

# The Cognitive Development of Sociology: The Contribution of John Stuart Mill

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**How to cite this paper:** Galluccio, C. (2018). The Cognitive Development of Sociology: The Contribution of John Stuart Mill. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 8, 189-198.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2018.83011>

**Received:** February 2, 2018

**Accepted:** March 10, 2018

**Published:** March 13, 2018

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## Abstract

One may track the origin of sociology back to the work of individuals such as Auguste Comte among other prominent scholars in the nineteenth century. Comte work of a general way to deal with the investigation of society stands out as one of a major contribution towards the cognitive development of sociology. The development of cognitive sociology can also be attributed to the ancient publications in the sociology of knowledge, sociology of culture, and cognitive and cultural anthropology. Arguably, scholars strive to understand the cognitive processes in order to understand how individuals come up with meanings for various phenomena in the society. John Stuart Mill deserves credit for his profound contribution in as far as the development of the methodology of the social science is concerned. His addition of a psychological perspective was critical to the development of sociology. Mill also incorporated the knowledge of psychology to explain what drives individuals to act in the manner they do while interacting with each other. Other than the deduction of the laws, Mill emphasized on the necessity of using an experiment to understand the personal and interpersonal interaction of individuals. However, other individuals who also made contributions to the development of the discipline of sociology dismissed and criticized his stand on the necessity of conducting experiments and not relying on deductive reasoning. Scholars who were opposed to Mill's position subscribed to the idea of anti-psychologism. Some of the profound authors and scholars include Karl Marx, Max Weber, Watkins, L. von Mises, Popper, Menger, von Hayek, Boudon, and Elster among others. Popper stands out as one of the scholars who were sternly opposed to Mill's idea of psychologism, contributing to the reinstatement of the autonomy of sociology and social laws. However, Millian convention and ideologies of integrating the psychologism perspective into sociology was adopted by several scholars from 1970s onwards. The purpose of this work is precisely to offer a more in-depth understanding of John Stuart Mill's contribution to the cognitive development of sociology.

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## Keywords

Sociology, Cognitive Sociology, Psychologism

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### 1. Introduction

The origin of sociology can be traced back to the work of individuals such as Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century. Comte worked out a general way to deal with the investigation of society. He referred to sociology as the “ruler of all sciences” and suggested that as the most elevated of all sciences, it would utilize the “positivist” strategy for perception, experimentation and correlation of comprehensive methodologies to explain human actions. As mentioned earlier, sociology—as an independent discipline—began in the nineteenth century with the contributions from four scholars namely: Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. From that point forward, several scholars and researchers have contributed towards the advancement of the discipline (Marshall, 2008: p. 2013). Each of the scholars laid a focus on the sociological problems that individuals faced throughout the nineteenth and mid twentieth century. Such contributions are the premises on which the modern sociology was established.

Vandergeest and Buttel (1988, p. 684) mention John Stuart Mill as one of the prominent scholars of matters that pertained to the rationale and logical learning in the mid-nineteenth century. He came up with the system of logic, which was first distributed in 1843 and reproduced in various releases. According to Zerubavel (1996, p. 426), the system is made up of an extensive treatment of logical learning and induction inside the empiricist custom. His contribution to the field of sociology was marked by the production of a book called “The Logic of the Moral Sciences” in which he characterized sociology as a discipline that concerns the study of human auras, character, and activity. According to Biersstedt (1960, p. 75), Mill’s overall idea was to expound the principles of psychology and come up with a more sociological perspective of explaining human actions.

Mill deserves credit for his profound contribution in as far as the development of the methodology of the social sciences is concerned. His addition of a psychological perspective was critical to the development of sociology. Mill also incorporated the knowledge of psychology to explain what drives individuals to act in the manner they do while interacting with each other. Other than the deduction of the laws, Mill emphasized on the necessity of using an experiment to understand the personal and interpersonal interaction of individuals. However, other individuals who also made contributions to the development of the discipline of sociology dismissed and criticized his stand on the necessity of conducting experiments and not relying on deductive reasoning. Scholars who were opposed to Mill’s position subscribed to the idea of anti-psychologism. Some of the profound authors and scholars include Karl Marx, Max Weber, Watkins, L. von

Mises, Popper, Menger, von Hayek, Boudon, and Elster among others. Popper stands out as one of the scholars who were sternly opposed to Mill's idea of psychologism, contributing to the reinstatement of the autonomy of sociology and social laws. However, Millian convention and ideologies of integrating the psychologism perspective into sociology was adopted by several scholars from 1970s onwards.

## 2. The Origin of Cognitive Sociology and the Contribution of John Stuart Mill

The origin of cognitive sociology can be traced back to the ancient publications in the sociology of knowledge, sociology of culture, and cognitive and cultural anthropology (Forgas, 1983: p. 130). Also, some recent literature on cultural sociology and cognitive science have contributed largely to the development of this discipline. Finn and Mikheyenkova (2011, p. 115) notes that scholars are often more concerned with the processes of reification. According to Swingewood (1970, p. 167), one may relate this trend to the locus of cognitive processes among human beings that has been a subject of contention among scholars. Arguably, scholars strive to understand the cognitive processes in a bid to understand how individuals give meaning to various phenomena in the society.

According to Viale (2011, p. 53), the focal point of social science is pegged on the consequences of the human's action within the society. The author implies that social scientists often make inferences and develop the explanation of various phenomena on the basis of how it affects both personal and interpersonal relationship of individuals. The author goes ahead to emphasize that no one can object or provide any reasonable justification against the explanations that are provided by social science (Viale, 2011: p. 53). This statement implies that social science—as academic discipline—is, so far, the most reliable source of information about human actions and the meanings attached to such actions. In his view, Oyserman (2015, p. 3) asserts that anthropologists perceive culture as a medium through which individuals' actions are shaped.

Lauder, Brown, and Halsey (2004, p. 15) suggest that one needs to know how culture influences the way people do things in the society in order for him or her to understand the basic tenets of social cognition. He mentions that sociologists have held a notion that individuals' actions are determined by the way things are done within the environment they dwell instead of what they wish to do or what they want for themselves. On the contrary, psychologists subscribe to the belief that an individual is driven by his or her personal mindset of personality styles to act in a particular way (Oyserman, 2015: p. 3). One may deduce that the development of cognitive sociology has its roots on the integration of both sociological and psychological principles, judging from the author's assertions. Viale (2011, p. 54) argues that social scientists ought to look out for the psychological mechanism that drives individuals into acting in certain ways that is common to a group of people. According to him, another group of social scientist would not

support the idea of explaining the actions of human beings casually, but instead they would propose a more rational and succinct interpretation of the action.

According to [Viale \(2011, p. 54\)](#) John Stuart Mill deserves credit for his profound contribution in as far as the development of methodology of the social sciences is concerned. He asserts that John Stuart Mill's addition of a psychological perspective was critical to the development of sociology. Also, [Oyserman \(2015, p. 3\)](#) takes note that Hofstede and other researchers who subscribe to the psychological perspective maintain an assumption that different societies have varied worldview. In his view, one can attribute the difference of worldview to various aspects including the geographical location of societies, their religions or their genetic makeup. Oyserman goes ahead to identify two world views namely; individualism and collectivism. Oyserman's assertion is arguably in tandem with Viale's proposition that Mill's addition of a psychological perspective was critical to the development of sociology. Both arguments are related in the sense that subsequent sociologists were able to come up with an explanation of the phenomenon from by laying focus on an individual attributes to understand the reasons for his or her actions.

[Oyserman \(2015, p. 4\)](#) outlines that individualism is a worldview which perceives an individual as the focal point of an analysis of human actions. The author asserts that people are individually responsible for the outcome of their actions, and therefore they need to put efforts towards doing right and serving their interest. A critical analysis of this argument reveals that the author takes a psychological point of view to explain why a human being act in the manner that they do. Such assumptions are established based on John Stuart Mill's idea of fusing psychological tenets to explain social actions of human beings in the society.

Mill also incorporated the knowledge of psychology to explain what drives individuals to act in the manner they do while interacting with each other. According to [Viale \(2011, p. 55\)](#). He argued that the personalities of human beings are directly related to the causal laws of the environment within which they live, given that the causal laws can legitimize their speculations. He referred to two levels from which an individual may hypothetically portray the functions of the brain. According to Campbell, the levels are; the lower level, which entails the basic exploration of an individual's character and the higher level which entails the study of the rudimentary laws of the psyche. It is possible for one to explain the difference in characters of individuals by deducting the law of ethology from the principles of psychology ([Campbell, 1975: p. 1103](#)). Other than the deduction of the laws, Mill emphasized on the necessity of using an experiment to understand the personal and interpersonal interaction of individuals.

### **3. Integration of Psychologism with Sociology**

[Brekhus, Brunnsma, Platts, and Dua, \(2010, p.1\)](#) acknowledges the significance of Mill's integration of psychologism with sociology by mentioning that cognitive

sociology has made a tremendous contribution in terms of intellectual development of the social sciences. The authors emphasize that the development of cognitive sociology has enabled numerous transformations and advancements in the social sciences. They point out the study of boundaries, social movements, security and organization as some of the key areas where the development of cognitive sociology has had an impact in as far as intellectual development is concerned. The authors clarify that there is a distinction between cognitive sociology and cognitive social psychology. Expounding on the two subfields of sociology may perhaps be relevant in understanding the cognitive development of sociology.

Brekhus, Brunσμα, Platts, and Dua (2010, p. 2) highlight that cognitive social psychology is majorly concerned with the cognition of an individual at and how he or she perceives the immediate environment. They add that cognitive social psychologists use individuals' basic goals, motives, feelings, needs, and the context within which he or she acts to explain their action. According to cognitive social psychology, the characters and actions of individuals are as a result of the socialization process from the immediate environment (Lindenberg, 1990: p. 732). On the contrary, cognitive sociology entails the analysis of the processes through which individuals' conducts are developed through their interaction with others.

Also, Popper argued that the field of psychology should be subjected to a reduction in order to interpret the concept from a social perspective and not vice versa (Ball, 1981: p. 67). His argument is notably contrary to Mill's psychologism idea which proposes that sociological concepts should be reduced and explained in the perspective of psychology.

Viale maintains that the manner in which an individual acts in the society is dependent on the actions that are undertaken by other people within his or her environment. He asserts that people's actions are majorly determined by their ability to analyze and evaluate the cultural values and standards of behaviors that are set by the society (2011, p. 64). The author implies that the manner in which individuals behave is determined to a large extent by the way they are socialized to believe or understand societal values.

It is imperative to mention that a majority of scholars were not well versed with sociological concepts in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, thus, provoking the need to perceive how Mill contemplated the undertaking of making sociology. Brinton and Nee (1998, p. 32) mention that the founders of sociology presumably had insufficient cases or purposes for which they could use as the basis of these studies. Clemens (2007, p. 540) mentions that the most viable subject that he could venture in for investigation was political economy, given that it was a major theme in the lives of individuals and societies at the time. The subjects that modern sociologists have considered to pursue and explain were as a result of the paradigm of shift with respect to the sociological trends within societies (Pickering, 1993: p. 562). Harrison claims that the change of focus from political

economy to other sociological aspects by scholars led to the development of the discipline of political with involved the investigation of the premiums and approaches that individuals use to run the political affairs of a particular country (Harrison, 2003: p. 76).

Mill was especially keen on the ideologies that were put forward by Auguste Comte—the scholar who introduced the concepts of social interaction amongst human beings and positivism into the discipline of philosophy (Palispis, 2007: p. 104). Pinch and Bijker (1987, p. 3) reports that the former showed his passion for the Comte by composing an article called “Auguste Comte and Positivism” in 1865. However, Lizardo claims that the ideologies that were developed by Auguste Comte did not add sufficient value to the cases that the scholars of sociology were investigating at that time. One of Comte’s focal objectives that stood out was to investigate the legal aspects that play a role in the advancement for developments (Lizardo, 2014: p. 986). Ignatow (2007, p. 118) argues that Comte’s approach was rather too complex for one to understand the principles of sociology.

The cognitive development of sociology was also characterized by Mill’s endorsement of the idea of prediction in the field of science. His endorsement was evident when he referred to a section from Condorcet which proposes the viability of prediction and expectations in the field of sciences and history (Holmwood, 2005: p. 89). Condorcet draws an express parallel between the prescient limit of a portion of the regular sciences (e.g. space science) and the advancement of history; with an assumption that history was indeed made by human beings (Long, 2003: p. 69). Mill goes ahead to suggest that there is dire need for human beings to adopt the laws of conduct and utilize them to foresee history (Book VI). Mill’s contribution to the development of sociology is also marked by his argument that social advancements are as a result of activities and practices of each individuals. According to him, one can explain singular activities by referring to laws that can be found in brain, science and ethology (the art of human improvement). This statement implies that the study of social interaction should be anchored on the objective of investigating the laws of conduct that one can rely upon to anticipate people’s conduct and social results.

Also, the concept of law and irregularity played a major part in the development of sociology. It deed in the sense that Mill, as well as other sociologists were convinced that sociology-just like any other field of science—is characterized by the disclosure of laws and regularities (Ritzer & Ryan, 2010: p. 24). It beats logic to use a collection of perceptions in order to sort out regularities and consider the procedure as a scientific action. For that reason, Mill and other scholars proposed that there is need for of sociology to integrate the disclosure of laws of social conduct and social progression.

According to Seidman (1983, p. 47), some of the questions that guided the progressive development of sociology include the following: first, are the activities of individuals, as well as other characteristic occasions, subject to perpetual

laws? Secondly, does that consistency with the causation of action add up to the establishment of each logical hypothesis? Mill appears to be in agreement with the fact that there are several laws that regulate individuals' conducts and the decision they make in their daily life. Sociologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries subscribed to the thought that the basic principle of human sciences is to determine the best approach for administering laws for the entire of society. [Swedberg \(1990, p. 46\)](#) notes that the process entails an investigation of the laws of individual's activity and ethology in relation to the societal values. Social researchers are therefore required to clarify the specific highlights of the aggregate condition of society.

Kusch notes that Millian convention and ideologies of integrating the psychologism perspective into sociology was adopted by several scholars from 1970s onwards ([Kusch, 1995: p. 8](#)). Key amongst the proponents of ideologies was Goldstein (1958-1974) who is known for condemning Watkin's position on the namelessness of social clarifications. According to Goldstein, the independence of methodologies is sufficient enough to prove the importance of mental attributes in clarifying and depicting social foundations ([Long, 1984: p. 784](#)). Goldstein asserts that the manner in which other scholars refer to unknown guidelines is not entirely appropriate for establishing the methodological independence. He questions the credibility of the arguments put forth by the opponents of Mill's psychologism perspective in sociology.

#### 4. Critics to John Stuart Mill

Other individuals who also made contributions to the development of the discipline of sociology dismissed and criticized Mill's stand on the necessity of conducting experiments and not relying on deductive reasoning. Scholars who were opposed to Mill's position subscribed to the idea of antipsychologism. Some of the profound authors and scholars include Karl Marx, Max Weber, Watkins, L. von Mises, Popper, Menger, von Hayek, Boudon, and Elster among others ([Viale, 2011: p. 56](#)). The authors were particularly opposed to the Mill's idea of psychologism and his proposal to reduce individuals' social action to causal mechanisms that occur within the minds of human beings. They were of a contrary opinion that human beings are social beings and that their actions are as articulated by social drives-environmental factors that predispose them to certain actions.

While making his assertive stand against Mill's psychologism, Popper argued that Marx made a great achievement as an outstanding sociologist by attacking Mill's psychologism and in the process, contributing to the reinstatement of the autonomy of sociology and social laws. In his view, John Stuart Mill was demeaning the principles upon which the discipline of sociology is built by making too much inference on psychological principles ([Popper, 1968: p. 12](#)). From his argument, Popper perceived Mill's propositions as a retrogressive process in as far as the development of sociology is concerned. The same point is reiterated by

Vaisey (2009, p. 1676) when he mentions that sociologists were once subscribed to the ideal that individuals' action were driven by the social values and expectations from the society. To confirm his point, the author refers to Max Weber's *Wertrationalitat* and voluntarist theory of action by Talcott Parson which propose that an individual's behavior is motivated by his or her desired ends. The author gives weight to the concept of culture as having played a key role in the determination of the course of the development of cognitive sociology. Opp (1979, p. 782) records that various scholars have perceived culture as the source of the values which are passed within a society from one generation to another until recently when scholars decided to critique the perception.

Popper attributes the flaw of Mill's psychologism idea to the claim that all sociological phenomena and social irregularities need to be reduced to psychological laws and psychological phenomena based on the principle of methodological individualism (Popper, 1987: p. 23). His idea is somewhat in tandem with the claim that Jacobs makes concerning culture and religion. Individuals can only enjoy common interests if they are able to recognize the difference in their cultures and make efforts towards transforming their perspectives towards the differences (Jacobs, 2016: p. 13). The author also credits attributes the creation of social bonds and boundaries, individuals and groups to culture. Thus it indicates that culture was central to the determination of sociological concepts and development of cognitive sociology. It did in the sense that culture influenced the way individuals interacted and related to each other by dictating what they ought to do in each situation. Popper also accused Mill of relying overly on a historical approach when developing the concept of psychologism whose basic tenet rests on the idea of an existence of human nature and individual-based psychology before the establishment of a society (Viale, 2011: p. 57).

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to offer a more in-depth understanding of John Stuart Mill's contribution to the cognitive development of sociology. From this research it emerges that according to Mill all the institutions and systems that make up a society must be explained from the perspective of an individual's action and mental processes. This proposal implied that sociological phenomena should not be understood or viewed from a social context, but rather from an individual's point of view. That is, mental processes, character traits and overall personality traits determine what transpires amongst people in the society and they should be the focal point for understanding the reason why people hold certain beliefs or subscribe to various cultures.

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