The Cultural and Social Incorporation of Sociological Knowledge

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Any evaluation of sociology as a discipline ought to focus not only on the way sociology is produced, but also on how it is consumed. In this article, we examine the degree to which sociological concepts have been incorporated into the vernacular of American society, the impact of sociological techniques and methods on politics and society, and the relationship between sociology and public policy. While sociologists often point to the problems caused by a certain alienation from the general culture—for example the notion that sociology is written in an obtuse language that the public cannot comprehend—we point to the problems that develop when sociology is too readily incorporated into American culture and society. The danger is that the more popular sociology is, the less likely it will be to maintain the sharp intellectual edge that made its incorporation possible in the first place.

Introduction

One of the least understood stages in the development of a science is the process by which scientific findings, concepts, and ways of thinking take leave from the scientists who originate them and enter the general culture and the larger society. This process, which occurs in any science, is of particular concern to sociologists. The terms and concepts of sociology through a process that has been described as cultural incorporation can become diffused throughout everyday language—often, in the process, losing their origins in the academic discipline that gave them birth. Moreover, sociological knowledge and technique can be subject to the parallel process of social incorporation, the direct or indirect (and unwitting) reliance on the findings and methods of sociology by social institutions and aspects of the social structure, both macro and micro.

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If the social and cultural incorporation of a science is part of what that science is, then any effort to assess the state of sociology as a science should deal with the way sociology has been received in American culture. One of the most interesting aspects of this subject is that the findings of science, which are presumably universal, are incorporated into cultures that, by definition, are particular; since, in studying scientific incorporation, we must limit ourselves to a particular culture, we have limited ourselves to our own. As sociologists evaluate their discipline, most of them will quite properly focus—to borrow terms from a sister discipline—on the supply side of the equation: how new knowledge is produced. Our concern here is with the demand side: how social knowledge is consumed. The sociology of knowledge is often better appreciated than the knowledge of sociology. We want to chart some of the ways in which work that originates as academic sociology becomes part of the culture and society that academic sociologists themselves study. In so doing, we may well discover that the incorporation of sociology into the culture and society is more of a mixed blessing than many sociologists might prefer.

The Language of Sociology

One place to begin is with the use of sociological words. Every sociologist knows Weber’s highly technical term *charisma* has become a favorite journalistic expression for those covering politics (as well as sports and popular music); how many of us also know that CHARISMA is also the name of a software program—or the name of a woman’s clothing store in Brooklyn? (Another store which closed, this one in Manhattan, was called *Gemeinschaft* [Wrong 1990:24]). It is common to find the term *thick description* in many areas of inquiry besides philosophy and anthropology, especially literary criticism; but it is also the name of an experimental theater company in San Francisco. A popular book on self-help movements was called *I’m Dysfunctional/You’re Dysfunctional*, even though it contorted to some degree the proper sociological meaning of *dysfunction*, while a journalist can write an article titled “We Have Met the *Anomie* and He Is Us.” Clearly one way in which we can begin to get a grasp on the degree to which sociological terms are incorporated into the vernacular is by examining their use in the popular media.

The mere fact that terms used by sociologists are also used by journalists does not establish direction; terms move from the general culture back to sociology just as they move from sociology to the general culture. Still, there is something to be gained by examining which sociological expressions are prevalent in popular usage and which are not. One way to approach this problem is to explore, using on-line data bases such as Nexis/Lexis, the frequency of citation for common sociological expressions and terms. This is, of course, a rough measure, since Nexis/Lexis, however helpful a tool for journalists and lawyers, is not a precise measuring instrument that can be relied on by sociologists. Nevertheless, the availability of such information does make possible some rough estimates of the degree to which sociological concepts appear in the mass media.