

Sociology or Anthropology

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Sometimes people ask me what the difference is between sociology and anthropology. There are the surface ones, of course — sociology typically studies first-world societies, whereas anthropology has a rep for studying so-called “primitive” cultures. But the fundamental difference is a philosophical one: sociologists study society, while anthropologists study culture.

What’s the difference? Let’s do a case study. It’s easy to notice a subtle sort of sexism in American textbooks. For example, studies have found that in biology textbooks sperm are seen as competitive creatures while eggs are passive receptacles they aim to penetrate. But the actual science on the subject is much less clear: eggs seem to do a fair bit of selection themselves, etc.

I saw a paper by an anthropologist on this fact; their argument was that these textbooks were a result of the sexism of American culture, a culture which sees men as competing for access to women, and those notions are naturally transported onto our writing about conception. Sexist culture, sexist output.

A sociologist would dig a little deeper. They’d see who writes the textbooks, perhaps notice a disproportionate number of males. They’d look into why it was that males got these jobs, find the sexism inherent in the relevant institutions. They’d argue it was the structures of society that end up with sexist textbooks, not some magical force known as “American culture”.

As you might guess, I’m on the side of the sociologists. Blaming things on culture — as if it were a natural property of a group of people or a mystical life force with its own mind — seems too facile. It also seems wrong.

I’ve mostly been talking about the cultural anthropologists, but there are also a subset of racist anthropologists (sometimes called “anthropological science,” in accordance with [Wall’s Law](#)). These anthropologists tried to measure different properties of people, see if they could quantify the differences between the races and predict criminality from the shape of the head.

Cultural anthropologists disdain all that and prefer to endorse a very left-wing notion of cultural relativism. (One shouldn’t make judgments about other cultures!) But in doing so, they end up pushing the judgments off onto the peoples involved. Just like the racist anthropologists, they end up suggesting that the reason people over here believe act differently from the people over there is because they’re different people.

But if there’s one thing we’ve learned from psychology, it’s that — for the most part — people are people, wherever you go. As Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison

Experiment showed, put normal people into the wrong situation and they turn into devious enforcement machines. And put the same people into a different society and they'll change just as fast.

It isn't culture — whatever that is — that causes these things; it's institutions. Institutions create environments which force a course of action. And that's why I'm a sociologist.

Bonus recommendation: I've been watching *The Wire* lately; perhaps the most sociologically-inclined show on television. And that's what makes it interesting, unlike all the other good-evil cop dramas.