

SOCIOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY: ADVICE FOR HELPING PROFESSIONS

Mark N Wexler, Simon Fraser University, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Practical men and women concerned with the shape of our times are becoming clear on one fact: that we are living in an age of uncertainty. The knowledge explosion has paradoxically succeeded in helping us to realize the severe limitations of expecting the future to unfold as a neat consequence of the present. This uncertainty, understood sociologically as an aggregate response rather than as an individual response, has important implications for the helping professions generally, and for social workers particularly.

I hope to sensitize human service practitioners to the process wherein variations in sociological uncertainty alter the nature of successful social adjustment. As we move steadily into increasing social uncertainty, the altering nature of successful social adjustment becomes an important aid to the human service workers seeking to know the nature of problems confronting their clients.

VARIATION IN SOCIOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY

Each human generation attempts to make sense of its times. This collective sense-making procedure is an effort to encapsulate the core of common sense beliefs about our age. Unlike the biological generation period of 20 years, the sense-making procedure is facilitated by the mass media, and occurs more rapidly. During World War II, the existentialists, aided by the popular press, dubbed an entire generation *the lost generation*. The 1950's, as psychologists tell us, was an age of *status anxiety*. Psychoanalysts inform us that the 1960's were a period of reaction against the conformist anxiety of the 1950's. It was *the age of the counter-culture*. The 1970's, and perhaps the 1980's as economists, sociologists, and futurologists tell us, are the *age of uncertainty*.

The age of uncertainty, whether depicted by economist Galbraith (1977), the sociologist Merton (1976) or the futurologist Toffler (1971), is based on the increasing experience of unexpected and avowedly uncontrollable events. Things are changing, not only more rapidly, but spasmodically, and hence, unpredictably.

As perceived and understood, the change is not at a uniform pace but an irregular, shapeless amoebic movement, advancing here and retreating there, apparently, in a random fashion. The age of uncertainty denotes a world in which citizens perceive a previously predictable and understandable reality becoming far less so.

This depiction of an *age of uncertainty* depends implicitly on perception of sociological uncertainty as a *relative* state. This rather abstract topic is concretized with three analogies: 1) sociological certainty, 2) sociological ambivalence, and 3) sociological uncertainty.

Imagine that you are watching a theater marquee in late evening, and the blinking lights announce the film. You read the message with certainty and base your decision to attend or not on trust in your comprehension of the message. This is an instance of sociological certainty. In this instance, certainty is not only possible, but prevailing. The messages out there in the environment are comprehensible, and moreover, meet your fundamental needs. It is important to round out this depiction and thus avoid the *utopian* strain in depicting certainty by noting that indecisiveness and inability to cope are possible under conditions of sociological certainty. In a psychological context, some persons are indecisive despite the clarity of the message. This individual response, rather than the aggregate response, stems from a low tolerance for ambiguity or inability to understand the message when read.

In the second instance, of sociological ambivalence, the blinking of the marquee lights is speeded up, making it impossible for those with normal vision to discern the message. This signals an increase in the rate of uncertainty. Now one has to weigh the importance of the message, because the cost, in time and energy, of comprehending the message now increases. Ambiguity also increases. Only those having the intellectual prowess and the will to spend the energy will succeed in solving the problem. The incidence of ambivalence here is remediable. Solutions are: 1) decide early in the scenario that the

message is unimportant, and go to other things; 2) use technological means, such as a high speed camera, to slow the blinking; 3) locate someone you trust who has seen the film and ask about it.

The third instance, unlike the other two, has no rational solution. It is sociological uncertainty. In this case the lights blinking out the message are not only blinking rapidly, but as in sociological ambivalence, are blinking randomly as well. The result is unpredictability. Efforts to master this unpredictability by intelligence, with genuine sociological uncertainty, can only frustrate. It is pointless to look to alternate activities on which one has more certain information, since all message-dependent actions under conditions of sociological uncertainty are equally random. Technological solutions only produce an indecipherable replication of randomness. Finally, it is impossible to find any one who has seen the film.

The third instance typifies the ideal conditions of sociological uncertainty. Elsewhere (Wexler 1981) I traced the relation of this depiction to the classical theory of *social anomie* and explored the reasons for emergence of the belief in ours as an *age of uncertainty*. In this historical framework, the age of uncertainty may not be empirically useful. Perhaps change is no more rapid and no more spasmodic than that prevalent in the Canadian west. Such reasoning, while interesting to the empirical scientist, is less so to the human service practitioner, who must deal with the simple but powerful fact that when people perceive things as real, they act accordingly.

The first time that I insisted that the "monsters" were not in the room with my drug-dependent client, I believed it, and my assistant believed it. But we were already acting in line with this belief. It became apparent to me, albeit not very quickly, that my empirical validation of a monsterless reality was powerless to dematerialize my client's monsters.

VARYING UNCERTAINTY AND THE CLIENT

If one accepts, either that ours is an age of uncertainty, or that many people believe it to be, then human service practitioners should

be interested in reactions to sociological uncertainty. There are two related reasons for this assertion. 1) Those requiring and seeking assistance of social workers in an *age of uncertainty* will be of a different sort and more numerous than under conditions of either *certainty* or *ambivalence*. 2) Due to the difference, social workers ought to move towards an evaluation of the usefulness of present therapeutic techniques and styles. As products of an age of uncertainty, they may be less effective than under conditions of ambivalence or certainty.

Those requiring the aid of social workers in an age of uncertainty are neither the social and psychological marginals prevalent as clients in an *age of certainty* nor those unable to cope with accelerating and increasing change, as is the case in an *age of ambivalence*. The age of certainty forces itself most harshly on citizens who are firmly committed to mastering the rules of the game. These are the citizens with a high desire for control and mastery, to whom uncertainty is understood as a correlate of much-dreaded powerlessness. This fear of powerlessness, melded with a desire for control, and a commitment to the rules of order all provide a new type of client; one who has met with great success in adapting to the conditions of certainty and ambivalence, but not to those embedded in an age of uncertainty.

Let us now account for how variations in degrees of sociological uncertainty create a change in the number and type of clients likely to seek assistance of helping professionals. To get to this issue in an analytic mode, we will explore the sociological model of social normalcy and adaptation prevalent in the works of structural functionalists (Parsons 1949, 1951; Merton 1957; Wexler 1974). Structural functionalists are important in this context since they seek to address the problem of the ongoing adaptation of individuals to changing social conditions. The emphasis here is historical and macrosocietal. Individuals are depicted as constantly striving to fulfill their personal desires and needs in the context of altering social and historical conditions.

In the context of structural functional theory, social normalcy is viewed as a product of the degree to which the individual and society are

integrated. Social normalcy is realized, the functionalists argue, when citizens develop modes of legitimate action grounded in socially accepted values which effectively achieve or approximate the ends sought by individuals. Failure to achieve one's ends or to do so in the context of socially approved values, when recurrent, will lead to social strain, and to abnormality if not tempered. Within the structural functional perspective, helping professionals arise to maintain a congruence between the actions and values of individuals and those of the larger society or collective in which both acting and valuing are meaningful.

Helping professionals, according to structural functionalists, attempt to help citizens learn and coordinate effective strategies of adaptation. An effective strategy is one in which the individual achieves the end sought, and does so with the approval of his/her collectivity. The logic here is that socially normal individuals are those capable of successfully securing their needs or adjusting them so as to secure their needs while realizing the approval of society. Everyone will attempt to develop modes of adaptation, but when these fail and none are found to replace them, the individual becomes a client of human service practitioners.

The structural functionalists take their reasoning one important step further. They posit five basic strategies of human adaptation to the changing social world. In line with Merton's (1957) work these are the five:

Conformity - The mode of adaptation involving a reliance on tradition and well-established paths of action to socially acceptable ends.

Retreatism - The mode of adaptation involving a concerted search for a more controlled social microcosm in which the individual can achieve socially acceptable ends.

Ritualism - The mode of adaptation involving an elaborate and structured series of continued and often repetitive actions to achieve socially acceptable ends.

Rebellion - The mode of adaptation involving an effort to thwart or renounce specific or generalized authority figures in order to achieve socially acceptable ends.

Innovation - The mode of adaptation involving the synthesis of heretofore uncombined elements to generate a novel but socially

acceptable path to approved ends.

These strategies of human adaptation are *ideal types* in the Weberian tradition (1964), and are simplifications of a complex welter of adaptive patterns. The simplification of ideal-type analysis occurs with the use of sensitizing labels like *conformity* and *rebellion* to denote broadly conceived adaptive strategies.

Humans, it is argued, in an age of certainty will generally develop adaptive strategies that differ from those in either ambivalence or uncertainty. Moreover, those unable to succeed in attaining social normalcy in an age of certainty will differ from those prevalent in either ambivalence or uncertainty. This logic assumes that individuals within populations seek stable and trustworthy information in order to achieve social normalcy. To fulfill both the means-ends and the social legitimacy aspects of social normalcy, it is imperative that one find or develop a means of making sense of the social world.

In the age of uncertainty this need for a sense-making procedure is easily fulfilled. As shown in Figure 1, the adaptive strategy most useful in this context is conformity. This conformity cannot be blind. The rules governing the social system are explicit, and one desiring to fulfill particular ends within a socially legitimate context ought to be aware of the social rules guiding that behavior and especially the particular nuances and emphases given to the general behavior stream by highly successful *known models*. The known model is the active agent whose behavior is made concrete, and not abstractly theoretical or rule-bound. The second most successful adaptive strategy in an age of certainty is innovation. The stability of elements in an age of certainty permits the emergence of the stable social entrepreneur. Social entrepreneurship goes beyond conformity in achieving one's goals. It takes a concrete instance of conformist behavior and generates a novel combination. The novelty of innovation is easily kept within the parameters of the *legitimate* and the *totally acceptable* in an age of certainty, but this becomes more difficult in both the ages of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Ritualism is the strategy least likely to work in an age of certainty. The ritualist relies on an elaborate and structured series of often

FIGURE 1: CERTAINTY IN HUMAN ADAPTATION:

Adaptation	Saliency
conformity	+
retreatism	+/-
ritualism	-
rebellion	-/+
innovation	+

FIGURE 2: AMBIVALENCE IN HUMAN ADAPTATION

Adaptation	Saliency
conformity	+/-
retreatism	+/-
ritualism	-
rebellion	-/+
innovation	+/-

FIGURE 3: UNCERTAINTY IN HUMAN ADAPTATION

Adaptation	Saliency
conformity	-
retreatism	+/-
ritualism	+
rebellion	-
innovation	+/-

reads rebellion as a signal to increase blocking behavior. Retreatism works well for those seeking goals that are achievable in the retreatist context. These goals should be highly focused. Moreover, to be successful in either a hermitic, or a community retreatist endeavor, the retreatist must be fully engaged and unstinting in commitment to this adaptive strategy.

In an age of ambivalence the social world becomes more turbulent. Conformity, like its behavioral root, tradition, now becomes iffy. Conformity, as shown in Figure 2 works well when done selectively. Since the social processes have speeded up so rapidly, one must learn to adjust the old well-established rules of an age of certainty to one of ambivalence. One of the best and most important ways to accomplish this is to select a model who is proving successful in the accelerated social conditions of this period. The selection requires a clear understanding of one's goals and an ability to discern this in a successful model as *other*.

In an age of ambivalence, as in an age of certainty, retreatism can be both adaptive and non-adaptive. Retreatism is useful for those seeking limited goals with an intense focus and concentration, a strategy not easily accepted in the hurly-burly of today's urban life. But one must be aware that it is likely in an age of ambivalence, as turbulence increases, that more individuals lacking in deep commitment, will perceive the retreatist adaptation as a panacea. To these increasing numbers, the retreatist adaptation may produce an increase, and not a decrease in social abnormality.

The ritualist in an age of ambivalence sticks out less exaggeratedly than in an age of certainty, but the ritualist's insistence on highly routinized activities does not become any more functional. The reason the ritualist begins to assume the appearance of greater adjustment in an age of ambivalence is that the ritual routines often give others the feeling that here is a swift and assured decision-maker; one who is self-confident. Ritualism increases during an age of ambivalence. To many, as the script speeds up, the only way to tackle the acceleration is to memorize one's lines.

Rebelliousness in an age of ambivalence is

repetitive actions to achieve socially acceptable ends. This behavioral strategy successfully anchors the psyche, and permits a feeling of control, but it often is incapable of ready transfer from one goal accomplishment to another. In an age of certainty, one must not only be able to use stable information to accomplish a goal, but be able to move on to other goals when one has succeeded with the first. Ritualism in an age of certainty is like a traveler with too much luggage.

Two adaptations that work for some and not others in an age of certainty are rebellion and retreatism. Rebellion works well when the individual is prevented from accomplishing socially acceptable goals by an authority figure. It works best when the authority figure is sensitive to rebellion as a *message* in line with *other's* desire to achieve socially acceptable goals. It works worst when directed to non-authority others with little direct influence on the individual's goals, or when directed to an authoritarian type authority figure who

both adaptive and non-adaptive. In this respect it is like rebelliousness in an age of certainty. But there are two key differences to be noted. In an age of certainty, it is still highly useful to rebel in order to communicate feelings of being blocked to the blocking *other*. In an age of ambivalence, it is both more difficult to identify clearly the blocking *other*, and of equal import, to have the *other* recognize the rebellious content of the message. Thus, in an age of ambivalence, as individuals find it more difficult to achieve their ends, rebelliousness increases.

Innovation in an age of ambivalence becomes an important, but dangerous mode of adaptation. It is important because the age of ambivalence provides great opportunities to innovators. The rapidity of acceleration of social phenomena melded with increasing erasure of older and more concrete demarcations of the age of certainty not only make innovation possible, but demand it. The dangers of innovation are twofold. 1) It cannot be taught, and one is confounded by those who claim to be able to teach innovation. 2) More pressing is that the innovator in an age of ambivalence may be found on the *wrong* side of the law. The issue of social legitimacy of action, explicit in the structural functionalists' designation of social normalcy now becomes problematic. The categories of moral and legal evaluation often change more slowly than the motive force that stirs the innovator.

In an age of uncertainty, unpredictability prevails. In these circumstances, as shown in Figure 3, conformity is not a very useful adaptation. Traditional means of achieving socially approved ends no longer serve adequately to guide behavior. Moreover, direct modeling based on the perceptions of successful others, is adaptive in an age of ambivalence but is no longer useful in an age of uncertainty. Citizen A's perception of Citizen B's success in a venture with an outcome which A desires, in no way guarantees that B's method will succeed.

The speed which denoted an age of ambivalence is not joined to the incidence of spasmodic change. Patterned events occurring at Time 1, such as B's successful behavior need not be at all successful at Time 2 simply because the same behavior sequence is used.

The rebel appears very frequently in an age

of uncertainty, but this frequency should not be taken to gauge rebellion's adaptiveness, because the perception of blockage increases when the rebel feels unable to achieve socially acceptable ends. But it is difficult to locate the source of blockage, and without this knowledge, tension reduction is temporary, and in the long run tension is increased. The reason that rebellion fails to reduce tension overall is the ubiquity of rebellion in an age of uncertainty. Tension likely increases as acts of rebellion are not received as messages of blockage, but as acts to be resisted with equal or greater rebellious intensity.

In an age of uncertainty ritualism will increase and provide a psychological anchor. Ritualism will not lead to goal attainment better than conformity, but it provides a sense of control. Excess behavior luggage which draws ridicule to the ritualist in the age of certainty helps to maintain calm and steady demeanor in times of social agitation. The ritualist takes refuge in a large corporate entity or fundamentalist religious interpretations. The ritualist adheres rigidly to a series of understandable behavioral prescriptions. The solidity of this step-by-step system provides a relatively sophisticated way to cope with uncertainty.

The retreatist and innovator, as shown in Figure 3 can adapt or fail depending on their mode of approach. Successful retreatism entails a formal commitment to the ideals and discipline of this mode of existence. Those seeking hermitic existence must insure that affiliative and social desires are well understood. Those entering the *community of retreatists* encounter a boom of such persons in the age of uncertainty, and many are drawn in less to the ideals of retreatist existence than by fear of the raw machinations of mass behavior. Successful innovation does not signal a mastery of the system or the use of intellect to fashion novelty. Instead, successful innovation requires patience, a playful disposition and good fortune. The unsuccessful innovator is one who, lacking patience, is continually frustrated by the randomness of occurrences, and looks at each failure as a threat to the self-perceived superior intellect. The successful innovator understands the importance of luck and appreciates the emergent, unpredictable age of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

While more analysts focus on the *stress* variable as an important indicator of psychological and social problems, they do so at the expense of ignoring the manner in which stress in the aggregate plays a vital role as sociological uncertainty. Being a good helping professional requires cognizance not only of one's particular therapy, but also of how this can be adjusted to suit ongoing changes in the nature of society. I have tried to sensitize human service practitioners to the effect of alterations in sociological uncertainty on human efforts to achieve normalcy. As a practitioner one must grow familiar with one's own version of current normalcy, but it is even more important to realize how transitory such normalcy is in the face of altering social pressures.

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SANDEFUR, FINLEY continued from Page 88

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