and views on how social knowledge can be generated.

One key source of methodological plurality lies in the distinction between deductive and inductive logics of inquiry. According to Bryman, deductive research begins with theory, from which hypotheses are derived and tested through empirical observation. This approach is commonly associated with positivist and structural traditions in sociology, where the aim is to identify patterns, regularities, and causal relationships using standardized and often quantitative methods (Bryman, 2016) ^[4]. Such approaches are well suited to theories that prioritize large-scale social structures, institutional analysis, and generalization across social contexts. In contrast, inductive research starts from empirical observations and seeks to generate theoretical insights from the data itself. Bryman notes that inductive logic is closely associated with qualitative research strategies, including ethnography, in-depth interviews, and participant observation. These methods are particularly central to interpretive and phenomenological traditions, which focus on understanding how social actors interpret their worlds and construct meaning in everyday interaction

(Bryman, 2016) ^[4]. Rather than prediction or generalization, the primary objective here is understanding social processes from the perspective of those involved.

Methodological plurality is also clearly visible in the well-known quantitative–qualitative distinction. Bryman emphasizes that quantitative research is typically associated with measurement, numerical data, and statistical analysis, whereas qualitative research prioritizes depth, context, and the interpretation of meanings. However, he cautions against viewing this distinction as a rigid or hierarchical opposition. Instead, methodological choices should be guided by research questions and theoretical concerns rather than methodological dogma (Bryman, 2016) ^[4]. This position closely parallels Wallace and Wolf's argument that methods reflect theoretical priorities rather than existing as neutral tools (Wallace & Wolf, 1995) ^[13].

Another important dimension of methodological plurality concerns the contrast between positivist and interpretive research traditions. Bryman explains that positivist approaches are grounded in the assumption that social reality can be studied objectively, much like the natural world, and that sociological knowledge should aim for value neutrality. Interpretive approaches, by contrast, reject the possibility of complete objectivity and emphasize the role of interpretation, reflexivity, and context in social research (Bryman, 2016) ^[4]. These differences arise from contrasting epistemological and ontological assumptions rather than disagreements over specific research techniques.

Crucially, Bryman argues that no single methodological approach can claim universal superiority. Each research strategy reveals certain aspects of social reality while obscuring others. Methodological pluralism, therefore, reflects the complexity of the social world and the variety of questions sociologists seek to answer. Attempts to impose a single methodological standard risk narrowing sociological inquiry and marginalizing valuable forms of knowledge (Bryman, 2016) ^[4]. In this sense, methodological diversity should be understood not as a problem but as an intellectual resource. By allowing multiple research strategies to coexist, sociology remains capable of addressing both macro-level structural patterns and micro-level processes of interaction and meaning. As scholars suggest, methodological plurality is an inevitable and necessary outcome of theoretical diversity within sociology.

d. Plurality of Objectives in Sociological Theory

A fourth and crucial dimension of theoretical plurality in sociology concerns the objectives of sociological inquiry. Wallace and Wolf (1995) ^[13] argue that sociological theories differ not only in what they study, what they assume, or how they conduct research, but also in why they study society. These differences in objectives significantly shape theoretical orientations and help explain why sociology has never converged around a single theoretical goal. One major division exists between theories that aim primarily at explanation and prediction and those that prioritize understanding and interpretation. Positivist and functionalist traditions often seek to identify causal relationships and general laws governing social behaviour. From this perspective, the objective of sociology is to explain social phenomena in a systematic and, where possible, predictive manner. Sociology, in this view, aspires to scientific status by producing reliable and generalizable knowledge about society (Turner, 2013; Ritzer, 2017) ^[11, 10]. In contrast,

interpretive and phenomenological perspectives define the objective of sociology as understanding social action from the actor's point of view. Rather than searching for universal laws, these approaches emphasize *verstehen*—the interpretive understanding of meaning, intention, and subjective experience. Social reality, according to this orientation, cannot be fully explained through causal models alone; it must be interpreted within its cultural and situational context (Craib, 2015; Elliott, 2014) ^[7, 9]. These differing objectives lead to fundamentally different styles of sociological explanation.

Another important objective shaping sociological plurality is critique and social change. Critical traditions, including Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial perspectives, argue that sociology should not remain value-neutral. Instead, it should expose relations of power, domination, and inequality and contribute to social transformation. From this standpoint, the objective of sociology is not only to understand society but also to challenge unjust social arrangements and support emancipatory change (Collins, 1994; Abraham, 2010) ^[6, 1]. Wallace and Wolf emphasize that these objectives—explanation, understanding, and critique—are not mutually exclusive but reflect different intellectual and moral commitments. Some theories aim to stabilize social order by explaining how institutions function, while others aim to disrupt existing arrangements by revealing their underlying inequalities. This diversity of objectives reflects the multiple roles sociology plays in society: as an academic discipline, a tool for policy analysis, and a form of social criticism (Wallace & Wolf, 1995) ^[13]. Thus, the plurality of objectives in sociological theory also reinforces the broader argument that theoretical diversity is not a weakness but a necessity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the meaning and nature of the plurality of sociological perspectives. Rather than treating sociological theory as a fragmented or unsettled body of knowledge, the discussion has shown that plurality is a constitutive and necessary feature of sociology. Theoretical diversity emerges not because sociologists fail to agree, but because society itself is complex, multi-layered, and continuously changing. By analysing sociological theory across four interrelated dimensions—subject matter, assumptions, methodology, and objectives—the paper has demonstrated how different perspectives illuminate different aspects of social reality. Some theories focus on large-scale structures and institutions, while others emphasize everyday interaction and meaning. Some assume social order and stability, whereas others foreground conflict, inequality, and power. Methodological differences further reflect these theoretical orientations, ranging from deductive and quantitative approaches to inductive and qualitative ones. Finally, sociological theories pursue diverse objectives, including explanation, interpretation, critique, and social transformation.

Therefore, we can conclude that no single theoretical perspective can adequately capture the totality of social life. Each theory offers a partial but valuable insight, and it is through their coexistence that sociology maintains its analytical richness. The plurality of sociological theory should therefore be understood as an intellectual strength rather than a weakness. It allows sociology to respond to

different social questions, historical contexts, and moral concerns.

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