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*Review Essays*

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## **Sociological Amnesia: The Noncumulation of Normal Social Science**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

When I was a graduate sociology student many years ago, I visualized “the literature” as an ever-growing mountain of sociological findings that would continue to grow until, someday, the discipline had obtained reasonably complete and perfect knowledge about the workings of society.

Others held more sensible versions of this image, but the hope that scientific research could be cumulative—or mountain-building—was forever destroyed by Thomas Kuhn’s finding (1962) that the paradigmatic axioms that underlie everyday “normal science” are overthrown and replaced periodically. However, Kuhn did not go far enough. Even the normal science that is conducted while paradigms remain dominant is not cumulative, at least in sociology, for empirical researchers regularly carry out research that repeats findings already reported by earlier sociologists.

Moreover, they do so not to replicate previous findings. Indeed, they often do not know the earlier work, thus redoing what does not need redoing instead of moving ahead to new knowledge. No wonder the discipline is often accused of reporting common sense, i.e., the already known, or not contributing enough to the stock of social knowledge. Only social theory seems to be exempt from this rule, for theoretical writings often build on the ideas of past major theorists.

The hypothesis that normal sociological science is not cumulative is hardly new. Pitirim Sorokin made it the lead theme of his 1956 book *Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology and Related Sciences*, and I would imagine

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that someday archaeologists will dig up a Babylonian tablet making the same point.<sup>2</sup> (Sorokin, 1956:3–4)

Today, as surely in the past as well, the amnesia hypothesis is regularly discussed, often in personal terms, whenever older sociologists meet, and tell each other that young colleagues are reporting findings they had reported in the past. Professional pride, and perhaps also the fear that they would be stigmatized for their age, has discouraged older sociologists from publicly voicing their dissatisfaction. However, anyone who began to do research in the 1950s and 1960s must by now have seen repetitions of their own findings, almost always uncredited. I have found it happening in the fields in which I have worked, among them the sociology of housing, the suburban community, poverty research, and the media. A colleague who did not know I was working on this paper wrote recently, “I know that this is a damaging sign of advanced age, but I am struck continually that so many ‘new’ policy ideas are refrains of the 1960s.”

Most of the repetitions are not major findings but small parts of the empirical building blocks that began to be added to older ones after World War II, and that could have been enlarged and added to even further in recent decades had energy not been spent in rediscovering them. For example, I have seen several recent papers on suburban neighboring that reported the dominant role of women, repeating a finding that a number of us made in the 1950s—and that incidentally probably repeated similar findings of the 1920s and earlier.<sup>3</sup> Further, I remember a recent review of institutionalization theory and institutional approaches that began with the 1960s, ignoring the earlier work that had been done (including by the founders of sociology) on these topics.

I am reluctant to report further anecdotes since I do not want to fault young colleagues for a common practice. Also, individual anecdotes do not prove hypotheses, but this particular hypothesis is also difficult to test. I suppose one could review the past and present literatures of a sample of major sociological fields and identify the repeated findings—which might be feasible once all journal issues and monographs ever published

<sup>2</sup>Robert K. Merton alerted me to Sorokin’s book, and to the fact that his first chapter is entitled “Amnesia and New Columboes.” I do not know whether my use of the same title is a matter of independent discovery or unconscious borrowing of another author’s work, however.

Merton had found reason to question the cumulative nature of research in his early work in the natural sciences, but he expressed the situation in the social sciences dramatically at the end of *On the Shoulders of Giants*, quoting David Zeman to the effect that “in the social sciences, each generation steps in the face of its predecessors.” (Merton, 1965:267, 267n).

<sup>3</sup>What I have not yet seen are enough studies of suburban neighboring that look at whether gender roles change when both spouses work, and in communities of varying socioeconomic levels.

are analyzed for key words and computerized. One could also survey older sociologists and ask which of their findings have been reported again, and as novel findings, but not all older researchers find out that their work has been repeated.

Meanwhile, Cynthia Fuchs Epstein described the problem well in an interview she conducted with Mirra Komarovsky in 1989:

Unfortunately, many feminist scholars today are not aware of the great contributions Komarovsky has made to the analysis of gender roles, regarding her work as a classic but neglecting to see how well it incorporates into today's studies. Many scholars, in fact, have rediscovered her insights, sometimes claiming them as their own, or attributing them to the more recently published works of younger sociologists. (Epstein, 1989)

### SOCIOLOGY'S ATTENTION SPAN

Looking for a way to support my hypothesis with some broader empirical materials, I ended up investigating a related one also interesting on its own merits: what could be called sociology's bibliographic attention span. I tabulated the ages of the references that sociologists doing empirical work have cited in their bibliographies, and while this analysis can neither show whether researchers have repeated or ignored relevant past findings, nor test a more general cumulation hypothesis, it can provide some illustrative data on the attention which footnote-creating researchers pay to past research.

My method was simple: I gathered what I considered the better known and highly respected book-length empirical studies in four sociological fields with which I am familiar: ethnicity, race, urban/community, and media, and classified the cited references in ten-year intervals counting back from each book's publication. Thus, for a book published in 1978, I counted all cited references for 1978–1969, 1968–1959, 1958–1949, etc. I included all references, sociological and other, counting each only once, and leaving out only anonymous newspaper articles and self-references.

Although sociological talk among older sociologists has it that the failure to cite older studies is a shortcoming of the younger generations, a quick look at a couple of older books persuaded me to expand the study backward in time. In the end, I chose six books from each field, one from each decade between the 1980s and 1930s or 1920s.

The basic results are reported in Table I. It suggests that the attention span is indeed short, for across the four fields I looked at, 55% of all references date from the decade prior to publication, and another 25% from

Table I. Age of References, by Fields of Studies

References Decade Prior to Year of Publication	Fields				
	Media	Ethnic	Urban/ community	Race	All
First	69.5	54.1	48.1	44.3	54.9
Second	20.4	26.2	29.8	28.0	24.8
Third	4.4	8.9	13.1	15.7	10.3
Fourth	3.5	4.7	6.9	4.0	4.6
Fifth	1.2	2.1	2.5	5.0	2.7
Sixth or prior	0.9	3.8	3.3	3.0	2.7
Percent	100	100	100	100	100
Ns, References	1087	769	694	1014	3564
Ns, Studies	6	6	6	6	24

the second prior decade.<sup>4</sup> Only about 20% of all references are three or more decades in age.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, whether the research was published recently or six decades ago makes little difference. In every decade from the 1920s on, about 80% of references come from the 20 years prior to a book's publication.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, what Derek de Solla Price first described in 1963 as the "immediacy of interest in recent work," or the immediacy effect, exists in all the sciences (Price, 1986:165).<sup>7</sup>

If there is a disciplinary short attention span, however, it is not limited to authors, for there is scattered evidence that editors have the same problem. Barry Schwartz reports (personal communication) that the recipient of an *American Journal of Sociology* rejection letter in the early 1970s subsequently informed the editors that he had picked a paper published in the journal 15 years earlier and had resubmitted it under his own name.

<sup>4</sup>The reference to decades is obviously an effect of my categories, and an analysis of the references by year of publication might have shown that a majority of citations are from less than a decade prior to a book's publication, or coincident with major publishing spurts in the book's field.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Tilly was intrigued by, and suggested more analyses of, the variations across fields, but while it is possible that fields have different bibliographic attention spans, my samples were too small to justify testing such a hypothesis. For the same reason if no other, this analysis should not be treated as a norm-setting exercise by colleagues who want to be citationally correct.

<sup>6</sup>The high was reached in the 1950s and 1960s, with a figure of 91% and 88% respectively. Curious about my own bibliographic attention span, I also analyzed the citations in my three fieldwork studies, and found that 73% of all citations dated from the first prior decade and another 22% from the second.

<sup>7</sup>MacRae (1969:633) found this effect to be somewhat less immediate for sociology, using 1965 data.

Dean (1989:183) describes two experiments in which researchers resubmitted slightly revised versions of previously published sociological or psychological articles to the journals in which they had previously appeared, discovering that the editors had forgotten their earlier publication, which in one experiment was only three years earlier.

That some editors are forgetful and that the authors of 20 major sociological works chose from two-fifths to two-thirds of their references from the decade prior to their own publication does not indicate that their authors, or all sociologists, have a brief attention span or have ignored all earlier findings similar to their own. They could have reported recent similar findings but left out earlier ones because they did not know about these.

However, these results supply enough illustrative data to suggest that my hypothesis of the unintended repetition of empirical findings, and the implications for cumulation, deserve systematic testing. More important would be close examinations of a number of such repetitions to figure out why they occurred, and whether and how they could be avoided. I say this in part because what is probably still a minor trickle of repetition today could soon be a flood, as the new generations of young sociologists doing empirical work in the 1990s and the 21st century forget the large amount of research published in the 1970s and 1980s, when books and journal articles reached a new high.

### SOME POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

On the assumption that my basic hypothesis will turn out to be accurate, I devote most of the rest of this article to possible explanations. These may be somewhat premature, but they shed some light on the social structures and cultures of sociology—a topic that the discipline has largely avoided.<sup>8</sup> In addition, they suggest my title may be too strong, for the discipline does not suffer from the clinical malady called amnesia so much as from a structurally encouraged case of forgetfulness.

I propose several explanations. First is the tendency of researchers to cite friends, colleagues, as well as others they may want to impress. A second is sociology's evolutionary myth. It assumes that sociological research is always improving, that past findings stem from methodologically more primitive eras and that the older they are, the less likely they are therefore to be accurate or relevant. This myth, which sociology has borrowed from other sciences, has been expertly debunked by Merton (1984).

<sup>8</sup>Some are not so premature, for they have been well known for a long time. For more value-laden and angry explanations, see Sorokin (1956:17–20).

A third explanation is sociology's fabled ahistorical thrust. The claim that the discipline ignores the past is an old one, although it may be becoming less accurate as historical sociology becomes a major field. However, part of the traditional ahistorical approach reflects sociology's nearly disciplinewide belief that society and its parts are always undergoing change. As a result, old data must be out-of-date, almost by definition.

However, the fact is that some social phenomena change more than others, and some may not change much at all. What several sociologists reported in the late 1970s about how newspaper, magazine, and television news organizations choose the news remains largely accurate today. News staffs and budgets are smaller, but audience and advertiser demands, professional norms, and the need to cover and report a news story in a short time with a small number of words, or only seconds of television time, all create their own structural and other imperatives (see Tuchman, 1978, Kaniss, 1991). Conversely, many findings on sexual attitudes and practices from the 1970s are not valid today: a variety of family structures, moral beliefs, contraceptives, and sexual maladies have changed considerably.

Fourth, despite lip service about the need for cumulative findings, there is actually not much interest in scientific cumulation *per se*. In fact, the academic incentive structure in which sociology operates discourages it. For one thing, instructional patterns are not oriented to reviewing old research. The required course reading lists that each student cohort encounters are often dominated by the work of the students' professors, the reference groups of these professors, and perhaps their personal teachers—which may help to explain the two-decade bibliographic attention span. Presumably, the pressure to be up-to-date is especially strong in university departments that perceive themselves to be on the “frontiers” of research. For example, one of today's well-known young sociologists had never read a classic in his major field published in 1945. It had been so deeply buried in his graduate-school reading lists that he never looked at it.

Sometimes, students put pressure on professors to be up-to-date and to omit what they consider to be ancient references. They are, after all, engaged in a vocational enterprise and want to be trained in the latest materials even when they are not heading for research frontiers. Thus, the ahistorical tendencies of sociology may be further encouraged by vocational pressures—of a kind also found in other social science disciplines. Indeed, bibliographic attention spans in the journals of these disciplines do not appear to be any longer than those in sociology.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>By now, a good deal of anecdotal evidence exists to indicate that when journals run into budgetary difficulties, footnotes and references are cut first, and at times the older references go first. These economic realities will have to be taken into consideration in citation research.

The instructional pressures, both from students and faculty, are embedded in a larger academic economy that includes other, similar, incentives. For one thing, faculty and increasingly students as well must cope with an institutional demand for speedy productivity so that there is no time and no justification for exploring the past. As I have noted elsewhere (Gans, 1990:12), the academy functions like a piecework industry, and the administrators who reward students with jobs, and faculty with promotions, count how many pieces they have produced.

Under such conditions, noncumulation may be occupationally extremely useful. Sociology, like much of the rest of the academic piecework industry, puts a high value on originality; forgetting the past is functional for increasing (artificially to be sure) the number of original findings, and the number of articles and books that can be produced.<sup>10</sup> The ability to ignore the past also allows more time for the production of new pieces of research. It also leads, however, to the ignoring of older scholars who are either retired or no longer writing, even if their ideas and findings are still in use. This too is functional, because it excludes some colleagues from the citation indices, and thus from the occupational competition, however painful this may be for the older victims.

Fifth, there is the already mentioned unconscious borrowing from teachers, peers, and others in which many of us indulge. No incentive or mechanism for avoiding it seems to be available: while conscious borrowing is strictly punished as plagiarism, it remains gauche for a sociologist to remind a colleague that he or she had unintentionally and unwittingly borrowed a finding or idea.

Sixth and last, the practices of empirical sociologists seem to fit the general pattern first reported by Mannheim (1927/1952): that generations seem almost inherently reluctant to acknowledge the utility of past generations. Then why the concurrent, and seemingly unchanging, sociological preoccupation — in a postindustrial society sitting in a global economy — with a “classical” theory that first developed around the issues and problems of 19th-century industrial modernization?

The end result of the disciplinary patterns I have described is that sociology is not growing in substance as much as it could be. Although concept formation seems to progress, in quantity and sophistication, and sociological analysis is generally subtler than it was two decades ago, there is too much rediscovery of old findings — many of which have by now be-

<sup>10</sup>The potential for high productivity of original pieces is enhanced further by the fact that each social science discipline can operate largely in total ignorance of the rest, so that its members are able to make the same discoveries, new or old, independently. This is immediately visible by some cross-disciplinary reading in sociology and social, especially urban, anthropology, and in political sociology and behavioral political science.

come the conventional wisdom to be found in everyday newspaper feature stories. To the extent that sociology is cumulative, then, the process is not linear but circular; we are going around too much in circles, even if the circles are widening over time.

### THE POSSIBILITIES OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

My earlier observations indicate that sociology does not have much of a collective memory, and what it has is predominantly theoretical. Indeed, the term itself was only coined in the 1920s, by the now infrequently remembered French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980). The discussion and worship of Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and a handful of other classical and contemporary theorists, seems in fact to be enough to satisfy the discipline's need for collective memory.

There is also the question of whether sociology, or any academic discipline, is, wants to be, or can be collective — or a collectivity. Annual sociology meetings attract about 25% of the 12,000 or so members of the discipline (or about 15% of the country's estimated 20,000 sociologists), but many come for reasons other than the desire for disciplinewide collectivity. Some journals reach more than 25% of the country's sociologists, though it is probably true that the larger their circulation, and the more mainstream they are, the less well they are read. Sociology does not even have common dramas, or even scandals like Watergate (Schudson, 1992), that supply collective memories for a nation of almost a quarter billion people.

The future of sociology, as of other disciplines, is in specialization, and the continuing success of A.S.A.'s sections suggests that social specialization is as much sought as research specialization. Since collective memories can be intellectually and otherwise confining and inhibiting, this is perhaps as it ought to be. In any case, the relative dearth of collective memory in sociology probably also helps to explain the lack of cumulation.

### SHOULD ANYTHING BE DONE?

Sociology has many more serious problems than the repetition of old findings, but even so, something is to be gained by more stress on cumulation.

Perhaps at least some of the discipline's ahistorical habits, which make us look foolish in the eyes of the historians and other humanists, could be reduced. If the long-standing faith in the virtues of the cross-sectional approach could be complemented with a look at the relevant past, the



quantitative work that dominates sociology would have a little wider appeal, and the overall level of quality of the discipline might rise.

Indeed, judging by the continued public popularity of history, and the danger that well-trained journalistic free-lance writers — some without even undergraduate coursework in sociology — may increasingly take over the already small audience for sociological writing about current phenomena, there are good reasons for increasing the quality of sociological research. Actually, if the current interest in historical sociology holds, interest in old findings may increase as well, and if old studies are still nevertheless repeated, they can at least be repeated in a replicatory framework so that researchers can ask what has changed or stayed the same and why.

This, however, requires more interest than seems currently visible in middle-range theorizing about the dynamics of social change. We need to find out what behavior patterns and institutional arrangements stay largely the same and which ones change — and why. For example, why have sexual practices and attitudes apparently changed more drastically since World War II, than, say, new community sociability patterns, or the family structures and school performance problems among the very poor?

The creation of historical data bases will be particularly helpful, but even before this happens, more primitively conducted sweeps of the past literature (e.g., Phelan, 1990) are useful. Dissertation and publication bibliographies can be reviewed to make sure they go back in time, so that findings now perceived to be original are actually original by a longer time-span than a couple of decades.

Appeals for more historical consciousness do not usually go very far, however, history normally being less concerned with saving the past than serving the present. Nor is sociology likely to express much need for a disciplinewide historical emphasis as long as the flow of research grants, royalties, promotions, and undergraduate enrollments suffices to maintain the faith in ever-continuing methodological progress as well as ever-continuing social change.

But maybe it will not suffice, and we all know that sociology's future in some parts of the academy does not look as rosy as it did even a decade ago. Being more cumulative will not solve our problems, but it ought to be somewhere on the agenda when we get ready, as a discipline, to think more systematically about our future.

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