tions as such—the family, the church, the school, and the political party—are a more distinctive subject matter for sociology, because society as a whole is already the unit of analysis in the fields of history and anthropology. The questions which would be dealt with by a special discipline devoted to institutions are of this order: What features do all institutions have in common? What are the dimensions on which they are distinguishable, and how do these dimensions vary when one compares institutions that perform different functions? Regardless of their function, do institutions come to share certain other features by virtue of being alike in size, in degree of specialization, in amount of autonomy, and so on?

Durkheim, as long ago as 1901, said that sociology "can be defined as the science of institutions," [37] but this form of sociological analysis has not been intensively developed. The growing importance in the modern world of one type of institution, the large-scale organization, has, however, led to renewed interest in and research on the general properties of institutions.

Sociology as the Study of Social Relationships

Just as societies are complex systems of institutions, so institutions may be conceived of as complex systems of still simpler "social relationships." The family, for example, is made up of many sets of relationships—those between man and woman, parent and child, brother and sister, grandparent and grandchild. Each of these may be studied as a particular type of relationship. And in all relationships, we can pursue certain common emphases, involving such attributes as the size of the group (dyad, triad, etc.), or the quality of the relationship—as, for example, in the study of dominance and submission.

On analytic grounds we may argue that such relationships form a distinctive subject matter, and that just as the common and differentiating properties of institutions can be studied in and of themselves, so one could study social relationships in the same way. Going even further, we might argue that such relationships are merely the "molecules" of social life, and that there is still a smaller unit, the "social act," the true "atom" of social life, which could be the special subject matter of sociology.

We will discuss the meaning of these terms more fully in a later chapter. For now we merely note that Max Weber took quite seriously the idea that sociology might be mainly a study of social relationships and acts, and elaborated a set of categories for their description and analysis. Other leading German sociologists shared this perspective. Leopold von Wiese argued at length in favor of treating social relationships as the only truly distinctive subject matter of sociology,[38] and much of the sociological writing of Georg Simmel [39] was an application of this principle. Among contemporary sociologists, Talcott Parsons has expressed similar views.[40] Systematic empirical research focused on the social act and the social relationship has, however, only recently been done on any substantial scale, mainly in the study of small groups and in industrial research.

[37] Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, p. lvi.

[38] Leopold von Wiese (F. H. Mueller, ed. and ann.), *Sociology* (New York: Piest, 1941), and (adapted and amplified by Howard Becker), *Systematic Sociology on the Basis of the Beziehungslehre and Gebeldelehre of Leopold von Wiese* (New York: Wiley, 1932), 772 pp..

[39] Georg Simmel (Kurt H. Wolff, ed. and trans.), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1950).

[40] Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951).