Q&A: Sociology of Knowledge

Much of the energy of the SKAT section is focused on the “S” and “T” - science and technology. But exciting work is also being done on “K” - the sociology of knowledge. The Q&A below asks four innovative scholars whose work contributes to the sociology of knowledge what they see for the future of this part of the discipline.

Marion Fourcade is professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Her book *Economists and Societies* (Princeton University Press, 2009), won, among several other honors, ASA’s Distinguished Book Award and 4S’s Ludwik Fleck Prize. She has published broadly on the sociology of valuation, classification, and morality, and her book in progress is tentatively titled *Measure for Measure: Social Ontologies of Classification.*

Neil Gross is professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia. His book *Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care?* was published by Harvard University Press in 2013, and he is co-editor of *Professors and Their Politics,* which will be published by Johns Hopkins University Press later this year. His work has ranged broadly across the sociology of ideas and academic life, and he is the editor of *Sociological Theory.*

Jerry Jacobs is professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. His book *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity, Specialization and the Research University* was published in 2013 by the University of Chicago Press, and he has published four other books and seventy-five articles primarily in the areas of work and gender, as well as receiving numerous honors for that work. He is a past editor of the *American Sociological Review.*

Owen Whooley is assistant professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico. His book, *Knowledge in the Time of Cholera: The Struggle over American Medicine in the Nineteenth Century,* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2013, and he has published in journals ranging from *Social Forces* to *Qualitative Sociology* to *The Sociology of Health & Illness.* He is a past winner of SKAT’s Hacker-Mullins award.

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What questions about knowledge do you find particularly new, important, or exciting at the present?

Fourcade: For me the “knowledge” in the “sociology of knowledge” refers, by and large, to the knowledge of the everyday world. To put it simply: how do we know what we know? How do we think what we think? Why do we act the way we do? This opens up a vast intellectual territory, of course, from the philosophy of language to the anthropology of the body to the sociology of culture to the history of the state, and much more. So there is a lot that is exciting. There is a lot, also, that is not new. Or rather, the exciting “newness” of the sociology of knowledge today may come from the rediscovery of a literature that had been “unlearned” because intellectual fashions went elsewhere; or from the re-reading of well-known works through a new lens. In some ways, the canon in the “sociology of culture” is now being rediscovered as “sociology of knowledge”. (So perhaps the K in SKAT could allow a colonialist claim on the intellectual territory of the culture section?) In any event, culture’s recent emphasis on cognition (e.g., Vaisey) suggests this kind of reorientation and convergence, as does the revival of a theoretically-oriented microsociology (e.g., Tavory). I think this is a good thing. My own obsession is with the origins and performative effects of classifications and categories—a very traditional question (and very French! – think Durkheim, Bourdieu, Foucault, Boltanski for starters). But I try to approach it through a more STS angle, via the technologies that are lodged at the core of these classificatory regimes. And as always, through cross-national comparisons. We’ll see where that goes. There is a beautiful book by historian John Carson, The Measure of Merit, which provides a wonderful illustration of the kinds of complex dynamics I find so interesting—between political culture, technology, and the performance of a particular social order.

Gross: Some of the questions I find most exciting right now aren’t new, but are being raised in contemporary public and scientific discourse with an intensity not seen for some time. These are questions about the role of value commitments, identity, and social group membership in shaping the work practices and ideational products of knowledge producers—intellectuals, scientists, journalists, and others. In public debates over environmental science and austerity economics, in debates internal to the scientific field over replication, and elsewhere, we are witnessing today challenges to ideals of objectivity and scientific rationality not seen on a large scale since the 1970s. Urgently needed is an understanding of where these challenges are coming from, what they mean for public trust in the knowledge enterprise, and the extent to which knowledge producers in various settings actually strive toward universalism and disinterestedness.

Jacobs: Universities in the US are facing many challenges today, in terms of funding, access and mission. But perhaps most fundamental is a broad effort to reconsider the role of the liberal arts disciplines, which have been a basic building block of the post-World War II research university.
Whooley: An exciting development in the sociology of knowledge is the burgeoning research that attends to issues of epistemology from a sociological perspective. Discussion of epistemology within philosophy remains a largely normative and abstract endeavor; a sociological approach takes up epistemologies as objects of empirical analyses in their own right, examining the social processes by which epistemological standards and norms emerge and are maintained. Epistemological questions (i.e. what is nature of truth? How can knowledge be achieved?) are being properly treated as social problems that must be negotiated and resolved in practice. Spanning multiple sociological subfields, this research explores the epistemic dimensions of a fascinating array of case studies: the decision-making processes of internal review boards (Mallard, Lamont, and Guetzkow, 2009), the causes of airplane engineering accidents (Downer 2011), the global financial crisis (MacKenzie 2011), the classification of French wines (Fourcade 2012), and the mysterious collapse of bee colonies (Suryanarayanan and Kleinman 2013), to name a few.

How is your own work currently engaging with these themes?

Fourcade: My past and current work focuses on the institutional scaffolding of knowledge – the myriad of ways through which institutions sustain the formation of particular judgments, representations, arguments on the one hand, and the use of instruments, or techniques, metrics on the other. My earlier work (Economists and Societies, 2009) approached this question from a very macro-sociological angle, looking at systems of higher education and public administration as sources of practical, intellectual and political entanglements that, in the long run, fashioned different trajectories for the discipline and profession of economics across nations. My more recent work tries to grapple with these questions at a much finer level of detail. So my current research investigates how systems of expert/scientific knowledge supply categories of thought – not only directly through discourse but also, and primarily, through metrological and valuation engines that are themselves deeply embedded in “the world as we know it.” This provides an opportunity not only to make the classical sociology of knowledge speak to the STS literature, but also to raise the theoretical stakes by showing the consequences of these systems on people’s experience of the world, and practical engagement with it. Empirically, I have been pursuing these questions through a series of studies on wine classifications, the economic valuation of nature, and credit markets (the latter with Kieran Healy).

Gross: I touch on some of these matters in my research on professors and their political commitments—in my book Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care? and in a forthcoming edited volume (with Solon Simmons) titled Professors and Their Politics. I’m trying to address faith in science with a new research project I’m launching: an interview-based study of left-right differences in scientific attitudes and understanding among members of the American public.

Jacobs: In my new book, In Defense of Disciplines, I critically assess the trend toward
interdisciplinarity. I maintain that the established disciplines have been broad, porous and dynamic. Research universities combine discipline-based hiring and teaching with a large number of interdisciplinarity institutes and research centers. Since the Second World War, this hybrid form has been a remarkably successful engine for advancing research and scholarship. As I see it, interdisciplinary programs themselves depend on strong disciplines.

And I raise questions about whether the diverse forms of interdisciplinarity are likely to achieve the goal of “integrating” knowledge, since interdisciplinary research domains are often quite narrow in scope. Paradoxically, the most successful interdisciplinary fields quickly revert to the same forms as disciplines: they develop their own journals, scholarly associations, national meetings, and before long, they become divided into their own sub-specialties.

Whooley: My research examines the distinct dynamics of epistemological politics, specifically as they relate to the medical professions. My book, Knowledge in the Time of Cholera (University of Chicago Press 2013), demonstrates how the modern American medical profession emerged out of an intellectual crisis produced by recurrent cholera epidemics in the 19th century and the “epistemic contest” over medical knowledge between medical sects that followed in their wake.

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Point us to a recent piece of work relevant to the sociology of knowledge that you think deserves more attention, and tell us why.

Fourcade: A few years ago I was asked to comment on a set of articles submitted to Qualitative Sociology for a special issue on “knowledge in practice” edited by Claudio Benzecry and Monika Krause (2010, volume 33). I was deeply impressed with the quality of those papers as a group, even though they took up the thematic challenge from very different angles, from the very micro to the very macro, from the sensuous to the discursive, from the pre-reflexive to the most analytical, from disciplining the self to fighting over the politics of numbers. The whole special issue is terrific I think, both the symposium and the stand-alone paper by Thomas Medvetz that completes it. It gives a wonderful overview of the possibilities open to us. More importantly, the issue came out of the Junior Theorists Symposium, and these are all papers by young scholars, including Owen in this symposium – another good reason to recommend them: we get a sense of what the next generation is up to.

And since I was given a chance, I cannot end without citing one of my favorite articles, even though it is old news by now: John Levi Martin, “What do animals do all day?” Poetics 1999. It’s a piece about how a particular series of American picture books taught children about relevant differences in society-gender roles, the division of labor, and class-based bodily hexis. This piece is an analytical tour-de-force, with a brilliant and deeply entertaining (or too playful for its own good?) empirical illustration. I would recommend it to anyone. But especially to those people in SKAT who have been mostly concerned with the S and the T, and want to see how the K might be made to fit into their world.
Gross: I am a fan of Tom Medvetz’s book *Think Tanks in America*, and sing its praises whenever I can. One of the things I appreciate about the book is that it draws on Bourdieu without being afraid to make creative modifications to the Bourdieusian theoretical approach. For example, Medvetz’s terrific chapter on “the crystallization of the space of think tanks” begins from the notion, developed by Gil Eyal but with Bourdieusian roots, that expertise can be conceived as existing in a two-dimensional space defined vertically by public engagement or disengagement and horizontally by dependence/heteronomy or independence/autonomy. Eyal, for his part, puts this idea into motion by conceiving of the space as a “field of expertise” in which experts with different forms of capital struggle with one another for authority. Medvetz further develops and then applies the theory by arguing that think tanks took on their modern form in the late 1960s and early 1970s as two groups of actors occupying structurally equivalent positions in this field as it existed in the American context—“conservative activist experts” and “New Left activist experts”—went to battle with various kinds of technocratic experts and entities both inside and outside the state, in so doing reshaping the field and giving birth to new types of organizations. This claim then sets up Medvetz’s rich analysis, in the subsequent chapter, of how practices of knowledge production around policy research in think tanks emerge as part of “a game of gathering, balancing, and assembling various institutionalized resources or forms of capital.” Key here is that “think tanks must actively signal both their autonomy (or cognitive independence) and their heteronomy (or their dependence on clients for resources and recognition.)” Think tanks are, in this way and in others, “interstitial institutions.” These all seem to me very productive moves—especially when then linked, later in the book, to an illustration of how this balancing act, and the structural transformations that underpinned it, played out in debates over poverty and welfare in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Jacobs: I have been fortunate to be working on these issues when so much other interesting research is underway or recently completed. I have benefited from the publications of (and/or conversations with) Elizabeth Popp Berman, Michele Lamont, Scott Frickel, Erin Leahy, Mathieu Albert, Aaron Panofsky, and Laurel Smith-Doerr, among many others. In terms of research in progress, Steve Brint’s institutional analyses of higher education and Harvey Graff’s work on historical comparisons of disciplines and interdisciplinary forms are likely to keep the conversation moving forward.