

WISSENSOZIOLOGIE: A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE FOR THEORY

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SUBSTANCE IN THEORY

Sociologists emphasize both theory and theory construction. But though the logic, objectives, and stages of theory development are more clearly understood, and though more sophisticated techniques for linking method and theory are available, the insights gained from the sociology of knowledge perspective are quite unique in developing theories (Blalock 1982; Leinhardt 1982).

Pragmatically defined, sociology focuses on what researchers actually do in their work. Often the doing of scientific research has not itself been analyzed.

The absence of the viewpoint of *wissenssoziologie* from a methodological analysis seems to me to be a defect since this branch of sociology claims to have discovered that science itself is embedded in the stream of social and historical reality, wherefore even in cases when the sincere effort toward unbiased objective knowledge cannot be denied, the available supply of terms, the technique of questioning, the articulation and grouping of problems may be responsible for distortions which can only be detected by intimate historical acquaintance with the correspondence between the development of science and the evolution of society (Mannheim 1963 10).

Mannheim recognized the importance of interaction effects between society and the sciences. The concerns of theorists emerge within a sociohistorical setting which, in turn affect the their theoretical formulations (Kinloch 1977). Sociological theories in the Nineteenth Century concerned problematic issues such as social disorganization or anomie and class exploitation and alienation. At that time, the notion *ought* had not been entirely replaced or separated from *is*. This meant that research revealed a social problem which should then be corrected. The beginning of this separation becomes apparent in the writings of Max Weber (Wolff 1959). Then, logical systems were directly linked with other concepts such as *cosmos*, *society*, or *nature*.

Only in such a teleological frame can *ought* be legitimately derived from *is*. Otherwise, what is exists without a referent point. Like Robert Lynd, we might well ask, "After all, what is knowledge for?" By linking research with current issues, substance as well as form

can be incorporated into construction. Current studies on inflation and work-related issues are examples of goal directed research. In such research the objectives are directly associated with society.

Much work in theory construction reflects the historical and formal systems approach of the natural sciences. Thus the goal of substantive research is often obscured by emphasis on methodology and exactness. There is:

.. a curious lack of ambition to excel in the quality of theoretical insight into phenomenal structures. The aim of exactness replaces the goal to convey a knowledge of things (Mannheim 1963 7).

Attempts to link theory and methodology underscore this point. The researcher's main concern is with measurable models. The fact remains that just as knowledge is dependent on methods, so are methods dependent on knowledge. In generalizing about a population, sociologists assume a common normative structure within that population.

An additional insight comes from *wissenssoziologie*. Populations are viewed as social bases from ideologies. A whole new perspective emerges from this analysis. Problems in model building and error term reduction are solved. If theorists broaden their perspective these biases may be located in everyday experience. It may well be that one person's error variance is another's social behavior. Here, the qualitative rather than quantitative methods are more appropriate.

Concepts and theories can be derived via phenomenology by looking at everyday experiences. The sociology of knowledge perspective requires that theorists incorporate a sociohistorical realism with existential truth. Consequently, theoretical orientations should identify interpersonal relations from the perspectives of existentialism, philosophy, and natural science (Wolff 1959 951). This is not an easy task but methods to achieve it are improving (Filstead 1970; Phillips 1971).

Ultimately, the validity of any theory depends on its description of reality. Chapman (1982) has evaluated in some detail the concept of relativity in sociological theory. The contribution of this analysis to sociology underscores the need for such critical reviews. According

to Chapman, we are not truly social unless we are interacting in a two-way pattern which is not dominated by social institutions.

VALUES

Discussion of opinions and values in the social sciences always produces rather diverse opinions and reactions. It is recognized that values affect sociologists with both humanist and naturalist perspectives. Even Weber, with his value-free scientific approach, believed that research problem selection and interpretative findings depended on the scientist's value system. However, values can be analyzed within a naturalist perspective as Catton has demonstrated (1966 155). In this case, naturalist assumptions reflect the values held predominantly by the scientific community. Parsons viewed such relations as the proper subject of the sociology of knowledge, whereby values of society and accumulated empirical knowledge are clarified (Parsons 1961 978). It will be interesting to observe how the emerging values, such as objective, economic-rational, professional, and accountable types in society will affect the scientific community. There may be totally new kinds of research and new kinds of theories developed with changing values in society. Already, sociologists are responding to changes (Rossi 1980).

Another approach is deliberately to assume a value stance in research. Means (1969) suggests such an idea, using a sociology of knowledge framework. Theories thus reflect both the *is* and the *ought*. These concepts were derived from values commonly held and widely shared. The objective values – self, nature, others' minds, and time – reflect specific questions. "What is innate human nature?" "What is one person's relation to other persons?" "How do we measure time?" These questions were surmised over a ten year period in a study of five different sub-cultures in the United States by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck. Accordingly, Means (1969) believes that these objective values have been validated empirically and philosophically, and consequentially. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck verified them empirically. Kant justified them philosophically and consequentially in his modes of understanding. Finally, values result from norms, which affect behavior. This is

exemplified in certain religious groups where traditional views are accepted as given. Such groups and people value some aspects of life, which causes them to behave in certain patterned ways. Often their group cohesiveness is a function of their common shared values.

SYNTHESIS

Because of the eclectic aspect of *wissen-soziologie* tradition, the perspective provides a framework for synthesizing diverse insights and issues. Sociologists' theories which only include the human factor as another causal variable can combine hard data with soft data. By means of the dialectic between social reality and the individual existence, a synthesis and more realistic picture of social life can be obtained (Berger, Luckman 1966 170). Then theory construction would encompass both the process and the impact of how social reality is constructed. Integrating the works of Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Mead is relevant for those interested in institutions. The application of these ideas is basic sociological conceptualization. It can also be applied to political science, economics, and other social sciences. The data for such analysis does not come in a positivist form, but still may have empirical indicators. Language and religion – the traditional means of integration – must necessarily be examined in a sociohistorical manner.

Finally, the sociology of knowledge helps resolve the macro-micro debate. By this means, sociologists integrate both. While the approach of Berger and Luckmann represents a macrosociology of knowledge, the writings of Znaniecki can be described as *micro-sociology* of knowledge. This kind of division in the subject area is advocated by Stark (1967 20). He says that macrosociology of knowledge fixes attention on the society and its influences, such as the impact of practical philosophy, while microsociology includes a narrow focus on such things as scholarship and the art of intellectuals and their ideas. Florian Znaniecki, in *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge* studied a sociology of knowledge carriers. He described knowledge workers such as theologians, moralists, philosophers, and scientists. The synthesizing role of sociology of knowledge allows for broad level analysis by society, or a narrow

focus on small groups and individuals.

DISCOVERY

As Mannheim indicates, sociology of knowledge can be an organ of self control, and it could perhaps be an organ of self criticism. In discussing the importance of sociology to philosophy, Handy says that fundamentalism is not limited to religion, but can be seen in science as well. "Fundamentalists in science as well as in religious worlds are phenomena that could be better understood through sociological investigation." (Handy 1964 267)

The sociology of knowledge offers an alternative to the rigidity of some approaches, and could allow discovery of new theories. For example, "... data on the lives of novelists, playwrights, and actors afford .. clues regarding the nature of the sensitive observer." (Sjoberg, Nett 1968 182) Bondage to particular theories may hamper creativity.

It is significant that few creative efforts to understand the contemporary political world have in the main not been made by the academic professionals, but either by theologians, such as Reinhold Neibuhr, or by outsiders such as Hannah Arendt, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and Walter Lippmann. Unencumbered by the weight of academic traditions and unrestrained by the shackles of professional conformism, they have been able to view the contemporary political world in the light of the heritage of our civilization (Morgenthau 1962 3).

Discovery of theories or new ideas can come from almost anywhere. The potential for generating new theories could derive from assessing how a discipline develops, and perhaps from choosing an alternative approach to reality via the sociology of knowledge perspective. If sociologists do not follow such alternatives we may later echo Jaki's thoughts regarding the field of physics in the previous century.

When I went up to Cambridge early in the 1880's .. nearly everything was supposed to be known about physics that could be known. By the 1890's there were tremors .. by 1900 the Newtonian physics were demolished .. I have been fooled once, and I'll be damned if I'll be fooled again. There is not more reason to suppose that Einstein's relativity is anything more final, than Newton's *Principia*. The danger is dogmatic thought .. and science is not immune from it (Jaki 1966 507).

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