Why Read Generalist Journals?

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On sociology, fragmentation, and generalist journals.

Sociology is a broad discipline. As the general "social science" it overlaps considerably with history, anthropology, political science, and economics, not to mention African American Studies, Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, Communication Studies, et al. While some see this breadth as a positive attribute, the dangers of a fragmented discipline are hard to ignore. As Stinchcombe (2001) argues, sociologists do not agree on the appropriate subject matter nor the way to measure it. What lies in store for a discipline that shares neither an epistemology nor a substantive focus? This lack of a "core" threatens both the coherence of sociology as a self-conscious branch of scientific study and its continued existence as an administrative department which "studies everything and owns nothing." Perhaps sociology will go the way of philosophy, who's subject matter gave birth to the thriving subfields known today as "physics", "law", and "mathematics." Successful subfields like criminology and public health have already begun to distance themselves from sociology departments. This diversity can produce subjective side-effects too. After years of deliberate study, sociologists can easily take a wrong turn at the national ASA conference and find themselves in a hallway of (ostensible) peers speaking a different scientific language. What does one studying the micro-interactions of rural LGBTQ youth (De Pedro, Lynch, and Esqueda 2018) have to say to someone studying the political diffusion of the welfare state in the post-communist Eastern Bloc (Cook 2007)?

One solution to this fragmentation is to sequester yourself deeper within the confines of your subfield, only reading your ASA section newsletters, sticking to your preferred journals, and avoiding certain conference center hallways. I argue for a different solution: reading generalist journals. This is the best way to sustain a common thread of professional discourse to unite our diasporic discipline. While there is no shortage of "frontier" knowledge filling the pages of countless journals, scientific progress in the formal sense implies some of these cutting-edge studies come to constitute our universally shared body of knowledge (Cole 2001). Not to mention the vital professional development these journals offer to scholars young and old. A newly minted PhD has only scratched the surface of a 150-year-old field, and it is the rare senior scholar who

claims to have nothing to learn about research design, theoretical motivation, analytical procedures, and writing style. I think reading our generalist flagship journals offers one significant way to resist the push towards academic specialization and to sustain some semblance of a shared community among sociologists.

Max Weber on Academic Specialization

> "One's own work must inevitably remain highly imperfect. Only by strict specialization can the scientific worker become fully conscious, for once and perhaps never again in his lifetime, that he has achieved something that will endure. A really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment. And whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders, so to speak, and to come up to the idea that the fate of his soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of this manuscript may as well stay away from science."
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> - Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation* ([1908] 1958:135)

This resigned description of academic specialization (in 1908) remains a prescient tale. Yet Weber himself was anything but the blinkered specialist he describes here (Radkau 2011:97). His sprawling career touched on agrarian peasants in Germany, Confucian religious leaders in China, and of course those industrious Protestants. In *Science as a Vocation*, he eventually comes to question the very notion of scientific progress itself: upon what shore are the endless waves of "science" directed? The academic who commits to this modern specialization "catches only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive" (Weber 1958:140). The ephemeral nature of modern research forsakes any ultimate meaning or foundation upon which to base one's life. His brilliant connections here to Tolstoy and the experience of death deserve their own treatment, but for now Weber – in word and deed – serves to warn against the dangers of a narrow academic focus.

Emile Durkheim on Shared Ideas and Community

> "A religious society does not exist without a collective credo and it is more or less strong and united according to whether this credo is more widely held… The greater the area of free inquiry that a religious group abandons to the judgment of individuals, the more it will be absent from their lives, and the less cohesion and vitality it will possess."
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> -Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* ([1897] 2006:165)

Academic fragmentation is particularly ironic in sociology, a discipline founded on the

study of community, bonding rituals, and anomie. Durkheim's resounding merits of community membership range from "not committing suicide" to having a metaphysical basis for time itself (Durkheim [1912] 1995; cf. Bergmann 1992). The relationship between shared ideas, community, and reality itself is detailed in Peter Berger's *Sacred Canopy* (1967), a book that had a profound effect on me in the early years of graduate school. But you do not have to buy the whole social constructionist agenda to see the necessity of shared ideas for group identity and solidarity. If a group is to have any sense of its group-ness, it must be based on something, and in every case this boils down to an idea. Political parties, music genres, religious traditions; each share some common orientation to the world. The more ideas are shared, the more social solidarity a group enjoys. With respect to sociology, I think we can agree on more than "the importance of society" or "Marx, Weber, Durkheim." We may not agree on every methodological technique or substantive concern, but sociologists' collective identity rests on having a shared currency of ideas. Our flagship generalist journals provide fertile ground to cultivate and harvest these ideas.

Now, this concern may simply be a naïve and youthful striving for certainty; a desire to find the immoveable foundation to anchor one's life. Yet the existence of this desire does nothing to prove the existence of a solution. As Simone Weil would say, "hunger is not bread." Maybe there are good reasons sociology must survive without a "core" of knowledge (Collins 2001). Whether "sociology" remains a useful description of academic research remains an open and important question. I have no prima facie objection to the splintering of sociology into autonomous subfields.

Lastly, it is easy to argue for the benefits of a given practice, and my suggestion to read generalist journals may fall into the unwelcome company of "exercise thirty minutes a day" and "eat your vegetables." Put bluntly: who has extra time to read generalist journals? Well, as one example, the *American Journal of Sociology* publishes six issues a year with about five articles per issue. This amounts to around thirty articles a year. To keep up with this output, one would only have to read one article every two weeks. The potential impossibility of this commitment should instigate a separate conversation about the culture of speed in academia (Berg and Seeber 2017).

At the end of the day, in Weber's words, "The ultimately possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice." (1958:152). I have presented what I see to be an important problem in sociology and proposed one solution. Questions about sociological "progress" or "core knowledge" deserve a more detailed treatment, and the felt need for community among sociologists will obviously vary. Alas, according to Weber, I can give no answers to questions of value, for I am no prophet or savior. It is up to each of us to "find and obey the demon who holds the fibers of his very life." (1958:156)

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