
First Words: Do Sociologists Actually Use the Terms in Introductory Textbooks' Glossaries?

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Remember folkways? The concept, of course, originated with William Graham Sumner (1959 [1906]). Sumner sought to distinguish varieties of rules—folkways (routine habits and customs), mores (more serious rules required for the societal welfare), and so on. The concept of folkways once was invoked fairly frequently by sociologists, but it is no longer in vogue. Figure 1 traces the rise and fall in folkway's appearance in the three principal general sociology journals (the methods we used to produce this figure are outlined below). We can see that references to folkways peaked in the 1940s, and have become relatively uncommon in recent decades.

And yet, the concept of folkway continues to thrive in introductory sociology textbooks. The term appears in the glossaries of the leading introductory texts. This raises several questions: Why are introductory students taught a term that sociologists in fact rarely use? Is this practice of teaching obsolete terminology common and if so, what accounts for this practice? What does this tell us about the relationship between the introductory course and the state of sociological research?

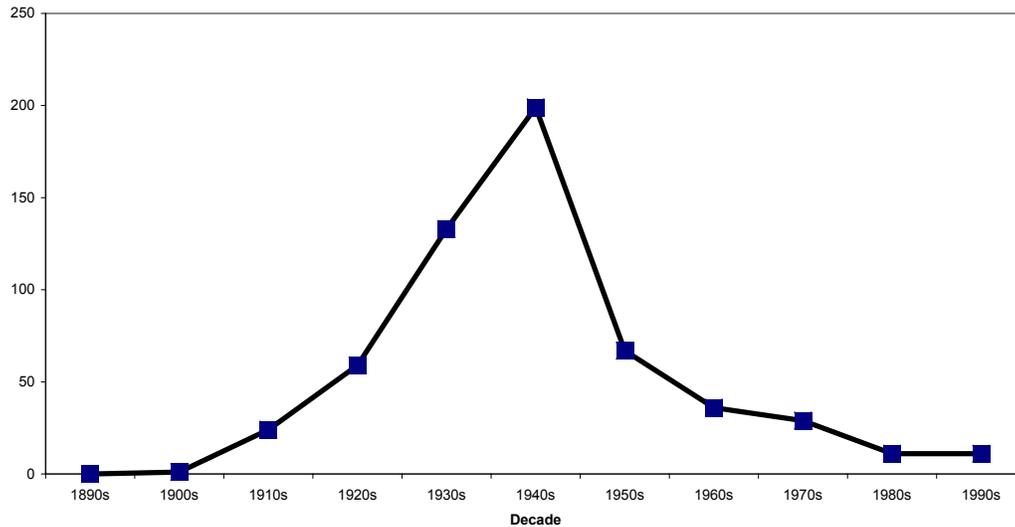
The Intro Course and the Intro Text

The introductory course is a nearly ubiquitous offering in sociology programs. Goldsmid and Wilson (1980) note that studies of sociology curricula routinely find that this is the most commonly offered course; by some estimates, this single course accounts for more than half of all sociology enrollments. While most instructors probably are able to choose what they want their class to cover and how they will organize and present the material, a very large share seem to adopt a “standard text.” These tend to be big, thick books with fifteen or more chapters (so that students can be assigned to read at least one chapter per week in a semester-length course). The more elaborate books feature four-color printing, glossaries and illustrations, figures, and “boxes” dealing with interesting topics, and come with packages of accompanying material such as an instructor's guide, a workbook, an anthology of readings, a CD-ROM, and so on. There is considerable evidence of

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Figure 1

Appearances of "Folkway" in Articles in *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, and *Social Forces*, 1890-1999



“textual isomorphism”; these books tend to cover the same topics in roughly the same order. It has become conventional, for example, for these texts to divide sociological theory into three strains (structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism), and to devote about half their contents to a series of chapters dealing with different social institutions.

There are several reasons why the discipline of sociology has settled on a standard format for intro texts. Most instructors probably took a fairly standard introductory course when they were students, and they may take it for granted that the course ought to be taught that way. Certainly it is easier to teach a standard course; publishers give instructors not just complimentary books but accompanying manuals featuring suggestions for lectures, audio-visual materials, and test banks of examination questions. Most sociologists specialize in one or two substantive areas; teaching the intro course probably bears little relation to their scholarly interests, and some may hope to minimize the time they invest in preparing for this course. And intro teachers can exchange ideas at the increasingly frequent sessions about teaching at scholarly conferences. Teaching a standard course gives an instructor more in common with others in this network.

At the same time, the competition for sales in the large introductory-textbook market encourages authors and publishers to keep books up-to-date. Here the pressures are more economic than intellectual. The high costs of these textbooks encourage students to sell back their books, and increasingly efficient distribution systems make it possible to supply a large proportion of students with cheaper used books. After the first semester a new book is available (when, of course, there are no used copies), used books quickly account for a growing proportion of sales. This forces publishers to bring out new editions more often; an every-other-year cycle is common for major texts, the costs of which in turn force publishers to price

books higher and thereby help maintain the vicious cycle. The constant cycle of revision encourages isomorphism: if one book offers a new feature that attracts adoptions, its competitors are quick to follow suit. Authors and publishers watch for developments such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks that can be incorporated in a new edition to differentiate it from both its predecessors and its competitors. Such development include not just current events, but shifts in sociologists' interests. Thus, the calls for incorporating race, class, and gender (and, more recently, sexuality and sexual orientation) in instruction have been reflected in several recent intro textbooks' contents.

Given these pressures to update their textbooks' contents, we might imagine that authors would try to follow intellectual currents within sociology by adopting an up-to-date vocabulary. This process could result in similar books that successfully but more independently reflect the core of the discipline. On the other hand, the books could be similar because they copy each other without reference to developments in the field. Textbook authors tend to argue for the former view: "Textbooks are a reflection of the discipline and the times; they are sure to change as the discipline changes and as ways of passing on knowledge change. As textbook writers we are not necessarily shaping the discipline, merely reflecting it" (Tischler 1988, p. 372). Other authors in *Teaching Sociology's* 1988 special issue on textbooks agreed that their goal was not to innovate, but to "present clearly the consensus view (or as near as we can come to it) of how sociology defines itself today" (Shepard 1988, p. 395; Persell 1988, Ballantine 1988). An alternative and more skeptical hypothesis was put forward by a publishing company editor: "By putting topics into books (at the suggestion of reviewers and authors), we sometimes reify them as part of sociology when in fact they may not be" (Fullerton 1988, p. 354).

Are introductory textbooks similar because authors are successfully capturing the core of sociology or is the textual isomorphism not closely linked with what is happening in the field? This paper examines this question by comparing the vocabulary presented in glossaries in major introductory textbooks with actual usage in major sociology journals to see how closely the texts' vocabulary reflects the discipline's language.

Methods

We chose four leading intro textbooks: Henslin's (2001) *Sociology: A Down-to-Earth Approach*, 5th ed.; Kendall's (2001) *Sociology in Our Times*, 3d ed.; Macionis's (2003) *Sociology*, 9th ed.; and Schaefer's (2001) *Sociology*, 7th ed. While it is difficult to get precise sales figures for different books, we came up with this list after asking textbook editors to name the leading books. Each book contained a glossary, and we identified 265 terms that appeared in at least three of the four glossaries.

We then searched for these terms in JSTOR (short for Journal Storage), a full-text electronic database that contains the complete contents of major journals. We used sociology's three leading general journals: the *American Sociological Review* (1936-96—JSTOR is not allowed to index the *ASR* until five years after its publication), the *American Journal of Sociology* (1895-1999), and *Social Forces* (1922-99). After specifying journals and the type of content to be examined (we limited our search to journal articles), it is possible to search JSTOR by entering a word,

such as “folkway”, and locating every article in the database in which that word appears even once. We divided the twentieth century into ten-year periods, 1900-09 through 1990-99, and counted the number of articles in each period using each term.

We found that it was not practicable to search for every term. Words such as “class” and “race” have common, non-sociological meanings, so that any count of their appearances would be meaningless. Since we were interested in concepts, we also did not search for words related to common sociological methods and measures, such as control group, hypothesis, and variable. Nor did we search for words describing sociological specialties or perspectives, such as conflict theory, demography, and functionalist perspective. Eliminating these categories removed 115 words from our list, leaving us with 151 terms.

We present these results as indicative rather than definitive. We might have selected a different sample of intro texts, chosen terms other than those that appeared most often in glossaries, or used some other criterion for usage than the contents of sociology’s three leading general journals. Still, the patterns we found strike us as interesting.

Results

Staple Concepts

If the terminology introduced in intro texts reflects the actual discourse of contemporary sociology, then we should expect to find these terms in numerous journal articles. We established a simple criterion: if a term appeared in at least sixty articles during each of the last three ten-year periods (1970-1979, 1980-1989, and 1990-1999), then we classified it as a conceptual staple. (Sixty appearances is equivalent to two per year per journal [10 years x 3 journals x 2 appearances = 60].)

We identified twenty-five concepts that met this criterion (see Table 1). Some of the concepts might be expected: anomie, deviance, public opinion, social change, social control, social mobility, social structure, subculture. We might wonder whether the appearances of others reflect some combination of professional and popular usage (e.g., ego, monopoly, rationality, sacred). But even when we include these terms, the list of conceptual staples seems surprisingly short.

It is also worth noting that some of these staple concepts are experiencing declines. Their usage in the major journals peaked some years ago, such as small group (peaked in the 1950s), anomie (1960s), and deviance (1970s). That is, while they retain a presence in the sociological literature, their importance seems to be slipping.

Interlopers

A second category contains what we call interlopers—terms that appear in the intro text glossaries but have never achieved a significant presence in the major journals. We used the criterion if a term had not appeared in the major journals more than six times in any of our ten-year periods (that is, the equivalent of no more than two appearances per journal in any period). Using this standard, we identified 22 interlopers (see Table 1).

Table 1

Classifications of Concepts

Conceptual Staples (i.e., at least 60 appearances in last three 10-year periods)

Concept	Texts	Peak Period
alienation	4	1970s
anomie	4	1960s
assimilation	4	1950s
bourgeoisie	3	1980s
class conflict	3	1980s
class consciousness	3	1970s
deviance	4	1970s
diffusion	3	1990s
ego	3	1950s
modernization	3	1990s
monopoly	3	1980s
pluralism	3	1980s
public opinion	3	1950s
rationality	3	1990s
sacred	4	1940s
segregation	4	1990s
small group	3	1950s
social change	4	1970s
social control	4	1980s
social interaction	4	1970s
social mobility	4	1970s
(social) stratification	4	1980s
social structure	4	1970s
subculture	4	1960s/1970s

Interlopers (i.e., no more than 6 appearances in any ten-year period)

Concept	Texts	Peak Period
activity theory	4	1990s
ageism	4	1990s
cultural universal	4	1980s
disengagement theory	4	1970s
ecclesia	4	1950s
environmental racism	3	1990s
expressive leader(ship)	3	1960s
goal displacement	3	1970s/1990s
groupthink	3	1990s
Hawthorne effect	3	1970s
health maintenance organization	4	1990s
holistic medicine	3	none
instrumental leader(ship)	3	1960s
liberation theology	3	1990s
matriarchy	4	1970s
megapolis	3	1960s
monotheism	3	1940s/1980s

Table 1 (cont.)

neocolonialism	3	1980s
nonverbal communication	3	1980s
pluralist model	3	1970s
Sapir-Whorf hypothesis	4	none
zero population growth	4	1980s

Survivals (more than 6 appearances during peak period and peak period prior to 1990s and fewer than 12 appearances in 1990s)

Concept	Texts	Peak Period
achieved status	4	1960s
animism	3	1940s
ascribed status	4	1960s
charismatic authority	4	1960s/1970s
cultural lag	4	1940s
cultural relativism	3	1960s
cultural transmission	4	1940s
culture shock	4	1970s
dysfunction	3	1960s
folkway	4	1940s
gentrification	3	1980s
hidden curriculum	4	1980s
intragenerational mobility	3	1970s
iron law of oligarchy	3	1970s
latent function	4	1960s
manifest function	4	1950s
master status	4	1980s
material culture	4	1930s
matrilineal (descent)	4	1930s/1940s/1970s
mechanical solidarity	3	1980s
monogamy	3	1940s
multinational corporation	3	1980s
nonmaterial culture	4	1930s
patrilineal (descent)	4	1970s
political action committee	4	1980s
polyandry	4	1930s
polygamy	3	1900s
polygyny	4	1940s
polytheism	3	1900s
resocialization	4	1960s
routinization of charisma	3	1960s
scapegoat	3	1940s
secondary group	4	1940s
sick role	4	1960s
special-interest group	3	1940s/1950s
status set	3	1970s
superego	3	1950s
total institution	4	1960s
traditional authority	4	1980s

This is an interesting category—terms that textbook authors agree are worth learning, yet that sociologists do not seem to use much. In seven cases, usage peaked during the 1990s, so it is possible to imagine that these terms might be just coming into their own: environmental racism, in particular, seems to be becoming an active focus for researchers. But other terms, such as holistic medicine or zero population growth, seem to represent efforts to incorporate topical issues into the sociology curriculum, perhaps to make the books seem more relevant.

Survivals

Our third category is illustrated by folkway (as depicted in Figure 1). These are terms that once had a significant presence in sociological writings but that are no longer much used. Using the criteria of (a) having had at least six appearances in the major journals in one of our ten-year periods, (b) usage having peaked in some period prior to the 1990s, and (c) having fewer than twelve appearances in the 1990s, we identified thirty-nine terms (see Table 1). In other words, these are terms that may have once had some currency among sociologists, but have now lost favor. In some cases, their usage peaked before 1950, in two cases before 1910!

This pattern, in short, reflects intellectual fashions. A term comes into use, rises in popularity, and then declines, its usage forming a relatively smooth curve (again, see Figure 1). There were relatively few instances where usage graphed over time showed a jagged pattern. There is, to invoke one of the terms on our list of survivals, a cultural lag—the intro class continues to teach terms to students long after sociologists have stopped using the concepts.

Residuals

Another sixty-four terms (not listed in Table 1) did not meet any of our other criteria: that is, (a) they did not have at least sixty appearances in each of the three most recent ten-year periods, (b) they had more than six appearances in at least one ten-year period, and (c) they either peaked during the 1990s, or they had at least twelve appearances during the 1990s. Half (thirty-three) of these terms peaked during the 1980s or 1990s, suggesting that these terms were part of contemporary sociological discourse, but others, while still used, had declined from past peaks in periods as distant as the 1940s, e.g., *Gesellschaft* and *propaganda* (1940s), *endogamy* and *ingroup* (1950s), *formal organization* (1960s), and *power elite* (1970s).

Missing Terms

Our fifth category is imaginary. It consists of terms that seem to occupy a prominent place in contemporary sociological discourse that have not achieved places in most intro text glossaries. We devised an arbitrary, off-the-top-of-our-heads list of six terms that, we thought, had figured prominently in the recent literature, but were not found in at least three of the glossaries we'd checked (see Table 2).

As we suspected, each of these terms showed a noticeable increase in its appearance in major journals in recent years, and each was in fairly common usage during the 1990s. These are terms sociologists are using—often far more often than

Table 2

Recent Appearances of Some Terms in Major Journal Articles			
Term	1970s	1980s	1990s
cultural capital	0	29	71
institutionalism(ist)	2	13	93
isomorphism	18	30	68
resource mobilization	8	82	106
routine activity(ies)	8	29	41
split-labor market	18	32	34

many of the terms appearing in the intro texts' glossaries. Their absence from the glossaries strikes us as interesting.

Discussion: Should We Care?

If there is constant pressure to keep these intro texts up-to-date, and if these are concepts actively in play in major journals, why haven't the textbooks incorporated these ideas? One possible reaction to these finding is disinterest. One might argue that there is no need to be concerned about whether the concepts introduced in introductory textbooks reflect current sociological discourse, or at least no need to worry if they do not.

Critics might even claim that the intro course should teach students terms like folkway that are no longer much in use. After all, these concepts once occupied a prominent place in sociologists' thinking, and even if this is no longer true, students ought to learn something about the discipline's conceptual history. Or it might be suggested that some conceptual distinctions are fundamental and helpful for students' understanding of the sociological perspective, even if they aren't really used much by contemporary analysts (e.g., the difference between primary and secondary groups [usage peaked in the 1950s and 1940s, respectively]).

A different criticism might be that the major journals reflect only elite disciplinary discourse, divorced from what interests most sociologists. After all, as journals have proliferated, the share of sociological work appearing in the three flagship periodicals has shrunk. Perhaps environmental racism has received only one mention in their prestigious pages, but that hardly means that there are not sociologists interested in the concept and using it in their research.

Another argument is that the goal of the intro class is to get students thinking sociologically, and that it hardly matters which set of concepts is used for this purpose. If we give students a sociological perspective first, we can worry later about teaching contemporary concepts in their advanced courses.

We do not dismiss any of these possible critiques. These are all principles that instructors might adopt in designing courses. Rather, our point is somewhat different. It is that the intro texts display a pattern of isomorphism; they all seem to have fallen into the same pattern. How should we account for the fact that three of four leading texts find it necessary to define holistic medicine, a term that has never

appeared in one of the three major sociology journals—or groupthink, which has only appeared once? And why do these books continue to feature the same terms that began to fall from favor more than half a century ago?

Our findings suggest that a major reason is that textbook authors and publishers duplicate elements of other books, both because they attempt to copy successful features and because the review process encourages conformity to a standard model. Some authors and editors report that “user reviewers” (who teach the intro course) complain when they notice that familiar concepts are missing from the draft chapters they review (e.g., Baker 1988, Kendall 1999, Ritzer 1988, Tischler 1988). Kendall’s (1999) study of the review process highlights its flaws. Based on her analysis of fifty reviews for three editions of one book, she identified five ways that the peer review process influences the contents of textbooks. Four had nothing to do with the intellectual content of the books (length, reading level, ancillaries and accessories, and marketing to potential adopters). The fifth influence is on “degree of innovation,” but all of Kendall’s examples are of reviewers objecting to innovations. In short, Kendall’s study suggests the review process does nothing to encourage authors to add new concepts to their books or remove outdated ones. The result may be considerable reluctance to jettison obsolete, albeit familiar concepts.

But why aren’t there complaints about the books’ lack of currency? Why isn’t there pressure to incorporate more of the ideas that shape current research? Perhaps this reflects the growing sophistication of the articles published in the leading journals. Thirty years ago, it was not uncommon for anthologies aimed at the intro market to reprint articles from *ASR* or *AJS*. Many articles, even in the leading journals, presented data based on relatively accessible cross-tabulations — percentages, perhaps a Chi-square significance test. But sociology has evolved, thanks to more accessible computing power and easy-to-use statistical software packages, and most data presented in the discipline’s flagship journals now adopt far more sophisticated, regression-based statistics. Not only are contemporary articles much longer (and therefore less attractive for reprinting) and much less accessible to student readers, but we might at least suspect that they are actually read and understood by a shrinking proportion of sociologists. The relatively small share of sociologists who publish in the leading journals increasingly may be cut off from and irrelevant to the people who teach intro students. A good deal of recent criticism (e.g., Cole, 2001) worries that contemporary sociology lacks a “core”; and while this critique usually refers to a central, agreed-upon set of intellectual principles, we might also suspect that the leading journals have become less central as sociology has expanded. If this is true, there may be relatively little demand for textbooks to keep up with the discipline’s discourse.

In our view, the introductory sociology textbook reflects commercial and perhaps pedagogical considerations far more than any sort of intellectual influences. It is, in a sense, the embodiment of our discipline’s folkways.

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