

# American SOCIOLOGICAL Review

February  
1947

Volume 12  
Number 1

The Official Journal of the American Sociological Society

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## SOCIOLOGY AND COMMON SENSE\*

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THE THESIS of this paper is that if sociology is to develop into a useful discipline it must combine the type of knowledge and understanding which is derived by use of the most rigid technique of science and by the type of knowledge that is known among practical men as common sense. The combined knowledge derived from these two sources will not, and cannot be pure science, but it will not lack the validity of science in that it will be trustworthy in both its capacity to validate its findings and to predict social behavior.

By common sense I mean the knowledge possessed by those who live in the midst and are a part of the social situations and processes which sociologists seek to understand. The term thus used may be synonymous with folk knowledge, or it may be the knowledge possessed by engineers, by the practical politicians, by those who gather and publish news, or by others who handle or work with and must interpret and predict the behavior of persons and groups.

I shall offer no other defense of this broad use of the term than the fact that all the types of persons whom I have listed, and many others, use this term to describe their understanding of situations and processes

and contrast this type of knowledge with what they call "theory." A part of their knowledge may be due to their knowledge of science but a large part of it is not. Common sense is a body of knowledge possessed by groups of persons who generally have spent years, sometimes generations, in the processes of living, making a living, and planning for the future. It may in many cases be quite logical and even quantitative knowledge but not rigidly so as in the case of science.

Its genius is that it is largely qualitative and adaptive. In some cases scientists are able to arrange this same knowledge into logical constructs and even reduce it to quantitative symbols of expression and convert it into precise scientific generalizations. Such generalizations do not, however, completely convert common sense into science because the generalizations are almost certain to be so abstract as to leave out some of the subtle and useful understanding contained in the adaptive knowledge of common sense. This is due to no technical shortcoming on the part of the social scientist. It is due to the nature of the phenomena with which sociological generalizations deal and the necessity of abstraction in arriving at generalizations.

If large universes of social phenomena with which sociological generalizations must necessarily deal were always multiples of

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\* The Presidential Address read before the annual meeting of the American Sociological Society, Chicago, Illinois, December 28-30, 1946.

smaller universes of the same phenomena, then this would not be true, for then generalizations broad enough to constitute sociological laws could be constructed by adding together or pyramiding sound generalizations concerning lower or less comprehensive levels of human experience. Unfortunately, and by necessity, this is not the nature of either the larger or smaller universes of day-by-day human experience. The large universes while not entirely unrelated to the thousands of smaller universes which function within their time and space scopes are quite *different integrations* of the same persons and events which make up the thousands of smaller universes. Generalizations about them cannot therefore be the mere sums or products of sound generalizations concerning the numerous smaller universes. Each broader and higher level of generalization must leave out some meaningful aspects or characteristics of the smaller universes because it must confine itself to the common denominators of all of them and with components or elements of behavior not present in the smaller universes. A broad generalization about common denominators may be valid but it is so thin in its interpretation of the many aspects of human experience which are significant in smaller universes as to be largely useless in the field of practical social action. It may even be stated in quantitative conclusions which are statistically verifiable but such conclusions seldom cover all of the attributes of important social relations of day-by-day behavior.

I do not contend that it is possible to develop less abstract sociological generalizations or that abstract systems of sociological thought are useless. Sociologists will not, in fact cannot, perform their share of the common task of constructing a sound sociology out of a combination of science and common sense unless they continuously and fruitfully work in the field of social theory. I do contend that a sociology applicable to social action will not be constructed unless theories are passed down, step by step, through the various levels of human behavior about which they generalize, and are synthesized on each level with the common sense knowl-

edge possessed by men who must and do understand many things which cannot be expressed in either statistics or abstractions. These men of common sense, are men of practical affairs who operate on every level of human behavior and in every universe of social action which sociologists seek to analyze. Syntheses of what they know and what science reveals are not compromises. They are *creative* in that they amplify so-called theoretical knowledge, validate theories if they are correct and modify them if they are incorrect. It would be difficult to envision the magnitude, progress, and usefulness of sociology if it would systematically and diligently follow this path of development.

I am not presenting a brief in behalf of "the cult of the practical" or delivering a tirade against those who are said to dwell in ivory towers. I am not even contending that sociologists should "be practical" in the common meaning of that term. They can't be "men of common sense" in all the fields of human behavior which they must analyze. There is no reason to believe that the average sociologist, had he spent his life in any one of the specific areas of behavior about which he generalizes, could not and would not make practical application of his sociological generalizations to that area of behavior and action, but there are not enough hours in a day, enough days in a year, or enough years in a lifetime for him to participate in all the specific areas of behavior to which sociological generalizations apply and at the same time develop and practice the patient scholarship required to develop, or even understand, the generalizations which constitute science. He can accomplish much by specialization but he will find it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to be both a "man of science" and a "man of common sense."

The data which constitute sociology also constitute the information which men responsible for social action require in their day by day operation. Some men of practical affairs are highly conscious of this fact. They believe there must be some known laws of human behavior which can be applied

to the groups and processes with which they work. They have begun to call on sociologists, cultural anthropologists and social psychologists for assistance but are often baffled by the lack of knowledge, or the types of knowledge, which these social scientists possess. They have long been using physical scientists and generally do not understand the differences between the nature of physical sciences and social sciences. They therefore define their problem as X, Y, or Z, and expect the social scientist to furnish prescription A, B, or C, for its solution. Finding that the social scientist cannot do this they become discouraged or critical. The social scientist, in such situations, may not become discouraged, but what is worse he becomes cynical about "practical men." The dilemma is not unsolvable. If social scientists only knew and if practical men were forewarned in advance that it would require both the scientific knowledge possessed by the social scientists, and the common sense operational knowledge, possessed by the practical man, and the joint efforts of both in the acquisition of additional knowledge, neither discouragement, criticism, nor cynicism would develop. Instead, laboratories for functional social research would be established and competent personnel for their operation be guaranteed. It would be understood from the beginning that no engineer's solutions would be found but that the practical man and the sociologist would together complete the analyses with findings which would be valuable to both operational practices and to social science.

Opportunities exist for the establishment of such laboratories in every local community where sociologists live, in the states and nations of which they are citizens, and in the "One World" of which they are all a part. In each of these universes of social action are the phenomena a knowledge of which constitutes the science of sociology. In them men of responsibility and action are making decisions and influencing human events daily. Because they are men of responsibility they must make decisions and because they are men of action they must move with dispatch. It should be possible

for them to count on social scientists to help them move with a higher degree of surety. They as men primarily of action and common sense do not know the processes and techniques by which scientific social knowledge is obtained and validated and few social scientists know either the complexities or subtleties of situations with which practical men deal. If the two would join their efforts the knowledge of men of practical affairs would greatly amplify the body of sociological knowledge and the sociologist would add precision and surety to the knowledge and judgment of practical men.

To merely relegate a consideration of the validity and usefulness of what I have said to circles of logical and philosophical discussion in the faith that all the knowledge of common sense can or at least should be reduced to science will accomplish little or nothing more than to add another topic to the type of futile discussion in which too many sociologists have too long engaged. Creative synthesis of both thinking and acting as joint enterprises of men of science and men of common sense will bear more fruit. Such enterprises will establish the laboratories for which sociologists plead. They will be laboratories primarily in the fields of social action and this will be most fortunate because now relatively too large a portion of sociology consists of a knowledge of structure and too little of it consists of a knowledge of action. Most of the meanings in life inhere in action and sociologists should learn how to study action per se. It is only in action that the motives and attitudes, that is, the dynamics of persons come near enough to the surface of behavior to be observed.

There are of course many instances in which sociologists have studied action, in the fields of criminology, social pathology, social movements of various kinds, and many others. Too often, however, they have allowed the fields of social action to be occupied by social workers and so-called "social engineers" who are likely to possess neither adequate theoretical training nor the cultivated objectivity essential to social analysis. A simple but pointed illustration of

the application of social research in the field of social action will serve to demonstrate the combined use of technical knowledge and common sense.

An action agency, staffed with a highly competent corps of technical experts, operates with social units which were presumably democratically constructed and composed of farmers. The farmers want to attain the same objectives as do the technical experts and the action agency. The problem posed by the action agency was, "why is it that two Soil Conservation Districts located in the same locality and type-of-farming area, staffed by equally competent technicians, and composed of people of the same nationality composition, behave so differently. In one district our program is an outstanding success, in the other we must admit a high degree of failure." They called on sociologists to assist them in analyzing both districts. The sociologist assigned to the Project did not have any technical knowledge in the field of soil conservation. He did not even possess the folk knowledge of farming in the area, but he uncovered the folk beliefs and the attitudes and values of the farmer participants and non-participants, identified their accepted and trusted folk leaders and not only identified but revealed to the technicians and to the action agency some of the factors which were causing the difference in the social behavior of the two districts. He did this by gathering up, so to speak, the common-sense knowledge and folk beliefs of the farmers, synthesizing them with his own sociological knowledge, discussing his observations constantly with the physical science technicians and administrators, and writing a report of his findings. He made an appreciated contribution to both the farmers and the action agency and his study is worthy of publication as a social research document. Had he not been willing to join hands with men of common sense—the farmers—he could not have made his contribution as a sociologist. He made some quantitative analyses but his chief contribution was that he tapped the common-sense knowledge of practical day-by-day farmers and uncovered attributes

of their behavior and thinking which when synthesized with the technical knowledge of scientists will be a contribution to the solution of the problems of both.

The conflict between scholars in sociology who are expert in the field of quantitative analysis and those who engage primarily in qualitative analysis is more foolish than and not unrelated to the lack of cooperation between men of science and men of common sense. They too need to join hands in research. It is not enough that each is willing to let the other live and make his maximum contribution independently. Each needs the other if anything approaching complete analysis is to be made of most social situations. Statistics provide not only methods of verification and validation but also techniques for sampling large time and space universes which it is impossible to encompass within personal observations. There can be no conflict between the findings revealed by the most rigid methods of quantification and the necessity for use of the more subtle and often more significant understanding which can be gained only by personal, qualitative observation. Where conflict arises it is generally due to the statistician's willingness to disregard or eliminate from consideration those components of situations which cannot be quantified or the insistence of the qualitative analyst that he possesses something approaching intuitive understanding.

In recent years sociologists have probably made greater recognized and accepted contributions through statistical analyses than in all other fields combined. Psychologists have made outstanding contributions by use of both statistical and psychiatric methods. Cultural anthropologists and sociologists are however being called upon for contributions which go beyond either statistical findings or psychological analyses. What these sociological scientists need to do is to join hands with each other and with observers who are practicing participants in the social situations which they seek to analyze. Data on the age, sex, and ethnic composition of population units gathered by Census schedules, attitudes and opinions gathered

by questionnaires or interviews, and psychoanalysis of troubled or troublesome individuals, reveal only a part of what needs to be known about social situations. Social relations and social situations necessitate *research by groups of social scientists*, without which probably no very significant social discovery may be expected.

The methods of analysis of neither the statistician nor cultural analyst need be sacrificed in the least by a combined use of the two in social research. The procedure for cooperation should be simply to depend on the results of quantitative research to reveal the various contours of behavior within the universe being analyzed and then depend upon qualitative observations to describe the influence of elements or attributes of behavior within the universe for which there are no quantitative symbols of identification. In many cases the qualitative analyst will also identify other elements of situations which could and should be quantitatively analyzed. This is the procedure being followed in a rural social research project now under way in which an attempt is being made to use both quantitative and qualitative methods and in the qualitative part of the work to make use of the common-sense knowledge of persons who are participants in the social situations or universes being analyzed. The project (or maybe it should be described as a group of projects) was undertaken for very practical purposes and with a determination that in its conduct there would be no sacrifice of sound research procedures. It is an attempt to analyze a number of significant social universes concurrently.

The practical purposes are based upon the conviction that an understanding of the psychological and cultural components of agricultural and rural life situations is needed in order that administrators of agricultural and rural life programs, leaders of rural people, and farm people themselves may successfully deal with the social, economic, and even technical and physical issues of living and making a living by farming. The significant universes of behavior selected for identification, description and analyses were

certain socio-geographic universes of American rural life, rural regions, and five types of rural organizations—neighborhoods, communities, institutions, trade areas, and service or action agencies; also certain time universes in the fields of population, farm labor, levels of living, and scopes of organizational behavior and changes. Insofar as possible the time universes are being studied in the areas of the socio-geographic universes. The methods consist of, first, the maximum use of quantitative techniques, and then the use of qualitative or descriptive techniques in all socio-geographic, or cluster universes. Considerable use is made of participant observers, or what I have called here “men of common sense.” Sociologists, cultural anthropologists, social psychologists, economists, and statisticians helped plan the project or projects and are being used in the laboratories and field work.

Major type-of-farming regions were accepted as regional universes, because their delineation is the end research product of a number of years of careful work on the part of agricultural economists who have attempted to group areas within which there is a marked uniformity of production—economic behavior. To the information used in the delineation economists and physical scientists are constantly adding data which are useful in social analyses. Furthermore, it is recognized that the routines of work and leisure; the daily, seasonal, and annual rhythms of farm life; and many types of social behavior and attitudes are sharply conditioned by the similar manner, means, and methods of making a living practiced by farmers in given type-of-farming areas.

Within regions all counties were grouped into strata and a county chosen from each stratum as a unit in the regional sample. In their selection highly technical statistical sampling methods were used. Anyone who desires to examine and appraise this contribution of experts in the field of quantitative procedures will find them described in the *Journal of the American Statistical Association* for September 1945, in an article entitled, “Component Indexes as a Basis for Stratification in Sampling.” The authors of

this article were assigned the task of selecting approximately 70 counties, using whatever sources of data were available, which would represent the rural life of seven generalized major type-of-farming regions. Census data on county units were not and are not available on many types of social behavior which are to be studied in the counties. But county data were available on the relative magnitude of such significant type-of-farming enterprises as cotton, corn, dairying, etc.; on family labor, hired labor, number of days spent in off-farm work, and tenancy; on mechanization, as measured by value of farm machinery; on size of farms, and gross farm production. Data were available on mean age of farm operators; per cent of the counties' populations that were rural farm; change in civilian population and migration of farm population; per cent of farm population that is foreign born and nonwhite; value of home consumed farm products; and an index of the rural-farm level of living.

By use of these types of quantitative data, 71 counties were selected, from 6 to 13 representing strata within each of the 7 major type-of-farming belts, and 12 representing residual areas not included in these belts. Thus local areas (counties) were designated within which qualitative and quantitative social studies can be made with some assurance that the combined findings can be used in describing and analyzing the rural life of both the major type-of-farming regions and of the Nation as a whole. Incidentally, the statistical analyses accomplished in the stratification of all of the 3,056 rural counties of the country, and in the selection of the 71 sample counties, not only can be used as foci for qualitative studies within the counties but constitute just as valuable a body of knowledge in and of themselves as if they had had no other object than to be a good piece of quantitative research.

Counties are the sample areas from which are to be compiled data for time series analyses of population, farm labor, level of living, and rural organization changes and trends. Such data may be assembled from either primary and secondary sources of data to

be found in the counties or by enumerative schedules and questionnaires on statistically carefully selected sample areas within the counties. Qualitative studies use a combination of structural analysis and case studies, commonly used by cultural anthropologists. Each *type* of rural organization listed above is studied as a socio-geographic universe and as a unit of social behavior. Each type of behavior reflected in the quantitative data used in selecting the county, and in stratifying the other counties which it was selected to represent, is related to other facts which only personal observation can reveal and interpret. In this process and from participant observers the intangible but more abiding things by which people habitually order their lives are identified, described and analyzed.

When the analyst enters the county he already has in his possession a valuable body of quantitative data and a clear knowledge of what stratum of the regional and national universes the county represents. His first observations are therefore focused. Working with this degree of advance direction, he quickly begins to feel the pulse and heart beat of the people in the types of behavior which have manifested themselves in the recorded data which he has. His study of their formal and informal organizational life leads him quickly and far beyond this mere qualitative check on quantitative data. He lives among the people for three or four months, participates in their social affairs, talks to their best informed members, studies all local sources of recorded information and above all trades ideas about his observations with his carefully selected participant observers.

Participant observers are selected to represent the strata of whatever social structure exists in the county. They are not interviewed by means of schedules or questionnaires and there is no attempt made to record their responses quantitatively. They represent all levels of life and are made partners of the analyst in his attempts to uncover attitudes and values by which the people live. They are used as persons of common sense with whose knowledge and viewpoints the

analyst can check his own impressions and conclusions. They are participants in a much more immediate and wholehearted way than the analyst can possibly be and can therefore tell him things he could otherwise never learn. By cooperation with him in a common task they become constantly more expert and therefore more useful observers.

Field studies already completed reveal the shortcomings of the data available for stratification and for selection of counties but they also place flesh, blood, and nervous system on the skeleton of statistical information which is available on rural life and organization in the counties. Every thing they reveal adds to and none of it subtracts from the quantitative information. Furthermore, as we stated above, the quantitative analyses revealed certain contours of behavior within the county which help to focus qualitative observations.

Most cultural anthropologists would contend that three or four months is not sufficient time within which to accomplish complete analysis of the rural organization and life of a county. My response is, first, that complete analysis is not accomplished, or expected, or possible, and second, that in order to accomplish analyses of the universes we have selected for study we had, for example, to choose between spending two man-years in studying one Corn Belt county, three man months in studying each of eight counties, or one man month in studying each of 24 counties. If we were only compiling fairly obvious statistical data we would study 24 or 48, or maybe 96 counties and thus have a statistically much more valid sample of the Corn Belt. If we were making only a cultural anthropological study we might study only one county, or a small part of it, but we would have no sample of anything. We are trying to analyze large, significant social universes and trying to demonstrate that both quantitative and qualitative methods, and common sense are needed as techniques for doing it.

The examples I have presented to illustrate the practical use of the methods I am describing by no means demonstrate everything that can and should be done. Some of

the most significant observations which should be made are of situations and processes which are not and cannot be so rigidly constructed into research projects. They are observations made by sociologists who are a part of or thoroughly familiar with action programs such as the social security program, employment services, farm programs, labor adjustments, reclamation projects, the Indian Service, juvenile delinquency and many others. The contribution which can be made to the development of sociology by the valuable observations of trained sociologists serving in such social action programs is partly due to their capacities to make objective observations in the midst of action and partly due to the fact that they become possessed of the type of knowledge which I am calling common sense. Not least among their possible contributions to the development of sociology is the fact that they can and do convert a considerable body of social science into common sense knowledge by making it part of the working knowledge of those responsible for practical programs of social action.

Any attempt to combine quantitative and qualitative methods of observation and analyses and the synthesizing of the knowledge of science and the knowledge of common sense in actual research practice will reveal the shortcomings of each method in ways which are not obvious when each is used separately. Statistical methods alone have no capacity to identify attributes of phenomena which are not included in their quantitative data. The statistician is helpless, no matter how aware he is of this weakness, because some attributes of social phenomena do not manifest themselves in such ways as to be susceptible of quantification. Qualitative observation identifies the presence and the influence of these attributes and guarantees that they not be disregarded. The qualitative analyst working alone is also faced with difficulties which he may not, and apparently quite often he does not, recognize. His laudable attempt to study the total situation, all components of it and all attributes of all phenomena within it, some-

times results in a magpie's nest full of descriptive information most of which is only slightly analyzed. The imperfections of his methods are largely due to failure to record observations with sufficient precision to make comparative analyses possible and to the fallacy that there is a possibility of completely describing a social situation. If his partner in research is a quantitative analyst he can be assured that his imperfections will be called to his attention.

The creative and practical synthesis of science and common sense and the joint use of quantitative and qualitative methods of research will automatically serve to sabotage the sociologists' futile and false practice of counseling with perfection. It may, of course, cause him to abandon some of the pleasures he enjoys in his semi-esoteric ways of life and it will deflate or at least modify his expectations of social discovery. This I believe will be salutary and ultimately contribute to the usefulness of sociology and its development as a sound discipline.

I have for a long time worried about the fact that it takes young sociologists from five to ten years to recover from what happens to them in their graduate training. Many of them seem to become so deeply imbued with the conviction that they are capable of developing new systems of sociology or of making some great social discovery that they are almost incapable of patient, painstaking analyses of living social phenomena. They should be taught that there is no such thing as individual social discovery; that sociology is the study of the behavior of persons in relation to each other and that everything they can ever know about this behavior and these relationships is already known in some of its aspects by those who are involved in them. They should be taught that they can at best only hope to furnish part of the answers of what these relationships are, how they function, and why. They should be taught that their possibility of being Einsteins in the field of sociology is an utter impossibility because of the modifiable, even creative, nature of human behavior and group relations. If they

could start their mature professional careers with this understanding they would know that they should seek to join hands with others in fields of research which require many hands and minds.

Social discovery is a product of the knowledge of persons living on many levels of experience. Intellectuals play important, but not the only, roles in such discovery. Men of common sense, quite often unconsciously, also have played leading roles in every phase of the evolution of social knowledge. Much would be gained if they would become as conscious and proud of the part they play in the social field as they are in their contributions to discovery in the fields of business and mechanics. That they are not is due to the fact that they do not know the process of social discovery. To them many of the things which social analysts seek to understand are perfectly obvious. They seldom, however, see the social significance or implications of the obvious and are baffled by the sociologists' concern with them. They are also often baffled by and confess that they don't understand why persons and groups with whom they work act the way they do. Few of them know that they could submit their problems to laboratory analysis by joining hands with sociologists. Much less do they know how much sociologists need laboratories in which they can study living human relations.

Such laboratories will not be brought into existence by writing social theory concocted out of "higher criticism" of the doctrines of dead or living social philosophers, however erudite such criticisms may be. They will not be brought into existence by the formulation of "systems of thought," useful as such formulations are. They will not even be created by public opinion and attitude polls, enumerative schedules, and the statistical analysis of their findings, notwithstanding the invaluable contributions these technologies and techniques have made to social analysis. They can be established by men of common sense, who operate or influence these laboratories as a means of attaining goals which are not per se scientific, joining hands with social scientists whose goals



are careful objective analysis for science's sake.

Because the laboratory of the sociologist is social action which is not stimulated or induced by himself but by others, and because he seldom can be a whole-time participant in the types of action he seeks to analyze and understand, there is nothing more defeating than for him to try to work alone. He needs not only to join efforts with men of common sense but to join hands with professional colleagues in *group research*. It would be fortunate if he could be a member of such face-to-face groups as have worked together for years on certain large socio-geographic universes at the University of Chicago and the University of North Carolina, or could be financed for specific research projects as were Warner and colleagues, the Lynds, and others in their group research projects. This however is not a necessary condition for group research. What *is* necessary is a greater degree of mutual understanding, purpose, and appreciation among sociologists, and a deeper conviction that science is constructed chiefly out of the findings of research. At the present time sociology consists chiefly of a body of social theory about some of which there is a great deal of disagreement. The disagreement would be positively healthy if it led numerous adherents of the same schools of thought systematically to join hands and sustained efforts in the use of its tenets as hypotheses for actual research. Its various adherents could be located at many places in the world and still work as a group. In some fields of research this would be a distinct advantage, in fact greatly to be desired. In other cases it would be neither desirable nor necessary. It could be, but all too seldom is, done by a group of sociological scientists located in the same institution. My guess is that it would be done more frequently if more of them believed that some of their best laboratories are, so to speak, on the streets and farms that lie in their own back yards; and done still more frequently if they believed that some of their best colleagues in social discovery are the men of common sense who live by the relationships

and processes which sociologists seek to analyze, understand, and explain.

This paper is a thesis and a preachment. The thesis is that good sociology is a combination of science and common sense and the preachment is that few sociologists have both these types of knowledge. The experiences which lead me to these conclusions are the fields of social action which I have observed during my professional life, in some of which I have participated fairly intimately. I am anxious to broaden the base of these types of observations and to submit my conclusions concerning them to criticism and discussion. I have therefore invited two other sociologists who have also participated in social action programs to join me in this discussion.

#### DISCUSSION

by

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I agree so heartily with what Carl Taylor has just said that the remarks I am about to add are not likely to be helpful. Applause does not clarify. I agree that the usefulness of sociology is increased as commonsense knowledge of social situations is taken into account by sociologists. I agree that the more inclusive generalizations of sociology do not often serve as guides to practical action. I agree that a combination of statistical and non-statistical descriptions of many or most social situations is more illuminating than is one of these descriptions alone, and that when a quantitative sociologist works together with what Carl Taylor calls a qualitative analyst, each is likely to supplement and correct the other. And I see as much to be gained from group research as he does.

In searching for something to say that would be more than an approving echo, I find I could work up a little dissatisfaction with the way he has made the distinction between commonsense knowledge and qualitative analysis. According to Dr. Taylor, there are three principal parties to a well-conducted study of a social situation. (I will here leave out the theorist who may have provided some influential systematic ideas and attend to the three collaborators emphasized in Carl Taylor's presentation.) Two of the three come from universities. One is the