THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE IN AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT, AND FUTURE[1]

James E. Curtis
University of Waterloo

John W. Petras
Central Michigan University

This paper examines the origins, development, and current status of the sociology of knowledge in American sociology. If a traditional and narrow definition of the sociology of knowledge is employed, few American studies appear to fall into this area of interest. However, when the sociology of knowledge is defined as a general frame of reference that is utilized in various research endeavors, definite orientations can be recognized. Most studies are seen as falling under one or more of the questions posed by Robert K. Merton in his paradigm for the sociology of knowledge. The paper concludes with a discussion of possible future trends.

In 1959, Kurt H. Wolff made note of the fact that much of the problem concerning the lack of a precise definition of the sociology of knowledge has resulted from the literal translation of the term Wissenssoziologie (1959:568). The effect of this literal translation has been to narrow, in the mind of contemporary sociologists, the range of problems originally encompassed within Wissenssoziologie. While claiming to be aware of the interdependent relationship between thoughts and the environment as an appropriate subject matter, sociologists have continued to operate primarily on the basis of "groups influencing behavior." Max Scheler, in his emphasis of the relational aspect, formulated the sociology of knowledge to demonstrate how social reality determined the existence of ideas, but not necessarily their nature. Today, the sociologist tends to take the former as a given and then concentrates upon how the nature of ideas is determined by the sociocultural environment. For examples, studies on time as a socio-cultural product, studies surrounding the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, and studies in the area of achievement motivation are only a few illustrations of this tendency.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) note that the stated concern of the sociology of knowledge has been with the relationship between the individual and society variable. However, they fail to note that in almost all of the empirical and theoretical work carried out within the area, the focus has been upon the social determination of the mental systems of society (see especially Curtis and Petras, 1970d). In this paper, we have treated the sociology of knowledge as a particular frame of reference utilized with some consistency by sociologists. We have not treated the area as representing a definite body of theory itself.

Coupled with the traditional and narrow delineation of the approach in contemporary sociology has been a focusing, in terms of subject matter, upon the role played by the social order in determining the mental perspectives of individual members. This is of interest in view of the fact that the formalization of the sociology of knowledge in the works of the German philosopher-sociologist Max Scheler was based upon the interdependent relationship between the mind and

the socio-cultural environment. The popular conception of the sociology of knowledge as representing a one-sided determinism has developed through the close association made between the approach and individuals such as Karl Mannheim and Emile Durkheim (see also Remmling, 1971; Wolff, 1971). Indeed, the nature of most of the empirical studies explicitly within the area gives sufficient evidence for this conception.

Trends in the Sociology of Knowledge in America

Several principal trends are observable within the development of the sociology of knowledge approach, especially within American sociology. First of all, there has been a movement towards emphasizing a functional relationship between these two terms. Secondly, there has been a notable shift away from viewing the social group as a general membership category and toward a direction of specifying aspects of the particular group or groups that are most important in influencing the thoughts and ideas of social categories of individuals. In terms of the type of research offered by the sociology of knowledge, the general trend has been toward a specification of the actual forces involved in the relationship between the group and the individual. That is, more and more emphasis is being given to those aspects of groups which are seen as influencing specific units of knowledge, e.g., attitudes, beliefs, and values (see also Seeman, 1968). Correspondingly, less attention is being given to historically oriented problems. This particular trend developed in large part out of the influence of the American social behavioristic tradition as developed in the writings of Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, William James, and George Herbert Mead (See for example, Farberman, 1970).

Writers who have used a sociological approach in the study of mental productions - whether these scholars are sociologists or others - have commonly been concerned with one or more of the five basic research questions posed by Robert K. Merton in his paradigm for the sociology of knowledge (1957b:460-61): Where is the existential basis for mental productions located? What mental productions are being sociologically analyzed? How are mental productions related to the existentially conditioned mental productions? When do the imputed relations of the existential base and knowledge obtain? The investigations that have grown in response to these questions, however, have been unsystematic, thereby compounding the difficulty of speaking of marked trends in the research literature. But, it is quite clear that the study of these problems in the sociology of knowledge has been a substantial part of the main-stream of sociological research from the beginnings of the discipline. This remains true today, despite the later proliferation of sociological subspecialities, the emergence of several varieties of "theories of the middle range," and a dominant theoretical orientation of "voluntaristic nominalism" in American sociology which have appeared to counter-act the centrality of the traditional view.

One outstanding characteristic of sociology of knowledge studies in both America and Europe is that they have experienced a checkered career. In the eras of Durkheim, Mannheim, Marx, and Weber, studies in the sociology of knowledge were explicitly viewed as central to the discipline. More recently, studies labelled "sociology of knowledge" are often seen as unfashionable and, therefore, have been evaluated unfavorably relative to works in other developing subdivisions of sociology. This is especially true in American sociology where the narrow, popular, and "low prestige" definition in terms of a one-sided determinism is frequently employed. Other factors helping to account for the unfavorable appraisals are numerous, grand, and speculative formulations on the one hand, and on the other

hand, descriptive studies defined as being of low quality in terms of recent research standards. There are indications that developments in the American branch of the sociology of knowledge are beginning to follow a course midway between the extremes of grand theory and limited research (see especially Willer, 1971).

Thirdly, the trend in American studies has been to focus upon social psychological variables and, as previously mentioned, exhibit a concern with intensive re-evaluations of what are considered to be the actual forces involved in reciprocal relations between individual variables and components on the social structure. Again, the Hinkles (1954), as well as Wolff, have made this point with reference to the fact that American sociology itself is best characterized in terms of an orientation of "voluntaristic nominalism." As Wolff (1959) emphasizes in "The Sociology of Knowledge and Sociological Theory," this perspective is clearly unsympathetic to the social-realistic brand of the sociology of knowledge associated with Durkheim, Mannheim, and Marx. The implication of this for American sociologists is that problems have most often been pursued in a social-psychological tradition of social behaviorism, pragmatism, or social action theory (see also Rytina and Loomis, 1970).

Further variations between the European and American branches of the sociology of knowledge have been explored by Merton in Social Theory and Social Structure (1957b). Merton has made note of the fact that the sociology of public opinion and mass communication is an important part of the sociology of knowledge in America, and although it developed independently of the European branch, both may be regarded as, "species of that genus of research which is concerned with the interplay between social structure and communications" (1957b:439). Merton's analysis goes on to show that the American perspective has been more concerned with the impact of the communication of ideas upon the public than with the structural determinants of ideas. Correspondingly, there has been less emphasis given to the study of the production of ideas, but more of a concern with the social-psychological processes involved in the acquisition or rejection of ideas.

A final important development in this country is that several of the ideas that were central to earlier theoretical formulations of the sociology of knowledge-- including the basic research focus upon the reciprocal relationships between types of mental productions and social structure - have become incorporated into a latent frame of reference that underlies several empirically based theoretical perspectives in sociology and other social science disciplines (see also Chall, 1958). Currently, fruitful research on important questions posed in the sociology of knowledge framework is being carried out in such disciplines as anthropology, history, and psychology, as well as in the various areas of concentration within sociology, e.g., the sociology of religion, science, etc. (see for example, Albrecht, et al., 1971; Ernest Becker, 1971; Nettler, 1970; 1972). Some of the most recent findings and promising developments in empirically based theory have come from diverse areas where research has been guided by such theoretical frameworks as role theory (Biddle and Thomas, 1966), reference group theory (Hyman and Singer, 1968), symbolic interactionism (Manis and Meltzer, 1972), dissonance theory (Brehm and Cohen, 1962), and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964).

In effect, several "partial" sociologies of knowledge have emerged, each fostering a particular research interest and favored research technique. Through specialization, several areas of study have drawn varying aspects of the sociology of knowledge into their own frameworks or orientations. However, these aspects of research and theory from the various fields have not as yet been brought together. Thus, the circuit remains incompleted and precludes the develop-

ment of a <u>full</u> sociology of knowledge. Although many of the studies to be dis-
cussed in the remainder of this paper have not been interpreted within a
sociology of knowledge framework, they nevertheless provide a much needed and
expanding empirical base against which one is able to test key propositions.

The Development of the Sociology of Knowledge in America

The series of studies written by Thorstein Veblen (1899, 1918, 1919) represents
a major historical antecedent of the sociology of knowledge in this country. In
these works he concentrated upon the dependence of thought on existential bases,
such as community social structures, institutional settings, and occupational
roles. Franz Adler (1957) had indicated that Veblen's <u>Theory of the Leisure Class</u>
(1899) would have been the point of departure for a systematic sociology of
knowledge in America, but it was not immediately followed by detailed investiga-
tions of the research problems which it described. However, Irwin Deutscher (1969)
disputes this interpretation and views Veblen's works as living analyses,
especially influential upon William F. Ogburn and, through Ogburn, upon David
Riesman. Veblen's own study of the emergence and communication of ideas in the
academy did anticipate a line of research in the sociology of education and
science which has become a major area of contribution to the American branch of
the sociology of knowledge. William F. Ogburn's <u>Social Change</u> (1922) considered
research problems in the sociology of education and science as well as several
other substantive areas (see also 1946, 1949). His work was guided by a modified
Marxist theory – i.e., a technological theory of social and cultural change. The
importance of the cultural base, instead of "Great Men," as an explanation of the
emergence of new ideas; the process and cumulative nature of technological develop-
ment; and the influence of inventions on cultural and social systems were among
the problems studied by Ogburn. Bernhard Stern's work (1927) represented a
pioneering study of the relationship between knowledge and organization in the
medical profession. His analysis of resistance to innovations in medical science
was well documented, and it anticipated findings and theoretical directions of
more recent research in this field (for example Coleman et al., 1966). Contem-
poraneously, S.C. Gilfillan specialized, for the most part, in the sociology of
invention. In his book by that title (1935b), he presented an intensive analysis
of recorded accounts of scientific discoveries. His intention was to develop a
refined statement on the principles of social processes of invention (see also
1935a).

Robert K. Merton has written extensively on the sociology of science and
academics (1957a, 1961, 1963, 1972). His <u>Science, Technology and Society in
Seventeenth Century England</u> (1938), which was first published abroad, is an
established classic in the field. This study considered hypotheses regarding
the relationship between religious ideas and the development of science that had
been suggested earlier in Max Weber's works. Through comprehensive historical
research, Merton demonstrated connections between several cultural and social
variables, on the one hand, and the emergence of systematic science, on the other.

Between 1937 and 1941, Sorokin published <u>Social and Cultural Dynamics</u>, a
monumental four-volume work that is often overlooked as an early example of
American sociology of knowledge. In brief, Sorokin maintained in this and
several later works that forms of "cultural mentalities" should be seen as inde-
pendent variables in the functional relationship between systems of ideas and
social structure. Especially noteworthy is his perceptive study on the concepts
of causality, space and time (1943).

Max Weber's work in the sociology of ideology provided key insights into the processes of social and cultural change within several institutional spheres (see also Connolly, 1967; Coser, 1972). Regardless of the validity of arguments advanced by Weber's critics, his works clearly were the impetus for several monographs and studies on the relationship between religion and political and economic change in various cultures (for example, Jonassen, 1947; Bellah, 1957; Marcuse, 1958; Geertz, 1962; Israel, 1966; Haneen, 1967).

In the study of economic institutions, one recent area of investigation has been the genesis and development of ideologies that become linked to concrete organizations within the economic sphere. Illustrative examples of this focus are Reinhard Bendix's (1956) comparative study of ideologies of management in Eastern Germany and the United States and John W. Riley's work (1963). Studies in the sociology of occupations and professions by E. C. Hughes (1937), Oswald Hall (1948), Ely Chinoy (1955), H. L. Wilensky (1956), Merton, et al. (1957), and H.S. Becker, et al. (1961), have dealt with processes involved in the development of group loyalties and the acquisition of occupational ideologies and vocabularies of motives (see also Kourvetaris, 1971).

A large heritage of problems outlined by Max Weber with regard to the relationship between the family and other institutional orders have been researched by sociologists, historians, economists, and psychologists (for example Nelson, 1949; Lipset and Bendix, 1959; George and George, 1961; Lenski, 1961; McClelland, 1961; Hagen, 1962). The precise connections between religious beliefs, characteristics of the family, and aspects of the economic order have been the object of sharply contradictory interpretations, and recent research has not settled the matter. But, one direct outgrowth of Weber's analysis has been numerous studies on the relationship between family structure and children's achievement motivation and attitudes (McClelland, et al., 1953; McClelland, 1961; Atkinson, 1958, 1964; Brown, 1965; Heckhausen, 1967; Rosen, 1959; Rosen, et al., 1959, 1961, 1967). A similar line of research has centered around the interrelations of family influence and educational and occupational aspiration (Kahl, 1964; Pettigrew, 1964; Elder, 1965; Featherman, 1972). Another pertinent area of research from the sociology of the family has been concerned with the changing social position of youth and factors in the development of adolescent subcultures. Representative studies of the emergence of distinctive values and normative systems among adolescent and youth groups would include the publications of Eisenstadt (1956), Bell (1962), Coleman (1962), M. Rosenberg (1965), Gottlieb et al. (1966), and Roszak (1969). Also, we should mention the research trend report by David Matza (1964), "Position and Behavior Patterns of Youth;" and a critique of past research by F. Elkin and W. A. Westley (1955) in which youth sub-cultures are discussed as adaptations of adult outlooks and sentiments to the special social position of youth.

More directly related to Weber's work are the conflicting findings and interpretations in American studies which relate various measures of religious background to occupational and educational aspirations, achievement, and social mobility, etc. (see especially Mack et al., 1956; Lenski, 1961; Mayer and Sharp, 1962; Veroff, et al., 1962; Greeley, 1963, 1964; Bressler and Westoff, 1965; Warkov and Greeley, 1966; Glenn and Hyland, 1967; Seaman, et al., 1971).

Numerous studies of social stratification and economic organization have also been related to the sociology of knowledge, although not labelled as such by researchers. Studies of social class and occupational positions and their influence on styles of thought have become increasingly precise and have contributed valuable data (for example Merton, 1945). Throughout the years several community

studies, such as the Lynd's Middletown studies (1929, 1937), Warner's study of
Yankee City (1941) and Democracy in Jonesville (1949), Davis, Gardner, and
Gardner's Deep South (1941), and Vidich and Bensman's Small Town in Mass Society
(1958), have shown how class and prestige structures are influential in the
acquisition of various motives, values, and beliefs. Gwynne Nettler (1945) has
proposed a method for studying differences in the ways in which individuals in
various occupational categories predict certain major events. Richard Centers'
work on the social psychology of classes (1949) and an earlier study by Max Lerner
(1939) are among the few American studies dealing with class consciousness in a
manner similar to the German-Marxist approach. Knowledge and attitudes pertaining
to the social stratification system have been analyzed in several studies such as
those by A. W. Jones (1941), Neal Gross (1953), Natalie Rogoff (1953), and Jerome
Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer (1954), Ransford (1972). Barber (1957) and Kahl
(1964) have reviewed research on social class identification as one part of a
larger study of reference group behavior. Still another area of study has
focused upon the influence of social class variables in the communication of ideas
and learning (Warner, et al., 1944; Davis, 1948; Hollingshead, 1949; Sewell,
et al., 1957; Rogoff et al., 1961; Lawton, 1968; Brandis and Henderson, 1970;
Dibble, 1972). Good overviews of the American literature can be found in reviews
by S. S. Boocock (1966) and R. J. Havighurst and B. J. Neugarten (1967).

From political sociology, only two of the more relevant research concerns
will be mentioned. First of all, a vast amount of research on political socializa-
tion in America has demonstrated the importance of family based experience and
parental attitudes in determining political allegiances and attitudes. For
example, Berelson, et al.(1954), have found that traditional voting patterns of
parents is a much better predictor of political persuasion than social class
variables or religious background. Other studies showing this type of family
influence are: H. Shepard and A. Kornhauser (1956), and David L. Westby and
R.G. Braungart (1966). Herbert Hyman (1959) surveyed the literature in this area
and found that party affiliation is apparently more readily transmitted than
ideology in the course of childhood socialization because of greater direct
indoctrination, a lesser range of alternatives, and greater simplicity of the
symbols involved. Broader political orientations seem to develop through adult
socialization, but little research has been done on the social psychological
mechanisms involved at this level. Studies of the "radical right" by Hofstadter
(1964), Lipset (1964a, 1964b), and others have led to a "status politics"
explanation for this group. It is suggested that "extreme right" or "pseudo-
conservative" political views in the United States tend to be held by members
of status threatened groups.

In the second line of political sociology research, several studies of mass
communication and voting behavior have indicated that structures of interpersonal
relationships intervene between mass communication sources and the individual.
These mediating networks have been found to selectively filter materials from
the flow of information and thus influence the knowledge and political attitudes
of those who later receive the communication. Studies of personal influence by
Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Katz (1957), and by Merton (1957) have added to the
growing body of evidence in this area. Robert Park (1940) was one of the first to
relate the study of mass communication to the sociology of knowledge. Alfred
Schutz's early work (1946) on the differential evaluation of information sources
by experts, the well informed citizen, and the man on the street is also relevant
in this context.

In the sociology of education and science there has been a rapid growth in
the quality of direct contributions to the sociology of knowledge. For example,

the relations of education and the political order have been studied in some detail in recent years. The effect of educational systems on political attitudes of high school and college students, including the revolutionary role of student political movements in developing countries, has been an area of inquiry (Key, 1961; Litt, 1963; Lipset, 1966). In similar vein, Maurice Stein (1963) argued that some of the other concepts utilized by contemporary sociologists - norms, roles, and social system - imply a conservative political bias. These views also find support in several other essays and studies that point to the pervasive influence of personal choices made by researchers.

There are several distinct problems of values and choices, which come to the forefront in these studies. Some of the authors argue that values are invariably embedded in concepts and theories used in the social sciences. Others argue that values, as reflected in choices made in the gathering, analysis, and interpretation of data, play a significant role in the scientific investigation of a problem. Crosscutting these questions is the separate consideration of the role of certain liberal and conservative tendencies among groups of sociologists. It is evident that these issues are considered from different perspectives by various authors. The data and conclusions suggest the proposition that there are several relatively "open" choice points in the scientific method, and that decisions made at these points will selectively distort "reality" for the investigator (for example Merton, 1972). Evidence is presented to suggest that socially influenced choices of research problems, theoretical perspectives, models of society, hypotheses, concepts, and research techniques are among important decisions which determine the nature of data that a researcher will analyze and interpret (see for example Coser, 1971). These decisions, along with reportorial styles, are key factors that selectively determine the nature of the findings that will reach the scientific public. The data and hypotheses suggest the importance of developing the sociology of knowledge perspective, not as a process for determining truth per se, but as a method for "sensitizing" researchers to: (1) the effect of value premises and individual choices upon research operations and (2) corrective measures to counteract these effects (Curtis and Petras, 1970a).

Conclusion

This paper has described several trends and directions in American research related to the sociology of knowledge. As in the past, the future literature may continue to oscillate between generalizing and particularizing approaches to science. It seems likely, however, that the current trend toward a rapproache- ment of theory and methods may provide the future direction for studies. It should be clear from even a highly selective discussion such as this one, that an extremely broad conceptualization of the sociology of knowledge is utilized within sociology. There appears to be a trend toward increased interdisciplinary and inter-specialty communication marking the potential for a synthesis of findings from different areas.

On the other hand, such optimism may not be warranted. First of all, as Wolff has already pointed out, the sociology of knowledge, as a historical and philosophical concern, is nearly dead, especially in America. Secondly, continued research into the areas discussed in this paper may have no other significance than that of being indicative of the growing research orientation in American sociology which has moved more and more toward an operationalization level and, consequently, further away from the level of a general theory of the sociology of knowledge. Finally, increasing interdisciplinary work may have the effect of making the sociology of knowledge less recognizable as a distinctive approach,

i.e., it will become "more latent" as a frame of reference. Thus, it may disappear
entirely from the vocabulary of sociology.

Footnotes

[1]This paper does not discuss trends in the sociology of sociology which has
developed more or less independently of the traditional concerns of the sociology
of knowledge. Elsewhere, we have analyzed several aspects of the origins, develop-
ment, and future of the sociology of sociology. For example, the following are
available: a bibliography of over seven hundred entries (1972b); a comparison of
developmental trends in Canada and the U.S. (1970b); and several discussions of
a more general nature (1970c; 1970d; 1972a; 1972c).

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