COMMENT AND REPLY

Comment on Keith and Ender, TS, *January 2004*

LOOKING FOR THE CORE IN THE WRONG PLACE*

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KEITH AND ENDER (2004) claim that if sociology has a disciplinary core, it "would logically be located in the introductory textbook" (p. 20). Based on their extensive analysis of textbooks in the 1940s and 1990s, they conclude that since these books have no core, the discipline itself may have no core. Furthermore, since a science is supposed to have a conceptual core, Keith and Ender suggest that sociology may not be a science, or at least is not presented as one in introduction to sociology textbooks. This comment presents evidence that introduction to sociology textbooks are not reflective of published sociological research and, therefore, the contents of these books' glossaries tell us little about the current state of the discipline.

Keith and Ender are not alone in claiming that introduction to sociology textbooks reflect the field. Several textbook authors in *Teaching Sociology*'s 1988 special issue on textbooks (Wagenaar 1988) make the same claim. For instance, Tischler (1988) claims that "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" (p. 372) (cf. Shepard 1988:395; Ballantine 1988). An alternative hypothesis is that books construct an "intro" version of sociology by borrowing from each other, either directly or through the review process as reviewers demand inclusion of features from other books. "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 1988:354). This second hypothesis is supported by studies of the textbook review process (Baker 1988; Kendall 1999; Ritzer 1988; Tischler 1988), which suggest that this process does more to make books similar to each other than to square them with developments in the field. More recently, Hamilton and Form (2003) concluded that there is a "serious gap" between "the two sociologies" of research specialists and introduction to sociology textbooks since "the findings of the specialized literature are not reflected in the introductory texts" (p. 693).

Keith and Ender examined 19 introductory textbooks from the 1990s and compiled a list of 61 terms that are found in the glossaries of 90 percent of them. However, they do not present evidence that their list is representative of the core of the discipline and not just an artifact of the processes that produce these books. Nor do they question whether these terms are, in fact, sociological concepts.

I argue here and elsewhere (Best and Schweingruber 2003; Schweingruber and Wohlstein forthcoming) that introduction to sociology textbooks are a poor reflection of the discipline. This comment presents evidence from full-text searches of three leading sociology journals (*American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology*, and *Social Forces*) over the past 100 years

to argue that Keith and Ender's 1990s glossary list is not reflective of the discipline's conceptual core.

Sociological Concepts?

The 61 terms on Keith and Ender's list are clearly concepts, but are they necessarily sociological concepts? Graham (1988) argues that one of the distinctive features of introduction to sociology textbooks is the inclusion in their glossaries of words that are not technical disciplinary concepts:

> Definitions are key. Every definition for which the student might be asked on an objective question must be included, usually in bold type, in the margin, in the glossary, in a word list at the end of each chapter, or all of the above. Further, technical definitions are not the essence of definitions. Rather, the author is expected to give his or her special perspective on such basic terms as technology, sickness, war, fad, education, law, less developed countries. Is this what the current debate over cultural literacy is about? (P. 630)

Since the terms in textbooks are not limited to sociological concepts, it is no surprise that a list compiled from these books contains terms that are not. Table 1 presents my taxonomy of the 61 terms in Keith and Ender's 1990s list. Many of the terms are clearly technical concepts, for example, "achieved status," "anomie," "folkways," "Gemeinschaft," "generalized other," "Gesellschaft," "looking-glass self," "mores," "primary group," "resocialization," and "secondary group." Most undergraduates would likely be unfamiliar with these terms before taking a sociology class. This category also includes two theories: "demographic transition theory" and "labeling theory."

Five of the terms on the list are methodological terms that are shared by many sciences, such as "hypothesis" and "dependent variable." Another, "crude death rate," is a measure. Two other terms, "sociology" and "demography" are names of disciplines.

A number of other terms are common English words. Some of these have clearly

been given technical meaning by sociologists. For example, definitions of "authority," "bureaucracy," and "power" may be shaped by the work of Max Weber. Others, such as "democracy," "crime," "family," and "religion" appear to represent the objects of sociological study, not the conceptual apparatus by which sociologists attempt to understand them. Most undergraduates would probably be familiar with these terms before taking a sociology class even if they did not understand the precise way sociologists use them. It is questionable whether inclusion of these common words in textbook glossaries elevates their status to core sociological concepts.

Since judging whether a glossary term is a technical sociological term or a common English word is somewhat subjective, I created Table 1 using objective criteria to distinguish between "common" and "less common" English words. I did a LexisNexis search of the full text of articles in two weekly news magazines (*Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*) for 1990 to 1999. Twenty-two of these glossary terms appeared in at least 350 articles during this period (or over once a month per magazine); these are categorized as "common English words." Thirteen of these appeared over 1,000 times (the limit for LexisNexis results). The remaining 31 terms appeared in fewer than 180 articles over that period; these were categorized as "less common English words." Twenty-four of these appeared fewer than 50 times and 11 of them never appeared.[1] I made this distinction

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[1] *Time*, the other major news magazine, was not available for LexisNexis search for the entire 1990s. Search for the word "mores" resulted in over 1,000 hits. However, all of the hits examined resulted from the article containing the word "more." Thus, "mores" was categorized as a less common English word. Excluding "mores," the correlation between the JSTOR search results and the LexisNexis search results (with 1,000 articles as the maximum) was 0.64 for the common words and 0.24 for the less common words.

Table 1. Results of JSTOR Full-Text Search for 61 Terms Commonly Found in 1990s Introduction to Sociology Textbooks			
Common English Words (22)	1990s Appearances	Peak Decade	Peak Decade Appearances
authority†	504	1970s	505
bureaucracy†	181	1990s	181
capitalism†	389	1990s	389
crime†	331	1980s	347
cult†	115	1960s	119
culture†	743	1940s	922
democracy†	352	1940s	376
discrimination†	367	1990s	367
ethnic group/ethnicity†	416	1990s	416
family†	1,066	1940s	1,104
group†	1,269	1950s	1,596
norms†	520	1960s	588
power†	1,095	1970s	1,117
prejudice†	128	1940s	211
race/racial group†	814	1990s	814
religion†	357	1940s	469
role†	1,248	1990s	1,248
sacred†	92	1940s	146
sect	32	1960s	58
society†	1,241	1950s	1,449
status†	1,227	1970s	1,372
values†	1,120	1970s	1,256
Methodological Terms (6)			
correlation†	672	1970s	960
crude death rate	5	1940s	8
dependent variable†	700	1980s	713
hypothesis†	940	1970s	1,040
independent variable†	421	1990s	421
variable†	1,209	1980s	1,370
Names of Disciplines (2)			
demography†	362	1990s	362
sociology†	1,481	1980s	1,651

Table 1 (cont'd)

Less Common English Words (31)	1990s Appearances	Peak Decade	Peak Decade Appearances
assimilation†	117	1940s	154
achieved status	12	1960s	29
anomie†	62	1960s	168
ascribed status	10	1960s	34
caste system	19	1940s	57
collective behavior	71	1970s	79
cultural relativism	3	1960s	12
demographic transition theory	6	1980s	7
endogamy	28	1950s	37
ethnocentrism	17	1950s	50
extended family	64	1990s	64
folkways	12	1940s	194
Gemeinschaft	23	1950s	38
generalized other	21	1980s	35
Gesellschaft	35	1940s	49
labeling theory	21	1970s	33
looking-glass self	12	1990s	12
minority group†	126	1970s	134
mores	27	1940s	334
nuclear family	47	1960s	84
primary group	22	1950s	106
profane	16	1970s	21
resocializaton	4	1960s	20
secondary group	3	1940s	26
secularization	57	1990s	57
social institution	31	1940s	48
social stratification†	232	1970s	259
social structure†	590	1970s	692
socialization†	338	1970s	451
social movement	171	1990s	171
subculture†	88	1970s	123

A dagger (†) indicates the term is a conceptual staple, i.e., it has appeared in 60 journal articles during the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s.

because the JSTOR (journal storage) full-text search results described below are more meaningful for terms that are not common English words since we can be more sure they are used as technical sociological concepts in journal articles.

Sociological Core?

Are the terms found in introduction to sociology textbooks used by sociologists in their published work? Elsewhere (Best and Schweingruber 2003), we addressed this question using the JSTOR searchable database. We identified 265 terms that are found in at least three of four leading textbooks (Henslin 2001; Kendall 2001; Macionis 2003; Schaefer 2001). Of these, we eliminated 115 because they were common English words, methodological terms or names of sociological specialties or perspectives. For the remaining 151 terms, we searched JSTOR to find out how often the words appeared in articles in the three leading sociology journals (*American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology* and *Social Forces*) during each decade from the 1900s to the 1990s. Because JSTOR is a full-text database, these searches targeted not just titles or subject terms but every word in every article. If these terms were part of the conceptual core of the discipline, we would expect them to be used frequently, to show up often in the JSTOR search.

We categorized a term a "conceptual staple" if it appeared in at least 60 articles during each of the past three decades (1970s, 1980s, 1990s), or, on average, twice a year per journal. This is a low standard; these journals published over 1,400 articles in the 1990s. Only 24 (15.9%) of the textbook concepts were conceptual staples. By comparison 39 (25.8%) of the terms were "survivals" that had peaked in usage before the 1990s and had fewer than 12 appearances in the 1990s. Another 22 (14.6%) terms were "interlopers" that had never appeared more than six times in any decade in the top three journals. Based on our analysis, we argued that the concepts in

introductory textbooks do not closely reflect the published research of sociologists.

For this comment I conducted a similar JSTOR full-text search for the 61 words on Keith and Ender's list. Table 1 shows: (1) how many articles each term appeared in during the 1990s, (2) the decade when usage of the term peaked, and (3) how many articles the term appeared in during that peak decade. Of the 61 terms, 35 meet our criteria for conceptual staple. (They are marked in Table 1 with daggers.) However, since many of these terms are common English words, such as "group," "role," and "society," it is unclear whether their use in the journals reflects unique sociological usage. Of the 31 words categorized as "less common English words," only seven met the criteria for conceptual staple: "assimilation," "anomie," "minority group," "social stratification," "social structure," "socialization," and "subculture." Seventeen of these 31 terms appeared fewer than 30 times in the 1990s, or less than once per year per journal. Of the 35 total terms on Keith and Ender's list that reach the level of "conceptual staple," 21 are common English words, indicating they may not be sociological concepts at all.

In contrast, many of the conceptual staples from our earlier analysis failed to appear on Keith and Ender's list, including "alienation," "bourgeoisie," "class conflict," "class consciousness," "deviance," "diffusion," "pluralism," "rationality," and "social mobility."

This full-text search method is prone to false positives since journal articles contain many words that are not sociological terms. However, failure of a term to show up frequently in published journal articles should cast a great deal of doubt on whether it can be said to be part of sociology's conceptual core. It is difficult to argue that a term like "demographic transition theory" is part of this core when it has appeared in only 13 journal articles in the discipline's top-ranked journals during the past century. Likewise, it is questionable whether once-popular concepts like "ascribed status,"

"resocialization," and "secondary group" are part of the core when they appeared fewer than 12 times in the 1990s.

One might argue, however, that the articles in *ASR*, *AJS* and *Social Forces* are a small, unrepresentative sample of published sociology. To examine to what extent the three elite journals may differ from less prestigious generalist journals and from specialty journals, I ran full-text searches for Keith and Ender's 61 terms in *Sociological Forum* (the only other generalist sociology journal available on JSTOR) for 1990 to 1998 (1999 was unavailable) and in seven specialty journals (*Gender and Society*, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Social Psychological Quarterly*, *Sociological Methodology*, *Sociological Theory*, and *Sociology of Education*) for 1990 to 1999. The correlations between these searches and the elite journal searches for 1990 to 1999 were very high (elite journals and *Sociological Forum*, r = .96; elite journals and specialty journals, r = .98).

Introductory Textbooks and the Sociological Perspective

Criticism of undergraduate sociology textbooks is a venerable disciplinary tradition, as demonstrated by early critiques by Pitirim Sorokin (1929) and C. Wright Mills (1943). More recent examples of criticism of introductory texts include articles in *Teaching Sociology*'s special issue on textbooks (Wagenar 1988) and numerous critiques of particular sections or topics (e.g., Beeman, Chowdhry, and Todd 2000; Dennick-Brecht 1993; Ferree and Hall 1990; Ferree and Hall 1996; Hall 1988; Hall 2000; Hamilton 2003; Hamilton and Form 2003; Lucal 1994; Marquez 1994; Nolan 2003; Phillips 1991; Schweingruber and Wohlstein forthcoming; Stone 1996; Taub and Fanflik 2000). Introduction to sociology books have also attracted much vitriol: according to some critics they ladle out a "namby-pamby Reader's Digest Encyclopedia of Mush" (Davis 1990:531) and are "embarrassingly mediocre by any reason-

able standard of intellectual quality" (Baker 1988:381).

The hostility by at least some observers of these books cannot be explained solely by the lack of correspondence between the "two sociologies." It also reflects the belief that the books "undermine the important educational goals that teachers of sociology should be pursuing" (Baker 1988:381). Evaluating textbooks requires not just comparing their contents to research sociology but also examining how they are used in the classroom, something about which we know too little. I suspect that many instructors dislike textbooks because they do not contribute to their classroom goals, which are probably different from Keith and Ender's goals of presenting sociology as a science by using a uniform set of concepts. My goal for the introductory class I teach each semester is to explain, demonstrate, model, and create enthusiasm for the sociological way of thinking, which for me is the true core of the discipline (Berger 1963). The sociologists who responded to Wagenaar's (2004) survey, yet another attempt to locate a sociological core, also appeared to stress the importance of items related to the sociological way of thinking, with "sociological imagination" and "sociological critical thinking" scoring in the top three items that should be covered in introductory courses and in undergraduate programs. My own presentation of the sociological way of thinking consists of a sociological perspective on how society influences people and a sociological perspective on how people build society. This is captured in my course's two master concepts, the "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959) and the "social construction of reality" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). [2]

The specific topics, theories, and findings presented in my course are chosen to illus-

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[2]Contrary to Keith and Ender's opening claim that "Peter Berger (1963) popularized our use of the term 'sociological imagination,'" the term never appears in *Invitation to Sociology* nor does the book cite Mill's *The Sociological Imagination*.

trate the sociological way of thinking and the two master concepts. For instance, "stratification," another of the highest-rated topics on Wagenaar's survey, takes up roughly a third of my course because understanding how class, race, and gender stratification systems work is crucial to developing a sociological imagination and because historical and cross-national comparisons of these systems illustrate the social construction of reality. A textbook is helpful to me to the extent that it can provide exciting examples from the discipline that demonstrate the sociological way of thinking. It gets in the way when it detracts from or clashes with my presentation of the sociological way of thinking or provides examples that are out-of-date, inaccurate, or boring. Other commentators on the introductory course agree that "*perspective* should take priority over *concepts*" (Leming 1990:534, emphasis in original; see also Babbie 1990; D'Antonio 1982; Eckstein, Schoenike, and Delaney 1995; Olzak 1981; Perrucci 1980), even though there is some disagreement as to how to define this perspective. "Perhaps the most common source of disciplinary confusion is equating the sociological perspective with the language of sociology, whereby mastering sociologists' jargon is viewed as the ultimate goal of a sociology course" (Eckstein et al. 1995:355). "Unfortunately, our texts are written as if our disciplinary language is *all* that is needed to understand our discipline" (Leming 1990:534).

I have gathered from *Teaching Sociology* articles, conference presentations, and conversations with colleagues that there are many ways to teach introduction to sociology. Courses give different weight to explaining the discipline and exploring its subject matter. There are or have been courses that emphasize quantitative reasoning, inequality, connections to students' lives, postmodernism, globalization, popular culture, ethnomethodology, experiential learning (Sobal et al. 1981), research methods (Markham 1991), stress (Wilson 1983), and so on. One professor I worked for in gradu-

ate school presented a multitude of research findings from journal articles; another emphasized research of the department's own faculty. At least one professor teaches the entire first third of the class as a structural-functionalist, before switching to conflict theory and then symbolic interactionism.

While Keith and Ender may view this variety as a problem, I see it as a disciplinary strength. Our discipline is a treasure trove of fascinating ideas, topics, and research findings that can be used to illustrate the sociological way of thinking. No two courses need be identical since creative teachers can draw from different parts of the discipline and its subject matter for their illustrations. I suspect the concern that introductory textbooks are "unimaginative clones" (Baker 1988:381) that "in another age might have been labeled as plagiaristic"(Graham 1988:358; see also Agger 1989; Herrick 1980) arises in part from the difficulty many professors have in finding a book that fits their plan and style for presenting and modeling sociological thinking. For instance, the vast majority of textbooks do not work well with my course because they stress the sociological imagination while giving only lip service to the social construction of reality. (I use the only introductory textbook with a social constructionist perspective of which I am aware, Newman's [2004] *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*.) Thus, I doubt that Keith and Ender's proposal to make the books more similar will be greeted with much enthusiasm. Instead, a greater variety of books is needed to allow more teachers to find the books that will best help them create intellectually exciting introductory courses.

CONCLUSION

This comment has pointed out two problems with the claim that concepts in introduction to sociology textbooks reflect the conceptual core of the discipline. First, because these textbooks' glossaries make no attempt to limit themselves to sociological terms, in-

clusion in these glossaries is not *prima facie* evidence that a word is part of sociology's conceptual core. Second, many terms found in textbooks are used infrequently in professional sociologists' published works in the discipline's most prestigious journals. I argue instead that the true core of the discipline is a way of thinking, one that cannot be captured in a list of concepts.

Keith and Ender's article is an important examination of the concepts found in introductory sociology textbooks. Since the books are most students' first exposure and many students' only exposure to the discipline, the content of these books deserves more attention from sociologists than it has received. More attention also needs to be directed to the goals of the introductory course, how textbooks are used in the course to meet these goals, and how they may get in the way of these goals. Whatever is wrong or right with introductory textbooks can only be understood within this context. However, a discussion of these books needs to move beyond the dubious claim that they do in fact reflect the research, debates, and discussion going on elsewhere in the discipline. Such a claim, for which little or no empirical evidence has been mustered, obscures the social processes by which these books are produced and which need changing if these books are to be improved.

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