

Fall 2010

Problems in the Sociology of Knowledge: Social Epistemologies

Soc 636:01, Crosslist: 491:03

Tuesday 1:10-3:50

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This is a course on the sociology of social scientific knowledge. It amalgamates theory and method so that some of the work is theory about method and some of it is method of theory. It is about some of the key questions regarding how to think, write, and argue about how people think and act.

Concretely the course will revolve around the following questions:

- What are the goals and functions of sociological thinking and writing?
- What do “important” and “interesting” mean when it comes to scholarship?
- How are things that are interesting and important to be known?
- What are some of the key debates concerning how we should know society?

Together, my outline of issues reveals my intent for this course to be about the epistemology of sociological work. Yet I want the course to be less and more than that. Less in the sense that there are real specialists in epistemology and the sociology of knowledge (who are sometimes mistakenly called theorists), but I am not one of them. More in the sense that I will cause us to read broadly, which means we'll read some substantive works with an eye toward epistemological evaluation.

Requirements

The course's requirements are to read, talk, and write. Read all the work. Talk about the work every class period. I don't lecture in graduate courses. Most days, I'll talk for a bit at the beginning of class, and I'll certainly participate in the discussion, but I won't spend three hours per week telling you what I think about others' work. I'm more interested in the collectively creative exposition of the ideas.

Each of the following will constitute a third of your grade.

Weekly Preparation

For each class period you should prepare a memo or list of questions or issues concerning the reading. These should be no longer than one page, but they needn't be that long. The things you write should indicate to me that you're thinking critically, creatively about the readings. Please get this to me, and the rest of the class via email, no later than Monday night.

Discussion

Each student will be asked to lead discussion/s. How many times that happens (not more than 2) will depend on enrollment. Discussion assignments will be made on the first day of class, where we'll also talk about how to lead discussions.

Big writing thing

Last is a proposal, paper, or chapter. With this I mean to be flexible, to give people a choice that will work best with their intellectual agenda. "Proposal" means a dissertation proposal. "Chapter" means something that would go in a dissertation. Of course, the specific topic can be of your own choosing, but you should clear it with me first. We will talk about people's work, regularly, during class-time. I am unconcerned about length here.

I do not give incompletes.

The following should be at the Douglass bookstore. Please buy them:

- George C. Homans, *The nature of social science*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World 1967.
- Richard Harvey Brown, *Society as Text*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

The other readings are on Sakai.

The following corresponds roughly to the number of weeks in the semester. We'll talk in more detail about that the first day of class.

1. Stories about science
 - a. George C. Homans, *The Nature Of Social Science*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World 1967.
2. What should sociology be about?
 - a. Black, Donald, *Dreams of Pure Sociology*, 2000, 18(3):343-367.
 - b. Black, Donald, *The Epistemology of Pure Sociology*, *Law & Social Inquiry* 20 (Summer 1995): 829-870.
 - c. Stanley Lieberson and Freda Lynn, *Barking Up The Wrong Branch: Scientific Alternatives to the Current Model of Sociological Science*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2002. 28:1-19.
 - d. Clifford Geertz, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*, 3-32 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, NY: Basic Books, 1973.
 - e. Max Weber, *The Definitions Of Sociology And Social Action*, 4-24 in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
3. Telling stories that people want to hear
 - a. Murray Davis, *That's Interesting*, 1971, 1(4):309-344.

- b. Wayne Brekhus, A Sociology Of The Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus, *Sociological Theory*, 1998, 16(1):34-51.
 - c. Wayne Brekhus, A Mundane Manifesto. *Journal of Mundane Behavior* 2000, 1(1):89-106.
 - d. Kai Erikson, On Sociological Prose, Pp. 23-34 in *The Rhetoric of Social Research: Understood and Believed*, Albert Hunter, editor, Rutgers University Press, 1990.
 - e. James Jasper, How the Research-University Model Has Killed the Creativity of Humanists and Social Scientists, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 26, 2002.
 - f. James Jasper, Why So Many Academics Are Lousy Writers, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 7, 2002.
4. The reality of representing a problem
- a. Vernon Dibble, Four Types Of Inference From Documents To Events, *History and Theory*, Vol. 3, 1963, pp. 203-221.
 - b. Arthur Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories*, Harcourt Brace and World, 1968, pp. 15-56.
 - c. Randall Collins, Statistics versus Words, *Sociological Theory*, 1984, 329-362
 - d. Andrew Abbott, Transcending General Linear Reality, *Sociological Theory*, 1988, 6:169-186.
 - e. Gary Marx, Introduction, *Muckraking Sociology: Research as Social Criticism*, Transaction.
5. Causes and social behavior
- a. Margaret Mooney Marini and Burton Singer, Causality In The Social Science, *Sociological Methodology*, 1988, 18:347-409.
 - b. Andrew Abbott, The Causal Devolution, Lecture on Causality in the Social Sciences in Honor of Herbert L. Costner, Delivered at the University of Washington on April 24, 1997.
 - c. Larry Griffin, Narrative, Event Structure Analysis, And Causal Interpretation, *American Journal of Sociology*, 1993, 98(5): 1094-1133.
 - d. Ian Hacking, The Argument, Pp. 1-10 in *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
 - e. Douglas R. Hofstadter, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle And The Many-Worlds Interpretation Of Quantum Mechanics, 455-477 in *Metamagical Themas*, New York: Basic Books, 1985.
 - f. Charles Tilly, Four Pernicious Postulates, in *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, Russell Sage Press.
6. Counterfactuals & negative evidence
- a. Max Weber, Objective Possibility And Adequate Causation In Historical Explanation, Pp. 164-188 in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Translated and edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, NY: Free Press, 1949.
 - b. George H. Lewis and Jonathan F. Lewis, The Dog In The Night-Time: Negative Evidence In Social Research, *British Journal of Sociology*, 1980, 31(4):544-558.

- c. James Fearon, Counterfactuals, *World Politics*, 1991, 43(2).
 - d. Read materials on Dark Winter and the Brookings/American Enterprise Institute effort on thinking about terror attacks (NB: only the Brookings report and the Inglesby articles are on the disk):
 - i. <http://www.hopkins-biodefense.org/darkwinter.html> link
 - ii. <http://www.hopkins-biodefense.org/darkwinter.html>
 - iii. <http://www.continuityofgovernment.org/pdfs/FirstReport.pdf>
7. Sociological stories as narrative
- a. Richard Harvey Brown, *Society as Text*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.