

# Sociology as Sociography

## Introduction

When Evert Willem (E.W.) Hofstee started his academic career as lecturer at Groningen University in 1938, he defined his work as 'sociography' (Hofstee 1938). In this, he was clearly following in the footsteps of his teacher and tutor, Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz (1862-1940), who had created the new discipline from a fusion of sociology and geography (Karel 2002: 2-3). Only later would Hofstee add the word "sociology" to the domain of his work. Thus, the department ("vakgroep") he established and headed at the Agricultural University in Wageningen after 1954 was named "sociography and sociology" before being renamed as "sociology", and then, more precisely, "rural sociology". Nevertheless, until the end of his life, he remained committed to the agenda of "sociography": a grounded theoretical approach with low levels of abstraction and high probability of practical application (Hofstee 1938, Hofstee 1982; Karel 2002).

## Sociography

In the year after he obtained his PhD in 1937, a "sociography" of Het Oldambt, a region in the eastern part of Groningen province in the north of the Netherlands, Hofstee was appointed as an unsalaried university lecturer in sociography embedded within Groningen University's Faculty of Law. In the public lecture preceding the start of his teaching there, he gave an overview of the development and meaning of sociography, the discipline in

which he firmly positioned himself, and which had produced an impressive number of studies in the first decade after its establishment. Hofstee's overview was imbued with the ideas of Steinmetz, the founder of this relatively new discipline. In brief, Hofstee argued that the sociography developed by Steinmetz and adopted by himself can be characterized as a field of study interested in the social life of people and the diversity emerging from this social life, following inductive methods (Hofstee 1938).

For Hofstee, Steinmetz's and sociography's primary objects of study are people's social lives and their particularities. This interest is rooted in a concern for human beings, not what he refers to as an "abstract," "systematized," "schematized," or "idealized" human being, but the "concrete, living" human beings; human beings in their diversity, with "their lows and heights" (Hofstee 1938: 5). While Hofstee identified the abstract and generalized with sociology, he considered the concrete and particular the domain of sociography. Hofstee's peer and colleague, Sjoerd Groenman, had argued in a similar vein that sociology generalizes, while sociography studies the particular (Groenman 1948: 4). As an "individualizing sociology", sociography focuses on "concrete situations" and "groups" (ibid. 7).

Hofstee's interest in the concrete, the lived and the particular, marked his inclination

towards “inductive” research methodology, making in-depth descriptions of the social groups (Hofstee 1938: 7-8). He combined this with a comparative approach. In his own research, conceptualization from in-depth and comparative descriptions yielded the concept of “farming styles” in agricultural production (Groenman 1948: 11). In today’s language, we would refer to this inductive approach with its conceptualization from in-depth description as ‘grounded theory’.

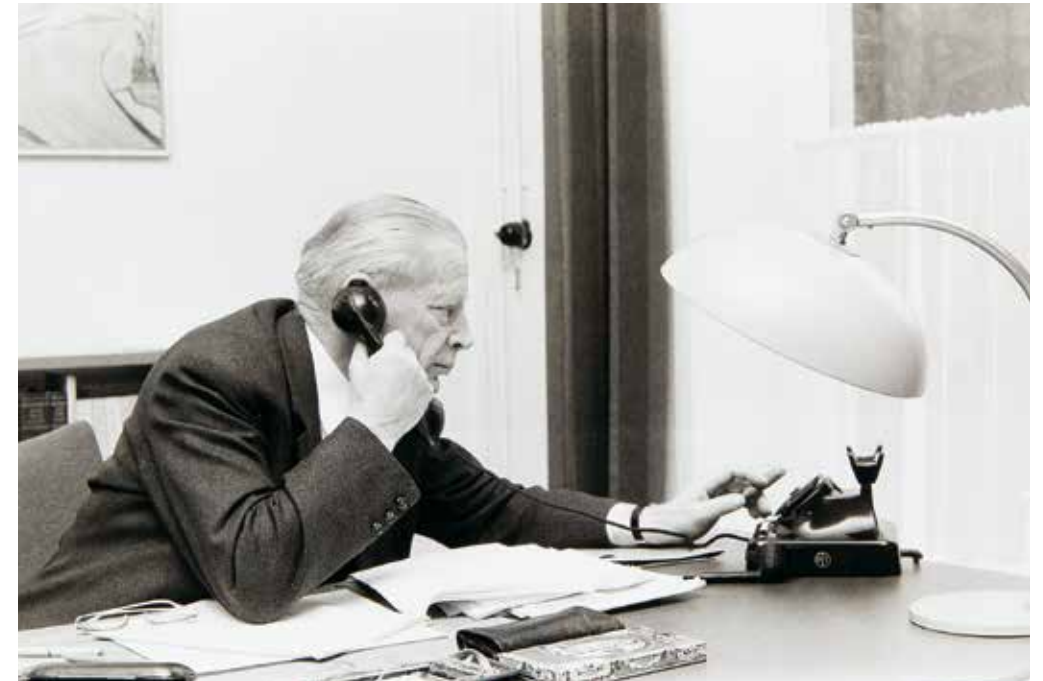
Hofstee distinguished sociology and sociography as separate but related sciences, the one developing abstract theories beyond time and place and the other developing an analytical understanding of the particular. This distinction between the general and the particular (Hofstee 1938: 11) was rooted in the apparent distinction between theory and research as it existed in the 1920s and 30s, a distinction that formed the background for the separation of sociology and sociography (Doorn and Lammers: 1958 53). Sociology’s tendency to abstraction, influenced by the philosophy-oriented German sociology, left the empirical field unexplored, now to be claimed by sociography. Yet Hofstee did not see sociography as an independent academic discipline but rather as providing the data for the sociologist, who would be able to develop fact based instead of speculative theory. The sociographer, collecting data – without theoretical assumptions or perspective (Karel 2002: 2-3) – does the ‘field work’ for the sociologist, making sociography the “auxiliary science” of sociology (Hofstee 1938 1105: 11, 15).

However, Hofstee did not only see the research oriented sociography as supportive towards theoretical sociology, he also considered sociography important for policy (Hofstee 1938 1105: 18). As the state increasingly intervened in people’s economic and

social life, so too did its need to acquire knowledge about diverse groups in society so that policy could be better assessed: “Without study, study and more study,” the state is unable to properly fulfill its task (Hofstee 1938 1105: 20), and it is the sociographers who can supply the knowledge required (Hofstee 1938 1105: 19). For Hofstee, sociography was an applied science (Karel 2002). Social scientific research in support of ordering interventions in Dutch society (Winkels,1982: 79).

### **Between unripe sociology and over-ripe geography**

Only ten years after Hofstee’s public lecture at the University of Groningen, Hofstee’s close colleague, Sjoerd Groenman, had concluded in his inaugural lecture at Utrecht University that sociography in the Netherlands had not delivered on its promise to become a powerful support for sociology. The material it inductively obtained had been of very little use in making generalizations (Groenman 1948 1103: 4). In fact, as the product of an unripe sociology and an over-ripe geography (Doorn and Lammers), it had remained more like a chorography, the description of regions, than a description of forms of social living (Groenman 1948 1103: 4-5). Rather than taking social groups as its object of study, Dutch sociography had produced what were essentially geographically-based descriptions of regions (Groenman 1948 1103: 6), yet in a way it had provided hardly anything more than uneven, incidental data of an unequal kind and therefore not useful to the sociologist (Groenman 1948 1103: 6, 15). In short, sociography had fallen short of its self-assigned duty to sociology (Groenman 1948 1103: 16). Hofstee himself came to a similar conclusion at a conference on sociography he hosted at the Institute for Social Research of the Dutch People in 1953 (Hofstee 1953). Sociography had not only failed to deliver, the distinction the practitioners of sociography



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had made between theory and research became less pronounced too. In the 1950s, the contradiction between theory and research, which had been the basis of the sociology-sociography distinction, had become less pronounced with the influence of American empirical sociology on the social sciences in the Netherlands. Moreover, several universities in the Netherlands started to offer masters in sociology – Utrecht 1951, Nijmegen 1953, Groningen 1955, the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam 1959, Wageningen 1962, and Rotterdam 1968 (Haan and Leeuw 1995). In short, the failure to deliver and to distinguish itself from geography as well as the empirical turn and institutionalization of sociology marked the end of sociography. In Utrecht, sociography became part of social geography and in Amsterdam part of sociology (Doorn and Lammers 1958). In Wageningen sociography became rural sociology, the study of social groups and phenomena within a rural

configuration. So in a period of only a few decades sociography became reduced to a specialization within geography or dissolved into sociology.

### **Sociography’s new cloths: Differential sociology**

At the beginning of the 1980s, at the end of his academic career, Hofstee defined his approach as a “differential sociology”:

*‘Differential’ sociological theory will in many respects be different from the currently existing sociological theories. First of all, as is already implied in the foregoing, ‘differential’ sociology does not aim at generalizations with a high level of universality. On the contrary, their validity will almost always be limited by time and place. Generalizations arrived at by ‘differential’ sociology will mostly not even function at ‘middle’ level but only at ‘lower’ levels of abstraction, since*

*they have to remain directly applicable to the factual social reality. Otherwise, they will lose their capacity to explain the characteristics of a particular group. In other words, in comparison with general sociological theories, 'differential' sociology is much more concerned with social phenomena of greater complexity. 'Differential' sociology means a comparative study of more or less similar single groups. It is interested in groups as such, and not in abstracted and isolated social traits. Even if it is interested in specific group characteristics, it will try to interpret them against the characteristics of the group as a whole. (Hofstee 1982: 54)*

Hofstee's differential sociology, as he emphasized time and again, did not aim at high levels of abstraction, referred to as generalization, therefore, but at explanations of the social reality of a particular group in time and space. This low-level abstraction was supposed to contribute to an understanding of the social worlds of identified groups, in all their complexity. Hofstee's concept of "farming styles", a shared understanding about how to farm shared by a group of farmers and the way this materializes, was one such low-level abstraction, one that has proved useful to understand diversity in farming practices. With his description of differential sociology, therefore, Hofstee could not have given a better definition of sociology.

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