

# UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

Daniel Little

<https://undsoc.org/2015/12/04/historical-vs-sociological-explanation/>

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## Historical vs. sociological explanation



Think of the following matrix of explanatory possibilities of social and historical phenomena:

	General, nomothetic, causal	Particular, ideographic, interpretive
Historical		
Sociological		

Vertically the matrix divides between historical and sociological explanations, whereas horizontally it distinguishes general explanations and particular explanations. A traditional way of understanding the distinction between historical and sociological explanations was to maintain that sociological explanations provide generalizations, whereas historical explanations provide accounts for particular and unique situations. Windelband and the historicist school referred to this distinction as that between nomothetic and idiographic explanations ([link](#)). It was often assumed, further, that the nomothetic / idiographic distinction corresponded as well to the distinction between causal and interpretive explanations.

On this approach, only two of the cells would be occupied: sociological / general and historical / particular. There are no general historical explanations and no particular sociological explanations.

	General, nomothetic, causal	Particular, idiographic, interpretive
Historical		Why did the Qing empire collapse in 1907?
Sociological	Why are teenagers at higher risk for suicide?	

This way of understanding social and historical explanations no longer has a lot of appeal. “Causal” and “nomological” no longer have the affinity with each other that they once had, and “idiographic” and “interpretive” no longer seem to mutually imply each other. Philosophers have come to recognize that the deductive-nomological model does a poor job of explicating causation, and that we are better served by the idea that causal relationships are established by discovering discrete *causal mechanisms*. And the interpretive approach doesn’t line up uniquely with any particular mode of explanation.

So historical and sociological explanations no longer bifurcate in the way once imagined. All four quadrants invoke both causal mechanisms and interpretation as components of explanation.

In fact it is straightforward to identify candidate explanations in the two “vacant” cells — particular sociological explanations and general historical explanations. In Fascists Michael Mann asks a number of moderately general questions about the causes of European fascism; but he also asks about

historically particular instances of fascism. Historical sociology involves both singular and general explanations. But likewise, historians of the French Revolution or the English Revolution often provide general hypotheses even as they construct a particular narrative leading to the storming of the Bastille (Pincus, Soboul).

	General, nomothetic, causal	Particular, ideographic, interpretive
Historical	Why are empires prone to falling apart?	Why did the Qing empire collapse in 1905?
Sociological	Why are teenagers at higher risk for suicide?	Why did fascism emerge in Italy in 1930?

There seem to be two important grounds of explanation that cut across all these variants of explanations of human affairs. It is always relevant to ask about the *meanings* that participants attribute to actions and social events, so interpretation is a resource for both historical and sociological explanations. But likewise, *causal mechanisms* are invoked in explanations across the spectrum of social and historical explanation, and are relevant to both singular and general explanations. Or in other words, there is no difference in principle between sociological and historical explanatory strategies.

How do the issues of generalization and particularity arise in the context of causal mechanisms? In several ways. First, explanations based on social mechanisms can take place in both a generalizing and a particular context. We can explain a group of similar social outcomes by hypothesizing the workings of a common causal mechanism giving rise to them; and we can explain a unique event by identifying the mechanisms that produced it in the given unique circumstances. Second, a social-mechanism explanation relies on a degree of lawfulness; but it refrains from the strong commitments of the deductive-nomological method. There are no high-level social regularities. Third, we can refer both to particular individual mechanisms and a class of similar mechanisms. For example, the situation of “easy access to valuable items along with low probability of detection” constitutes a mechanism leading to pilferage and corruption. We can invoke this mechanism to explain a particular instance of corrupt behavior — a specific group of agents in a business who conspire to issue false invoices — or a general fact — the logistics function of a large military organization is prone to repeated corruption. (Sergeant

Bilko, we see you!) So mechanisms support a degree of generalization across instances of social activity; and they also depend upon a degree of generalization across sequences of events.

And what about meanings? Human actions proceed on the basis of subjective understandings and motivations. There are some common features of ordinary human experience that are broadly shared. But the variations across groups, cultures, and individuals are very wide, and there is often no substitute for detailed hermeneutic research into the mental frameworks of the actors in specific historical settings. Here again, then, explanations can take the form of either generalized statements or accounts of particular and unique outcomes.

We might say that the most basic difference between historical and sociological explanation is a matter of pragmatics — intellectual interest rather than fundamental logic. Historians tend to be more interested in the particulars of a historical setting, whereas sociologists — even historical sociologists — tend to be more interested in generalizable patterns and causes. But in each case the goal of explanation is to discover an answer to the question, why and how does the outcome occur? And this typically involves identifying both causal mechanisms and human meanings.

## EXPLANATION, PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY