

But should we be unable to find a generic meaning for a given term, then, in the interests of discipline-wide communication, we simply need to reflect the different meanings terminologically.

It is therefore only the *generic* meanings of concepts that should be standardized in sociology. The connotations given those meanings must remain in the hands of different traditions, different specialties, and, ultimately, different sociologists. Our standardization, then, should strive systematically to *subsume* different connotations of a given concept under some generic denotation. This should enable us, for the first time, to say just how one connotation (and more importantly, one set of hypotheses and findings made in accord with that connotation) relates to another.

The Next Step

Conceptual standardization in sociology is by no means a new idea. Thirty-two years ago, Kroeber and Parsons noted that "the confusion among anthropologists and sociologists about the concepts of culture and society...has made for...confusion as to what data are subsumed under these terms...[and] impeded theoretical advance as to their interrelation" (1958:582). Their call for "consensus between and within disciplines" on these concepts, however, went unheeded. Twenty-one years later Blalock proposed a "self-conscious and coordinated effort to focus on the basic concepts in the field" (1979:134). This call, too, went unheeded. The motion at the head of this article argues that the time has come for a fair trial.

If our trial succeeds, perhaps other national associations will do likewise. And if the various national associations can then reach agreement on a common standardization, we shall be well on the way to a global sociology with global knowledge cumulation, global research guidance, and global solidarity -- which is precisely where we need to be.

Let us discuss the motion in the pages of this newsletter and elsewhere during the current year, then vote on the idea and forward it to the A.S.A. Council for its consideration.

Procedural Note

According to section by-laws, a resolution can be brought to the members for a vote "by the Council, by a petition of 10 percent of the members of the Section or by twenty-five members of the Section, whichever is less." By precedent, issues such as this are decided by a membership vote at the annual meeting. Those wishing to bring the above resolution to a vote of the membership present at the Business Meeting of the section in August, 1991 should send letters to that effect to James Coleman, University of Chicago, 1126 East 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637 before August 15. All signers of individual and group letters must be dues-paying members of the section. -- Ed.

References

- Blalock, Hubert M. 1979. "Dilemmas and Strategies of Theory Construction." Pp.119-135 in William E. Snizek, Ellsworth R. Fuhrman and Michael K. Miller (eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Theory and Research*. Westport, CN.: Greenwood.
- Kroeber, A.L. and Talcott Parsons. 1958. "The Concepts of Culture and Social System." *American Sociological Review* 23 (October): 582-590.
- Weber, Max. 1975. *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics*. Guy Oakes (tr.). New York: Free Press.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL SCIENCE: GIVING UP THE POSITIVIST GHOST

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Walter Wallace complains that sociology lacks consensus about a single set of concepts. Only with such univocality could the core terms of sociology refer "uniquely and reliably to its domain." Only with such reliability could we be sure that sociologists are speaking about the same "type" of phenomenon. Only with commonality could we confidently separate "new knowledge" from "old knowledge." Upon this separation depends the steady and progressive accumulation that characterizes real science.

Since its inception, Wallace acknowledges, sociological theory has been neither univocal, reliable, nor exclusively attached to the new. Yet he assures us that all this can change, and now, if theorists would only show an appropriate concern and exercise their administrative prerogatives. If they but will, members of the A.S.A. Theory Section can shift the current of intellectual history!

Surely such a proposal is utopian. It displays a fundamental lack of seriousness in a sociological sense. In the history of sociology, thousands of intellectuals have argued in similarly idealistic ways. Tens of thousands of social scientists have tried to ground concepts in the empirical world. A small handful of brilliant conceptual systems have been proposed. None have succeeded.

Instead of calling this lack of success a scandal, it is best to call it reality. We must take this reality as a serious object of inquiry. If we understand the structure that produces continuing disagreement, we should call that our science. If dissensus is rooted in necessity, it may be less an affliction than a sign of health. Certainly, what we wish our science to be must be rooted on what it is possible to have.

I would like to define sociology as a multilevel rational discourse about society that occurs within traditions. This definition is deliberately paradoxical. There is rationality in social science, but not the consensus about the object-world that allows unequivocal access to it. Rationality suggests reflection and reflexivity, universalism and decentering -- the same objectivity that structures the natural sciences. Yet, because the topic is social, our science remains subjunctive and interior in a way that natural science does not. Because human feelings and ideas can never be observed, it is more difficult to hold indicators for key concepts to account. Because investigators wish not only to understand the world but to change it, a critical distance from the referents of our science is impossible to sustain.

These departures from objectivity are not random. We presuppose the object-world in a small number of distinctive ways. These form the traditions of social science. Once they are formulated and legitimated, social science traditions function in the Saussurian sense. They provide the core, taken-for-granted vocabulary upon which a wide variety of empirically directed speech acts, or research studies, rely. Traditions supply "sliding signifiers" (Moodey,

1990) vis-a-vis signifieds, ensuring there will be an element of the semiotically arbitrary alongside the scientifically rational.

Because our signifiers are intended to denote the empirical world, which is real and unbending, there are indeed limits to theory dependence. Yet signifiers connote as well as denote. Connotation is ensured by the arbitrariness, the relativity of signifiers; they are linked to one another linguistically -- by symbolic relation and difference -- as much as by any common social referent. Neither signifier nor signified can be thought of as "generic;" neither can "subsume" the other. The objects of social science are created by traditions; the objects of social science are discovered by reality-observation.

Traditions are carried forward by discourses and by research programs. Rather than empirical work testing tradition, even the most disciplined research is typically organized as a program to specify, elaborate, and revise it (Alexander and Colomy, forthcoming). Discourses perform much the same function in more speculative and ratiocinative ways. The "truth" and "newness" of knowledge are relative to program and discourse. They involve legitimacy as much as objectivity; at any particular historical time one tradition or another may have the competitive edge. Knowledge is accumulated, but there is disaccumulation as well.

Disciplinary solidarity exists in sociology, but it can only regulate, never displace the solidarity generated by competitive traditions. If disciplines are working well, disagreements between the traditions take the form of open-ended conversations. Administrative fiat can never produce genuine agreement. Like any coercive intervention in self-managed organization, it would serve only to distort the conversation of social science in artificial, significant, and unforeseen ways.

References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. and Paul Colomy. Forthcoming. "Traditions and Competition: Preface to a Postpositivist Approach to Knowledge Accumulation." In George Ritzer (ed.), *Metatheory in Sociology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Richard W. Moody. 1990. "'Sliding Signifiers' and 'Standardized Concepts'." *Perspectives: The Theory Section Newsletter* 13 (October): 7-8.

NEW JOURNAL

Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy provides a forum for philosophical and sociological inquiry on the production, assessment and validation of knowledge. In addition to empirical research on the origin and transmission of knowledge, *Social Epistemology* publishes normative essays on science and science policy, commentaries, exchanges between contributors, interviews and reviews. For a free sample copy, write: Steve Fuller, Editor, Center for the Study of Science in Society, 102 Price House, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg, VA 24061. tel: (703) 231 7687. fax: (703) 231 9307.

THEORIST WINS PRIZE

Jeffrey C. Alexander is the winner of his university's "Gold Shield" prize for academic excellence. The award is given to the U.C.L.A. faculty member who has demonstrated excellence in both teaching and research. The prize committee was especially impressed by the success of Jeff's undergraduate honor's course, "Social Theory in the Twentieth Century." Readers of his book, *Twenty Lectures* (1987), know the combination of deft exposition, metatheoretical sophistication, and historical and ideological contextualization that he brings to the classroom. Good work, Jeff! (For more details about the award, see the November issue of *Footnotes*.)

--- SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR --- SEMIOTIC AND STRUCTURAL STUDIES

The thirteenth International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies will be held in Honolulu, Hawaii June 3-28. The 1991 Institute's emphasis will be on Literary Theory, Feminist Studies, Anthropology, Philosophy, International Politics and Visual Semiotics. Program participants include John O'Neill and Marshall Sahlins. Enrollment is open to faculty and students, and tuition reduction scholarships were still available in November. Registration fee is \$395, meal plans cost \$9-13 per day, and housing options range from \$15-22 per night (shared dormitory or apartment) to \$43 per night (one-bedroom apartment) to \$72 per night (two-bedrooms). Reservations required by February 1. Contact: Michael J. Shapiro, Political Science, 640 Porteus Hall, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822. tel: (808) 956 8628. fax: (808) 956 6877.

CALL FOR PAPERS

"Religion and Social Theory" will be the subject of a joint program session of the American Sociological Association and the Association for the Sociology of Religion (A.S.R.) at the 1991 meetings in Cincinnati. Papers on any aspect of the subject are welcome, especially those dealing with the treatment of religion in social theory, assessments of the mutual contribution of social theory and the study of religion, and substantive theorizing on religion in society. Theorists are invited to participate in other A.S.R. sessions as well. Submissions should be sent to Theodore E. Long, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Merrimack College, North Andover, MA 01845 by February 1.

The International Visual Sociology Association will assemble July 11-13 in Rochester, N.Y. under the theme, "Visual Sociology: Seeing, Discovery and the Documentary Process." Visual sociology studies and papers on the use of visual methods are welcome. Abstracts (150 words) may be sent to: Chuck Suchar, President I.V.S.A., DePaul University, 2323 N. Seminary, Chicago, Ill., 60614. tel: (312) 362 8244. Following the conference, Howard Becker will lead a five-day workshop on "Exploring Society Photographically."