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IN PURSUIT OF PROGRESS

An assessment of achievements in Dutch sociology

Henk A. Becker
Frans L. Leeuw
Kitty Verrips (Eds.)

Amsterdam, 1991
SISWO publication 355

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Wout Ultee

How Classical Questions were enriched

The relation between problems of general sociology and of sociology's specialisms in the Netherlands in the 1980s

Prologue

For a long time now, titles of introductions to sociology have included words like 'problem' and 'question'. Here's a list:

- Simmel, *Grundfragen der Soziologie*, 1917
- Von Wiese, *Soziologie: Geschichte und Hauptprobleme*, 1926
- Rex, *Key problems in sociological theory*, 1961
- Giddens, *Central problems in social theory*, 1979
- Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*, 1980.

Titles like these will be to the liking of readers who assume that the growth of knowledge amounts to solving problems and that the proper statement of a problem is half its solution. After studying these books, however, they may feel disappointed. Whatever the quality of other wares on offer, the questions presented in these volumes are rather abstract if not downright vague. To make matters worse, problems are labelled as important, but the whys and wherefores of this importance remains elusive. If Giddens and Bourdieu, top of the bill for grand theory in the 1980s, failed to clearly identify sociology's main questions, it might be presumed that the answer to the \$64,000 question 'What has sociology achieved?' surely and simply is 'nothing'.

Actually, the state of sociology is not that rotten. If advances are made not by vocal fireworks but by painstakingly piecing things together and more by drift than by design, progress will remain veiled. To pinpoint an achievement, a reconstruction which deploys definite rules is required. These standards have to pertain not only to how evidence bears on theories, but even more so to the questions raised at various points in time. The application of principles in a reconstruction of specific episodes in the history of a particular field reveals what it takes for a problem to be a central one and what the articulation of a master problem in consecutive steps is all about. In the present paper, I undertake such an exercise. I determine for the Netherlands in the

1980s how general sociology's classical questions became enriched by recent research questions of sociology's specialisms.

My main concern is the questions sociologists seek to answer. I do not argue that sociology is in bad shape because of an abundance of rudimentary substantive theories. Actually, the image of competing paradigms evoked by textbooks confuses the matter (Ultee, 1978). Nor will I deal with the opposition between qualitative and quantitative research methods. I do think that present-day 'tolerant' positions holding that researchers choose techniques that best suit their problems, miss the point that progress is attained by applying techniques that once seemed inappropriate. Progress can be achieved with regard to methods of empirical research, theory formation, and problem articulation. In this paper I am chiefly concerned with problem articulation.

In the next section of this paper, I state certain principles of successive problem articulation. I then apply these standards. The reconstructions I undertake involve cohesion, rationalization and inequality as the three classical problems of general sociology. I then develop subsidiary theses on how developments in theory formation and research methods impinge on sociology's classical questions.

I sum up my reconstructions by asserting that particular studies from sociology's specialisms enhanced the entire field's main questions. I do not claim, however, that the people engaged in these studies explicitly set out to do so. One point regarding reconstructions is that, since relations between problems are of a logical nature, unintended consequences have their place in the history of a field. In fact, it may be that no single person stated the central problem of a field, but that this problem consists of the entirety of questions raised by different persons, each working in his or her own subfield.

By singling out cohesion, inequality and rationalization as sociology's main problems, I follow Dutch textbooks. In contrast to the likes of Bourdieu and Giddens, Thurlings (1977) and Laeyendecker (1981) not only named problems with the weight of sociology's founders, but neatly enumerated and clearly stated them. In line with the title of another Dutch introduction (Wilterdink & Van Heerikhuizen, 1983), I take cohesion, inequality and rationalization as characteristics of societies.

A methodology for successive problem articulation

Building on Bunge (1967), in an earlier study I developed formal standards for gauging the import of problems in sociology (Ultee, 1974). For the present paper, I summarize these rules as follows.

One principle for problem articulation is that as many blanks as possible should be filled in. The stipulation that sociology's subject is societies (and not individuals), does not specify the features of these units that are to be described, nor what might explain these properties. The exhortation to account for a society's income distribution hints at the societal characteristic to be explained, but as yet this feature has not been specified into a variable. The question of how to explain the degree of disparity displayed by a society's income distribution contains this variable, but leaves open the variable accounting for it. Whether social democracy within a society makes for smaller income disparities is a full-fledged problem: a unit, a predictor variable and an explanatory variable have been specified. Unspecified problems leave a field in an embryonal stage.

Another rule for the articulation of problems in consecutive steps involves the distinction between description and explanation. Again, to anticipate inequality as one of sociology's main problems: it is one thing to ask how large personal income differences were in the Netherlands in 1980, another to query whether this disparity remained at this level, and yet another to wonder what accounts for this trend. In fact, these three questions form a sequence. The explanatory question of why a specific trend in income disparity occurred can only be raised after this trend has been described, and the question of whether income disparities after 1980 are the same as those in 1980 presupposes an answer to the even simpler descriptive question of how much disparity there was in 1980. One way questions become articulated is because answers to simple descriptive questions give rise to richer descriptive questions, and answers to these questions become the starting point for explanatory ones.

This principle can be extended. Explanatory questions in turn prompt predictive ones: if income disparities in the Netherlands widened during the 1980s because of its right-wing government, did they recede at the time in leftist Spain? And if this predictive question has been answered in the affirmative, a deeper explanatory question can be raised: why exactly are income disparities larger in countries run by rightists than in those with a left-wing government? This question again occasions predictive questions. There is no natural end to such a sequence of questions. If the questions raised within a field can be arranged into a

sequence from simple description to deep explanation, that field displays continuity.

Yet another way of articulating problems is to subsume a problem under an overarching one and detail a new subordinate question. To continue the example: questions about income disparities are a concrete instance of the more general question of the distribution of scarce goods, and questions on the differences between persons in the prestige of their job are another case. Thus seemingly disparate problems sometimes turn out to be connected with each other, lending unity to a field. If longevity is regarded as a scarce good, questions about life tables, income distributions and prestige ladders are analogous. It is, of course, possible to subsume two problems that in themselves comprise various subproblems under one even vaster problem. The principle of subsuming a problem under a more general one gives a clear meaning to catchy phrases like 'central problems' and 'key questions'. I commence my reconstructions by showing that sociology's founders propounded overarching questions, and I proceed by demonstrating how contemporary Dutch sociologists enriched these more general problems by addressing new subordinate ones.

Further guidance for problem choice is provided by the rule: single out issues and anomalies. An issue is a problem consisting of two incompatible hypotheses, an anomaly is a problem arising from the clash between a corroborated hypothesis and new empirical findings. Let me illustrate once more. If one hypothesis holds that leftist governments always lessen disparities and another holds that they only do so in times of economic growth, under certain conditions the predictions derived from these hypotheses do not square. An issue is born, making specific predictive questions interesting: do leftist governments diminish income disparities in times of economic stagnation, or don't they? If income disparities did not abate under the left-wing government ruling Spain in the 1980s, the hypothesis successfully invoked to explain a trend towards larger income disparities in the Netherlands is contradicted by a piece of evidence. This contradiction provides an anomaly and adds urgency to particular explanatory questions about income disparities: why don't left-wing governments always make for smaller income differences? Issues may be said to anticipate anomalies: an alternative for a hypothesis focuses the search for contradictory evidence.

To the extent that issues and anomalies remain unsolved, a field has a limited yield, which is why problems of this type deserve priority. In fact, the single them out rule reduces the class of all possible questions

to a more manageable size. After all, sequences of questions have no natural end, the ultimately overarching problem does not exist, and the last question on a list of subordinate problems will never be reached.

I applied these rules on problem articulation when reconstructing several episodes in sociology's recent and not so recent history, and the present paper extends the scope of these earlier efforts. In one contribution (Ultee, 1981), I brought out the overarching questions dealt with by sociology's founders and the subordinate problems treated in the course of time by 'lesser' masters of sociological thought. In two studies, I appraised problem shifts in the field of stratification and mobility since the Second World War (Ultee, 1984) and in the 1980s (Ultee, 1989). I did so by pointing out how an answer to one inequality question occasioned another inequality question, and its answer yet another one, and so forth. In a study on sociology within one country, I showed which of sociology's classical questions were alive and well in the Netherlands in the 1970s. I did so by subsuming current topics under traditional overarching ones (Ultee, 1986). The present paper follows up on this analysis. It deals with questions broached in the 1980s by specialisms of Dutch sociology.

Enriching sociology's main questions

Given the incommensurate attention devoted by sociology to its founders, a sceptical observer may well wonder whether sociology's classical problems have become overstudied if not exhausted. I hold that nothing could be further from the truth. Problems are considered classical precisely because they are overarching and comprise several subordinate problems.

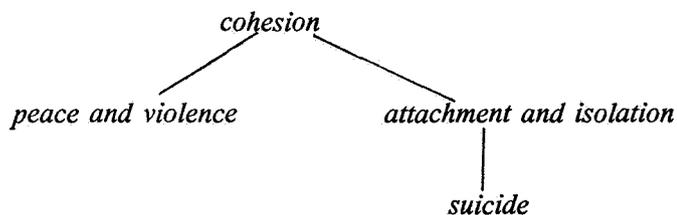
The problem of cohesion in times of crumbling solidarity

With hindsight and in a personalized way, the story of the classical problem of cohesion within general sociology can be told as follows. Hobbes raised the seemingly simple question as to the conditions under which people live together peacefully. Given the attention devoted by Hobbes to the Puritan rebellion, the contrast implied by this question pertains to the conditions under which people use violence against each other. Durkheim saw that the problem of order really consisted of two questions wrapped up as one. This problem, after all, suggests a second distinction: it also refers to the factors causing persons once living together peacefully to become isolated from each other. Hence Durkheim's question as to why some people choose voluntary death above life in society. It is in this vein that in a textbook used in the Nether-

lands, Collins (1983:122-124) somewhat cryptically maintained that 'Durkheim was not interested in suicide at all' and that 'What Durkheim was able to achieve of lasting value was to cut through to a basic question of sociology: What holds society together?' Figure 1 reconstructs the tree of problems Durkheim placed on sociology's agenda.

Wagner

Figure 1 The problem of cohesion since Durkheim



The fact that Durkheim distinguished the problem of attachment and isolation from that of violence and peace is already an achievement. Yet Durkheim's unravelling of the problem of cohesion promises additional progress: it raises the prospect of attachment and isolation questions different from those of suicide. My point is that even if empirical research on suicide stagnated in the Netherlands in the 1980s due to a lack of reliable data, new questions cropped up here at the time which enriched the problem of attachment and isolation. In fact, these new questions did constitute progress. I single out the studies conducted in the Netherlands in the 1980s by De Jong-Gierveld (1984) and her collaborator Dykstra (1990).

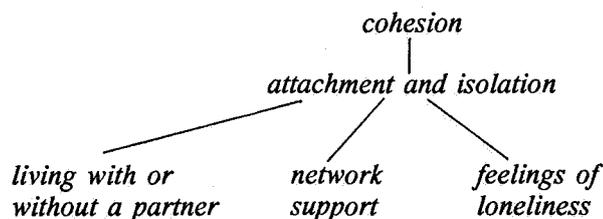
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The topic of 'the unmarried' (already dealt with, albeit in a somewhat different manner, in De Jong-Gierveld, 1969) is of practical import in contemporary Dutch society, with its growing number of one-person households. It also constitutes a welcome addition to a narrowly conceived sociology of the family. To what extent does Dykstra articulate this topic? Dykstra addresses questions on:

- 1) Whether elderly persons now live with a partner, once lived with a partner but now no longer do so, or have always lived without one
- 2) The amount of emotional support given by the persons closest to them
- 3) The extent to which they feel lonely, and
- 4) Whether the loneliness resulting from the absence of a partner can be compensated by support from other close relations.

Since the last question refers to the interrelations among the phenomena focused on by the other questions, these four questions constitute a sequence of new questions within the sociology of primary relations. They also are of import for general sociology: each and every question constitutes a specific new instance of Durkheim's question of isolation and attachment. De Jong-Gierveld's and Dykstra's questions enrich the problem of cohesion so often paraded by general sociology - but nowadays so seldom broken down by general sociology into its components. This articulation of the problem of cohesion is illustrated in Figure 2.

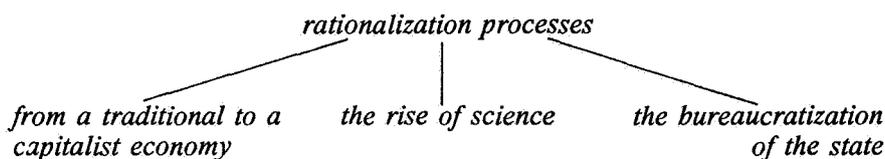
Figure 2 De Jong-Gierveld & Dykstra's detailing of the problem of cohesion



Rational individuals and the rationalization of society: why do states produce health, education and welfare?

Adam Smith argued that the production of material goods by way of free markets (later dubbed capitalism) is more efficient than by any other known economic system. More than a century later, Max Weber wondered why capitalism first gained prominence in the West, and subsumed this question under the overarching one of why processes of rationalization had advanced so fast that the West had overtaken India and China, two other highly developed cultures. Weber detailed other subquestions of this overarching problem, pertaining for instance to the rise of science and the emergence of the state as a formal organization. Outside the Netherlands, Merton (1938) addressed the former and Blau (1974) the latter subproblem. Weber's problem structure is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Weber's overarching problem of rationalization



Two decades after Weber, Elias formulated with a new subquestion of Weber's problem of rationalization: the issue of a trend towards civilization, a bridling of affect and a refinement of manners to promote long-term interests (Elias, 1939; Elias, 1969:168-170). This subject attracted quite a bit of attention in the Netherlands in the 1970s. Several social scientists conducted research on questions for the Netherlands analogous to questions Elias empirically answered for France. Contrary to the impression created by these researchers, their findings did not fully accord with the theories of Elias' figurational sociology (Ultee 1986:193-194).

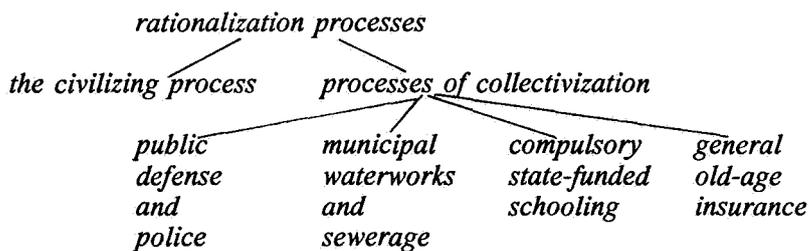
My first point is that in the 1980s, these contradictions were not taken as anomalies requiring further research. My second point is that despite this stagnation, the problem of rationalization was advanced in 1980s by a Dutch follower of Elias specialized in the sociology of welfare. De Swaan (1988) produced an anomaly for a seemingly innocent statement by Weber and a reformulation of Weber's subproblem of the rise of the state. This led De Swaan to an even finer breakdown of that subproblem.

Weber was wrong about what effective and efficient states actually do. Of course, according to Weber, states have a monopoly on the instruments of violence and on taxation. But taxes levied by states are spent on more than defense against outsiders and policing its own subjects. What's more, in the 20th century several Western states came to spend less and less of their budgets on defense. By regarding 'in care of the state' as 'a new phase in the process of state formation' (De Swaan 1988:216), De Swaan presented an anomaly for longstanding assumptions about the state.

To explain how state care came about, De Swaan in effect restated this problem. This reformulation was arrived at by applying the notion of externality and the distinction between private and collective goods hinging on it. This distinction became familiar to Dutch sociologists in the 1970s by way of Van den Doel's (1978) 'new political economy'. Free markets are the way to attain the optimal production of individual

goods, but not of collective goods. Here the state comes in, and defense and police are not the only collective goods around. De Swaan focuses on public health, literacy and numeracy, and the infirmities of old age. These goods involving externalities in modern states are produced by municipal waterworks and sewerage, state-funded compulsory education, and collective old-age insurance. De Swaan restates Weber's problem of the emergence of the formal state as that of collectivizing processes in modern societies, and breaks down the latter problem into more specific questions as to how modern states came to produce other collective goods than defense and police. Figure 4 illustrates this problem system.

Figure 4 The problem of rationalization according to Elias and De Swaan



My last point does not pertain to De Swaan's theories answering these questions, but to these questions themselves. In retrospect, it is evident that Weber did not distinguish between questions of societal rationalization and questions of individual rationality. The new political economy argues that if goods involve externalities, rational individual decisions do not always result in optimal production of these goods. Individual rationality sometimes unintentionally results in inefficiencies at higher levels. Of course, Weber employed the notion of unintended consequences. Weber, however, sought to demonstrate that the economic rationality of persons is an unintended effect of the religious ideas they hold. Weber did not entertain the possibility that rational individual actions could result in inefficient macro-outcomes. De Swaan makes it clear from the outset that his questions pertain to collective outcomes and that his answers involve the assumption of rational individuals. Precisely because individuals are rational, the optimal production of collective goods cannot always be expected. De Swaan's study of questions prominent in the sociology of welfare, indicates that general sociology's classical questions insufficiently distinguish between ques-

tions of societal rationalization and those of individual rationality.

From questions of openness to questions of disparity and cumulation

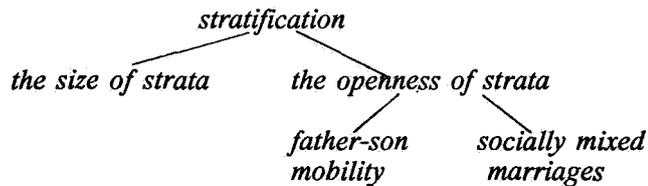
Sombart suggested that frequent upward mobility could explain why the political effects Marx predicted would emerge from increasing income disparities failed to do so. In this way, the classical question of inequality was subdivided into that of disparity and that of mobility. The earliest answer to questions of mobility for the Netherlands was given by Van Heek. I reconstruct his sequence of questions (Van Heek 1945:35-36) as follows:

- 1 What does the ladder of occupational prestige for the Netherlands look like?
- 2a How many males have high, intermediate and low prestige jobs?
- 2b Did these numbers change in the course of time?
- 3a How much father-son mobility occurs along the ladder of occupational prestige?
- 3b Did this mobility increase or decrease?
- 4a What explains differences in mobility among Dutchmen?
- 4b What accounts for differences in mobility between the Netherlands and other countries?

This sequence kept Van Heek's Leyden School busy. The last study it produced addressed the question of trends in socially mixed marriages (Van Tulder, 1972). This subject was stipulated by generalizing Van Heek's father-son mobility question into one on the openness of social strata, and detailing a subordinate question on the connection between the occupational prestige of the father and that of the father-in-law.

The Leyden School did not ascertain the trend in mobility, nor did it explain differences among nations. Studies on labour supply in the textile industry (Ijzerman, 1959) and on social background and school careers (Van Heek et al., 1968), sealed the division of the field of social mobility, hitherto closely linked with general sociology, into the sociology of labour markets and of education. These studies also marked the shift from macroquestions to microquestions. The branchings of the Leyden School questions are traced in Figure 5.

Figure 5 The Leyden School on the problem of inequality



Although mobility questions were out of favour in the 1970s, they became one of Dutch sociology's growth industries in the 1980s. Van Heek's sequence of questions was completed by members of the now defunct Utrecht Mobility Seminar (UMS), originally from general sociology and sociological methodology, with weak ties to the sociology of education and of labour markets. Recycling Van Heek's scale for occupational prestige and Van Tulder's mobility table, they demonstrated that father-son mobility increased between 1954 and 1977 (Ganzeboom & De Graaf, 1984). Another study observed that father-child educational mobility had increased from 1891 to 1960 (Ganzeboom & De Graaf, 1989).

In addition, UMS members answered the last question in Van Heek's sequence. One study involving nine EEC countries (Ultee & Luijkx, 1986) and another including thirty-five nations all over the world (Ganzeboom, Luijkx & Treiman, 1989) addressed the questions of why societies vary in father-son mobility and whether social democracy makes greater mobility of this kind. On the basis of crossings of husband's and wife's education for twenty-three industrial nations, another UMS study raised a different subquestion of the openness problem, that of why countries differ in educational heterogamy (Ultee & Luijkx, 1990). By combining data on father-son mobility with data on educational heterogamy, the latter study also dealt with the issue of whether more father-son mobility in a country goes together with more educational heterogamy (as Lipset maintained in the 1950s) or whether father-son inheritance and educational homogamy are compensatory strategies of reproduction (Bourdieu's counter-argument in the 1970s).

Yet another UMS study addressed an explanatory question on a neglected aspect of openness. In the 1980s, the question of whether the unemployed constitute an underclass came to be of growing political significance. Yet it remained poorly posed within the sociology of labour markets (Van 't Eind & Ravenstein, 1979). UMS members restated this question as a mobility problem: Does a higher rate of

unemployment in a country make for less mobility from employment to unemployment and from unemployment to employment? Data for fourteen Western industrial countries were compared (Ultee, Dessens & Jansen, 1988).

Another thing that happened was that two of Van Heek's questions were specified, and that Van Heek's sequence was extended.

Van Heek's question on the distribution of men with jobs along a ladder of occupational prestige is analogous to that on disparity in a nation's income distribution, a favourite question of Dutch economists (Pen, 1971). Both questions fall under the more general one on disparities in the distribution of scarce goods. Yet no pupil of Van Heek computed Gini-coefficients or any other measure for dispersion in a distribution of occupational prestige. Huijgen (1984), from the sociology of labour markets, did not compute one either when answering questions on changes in the distribution of jobs according to their level of skills. It was not always appreciated that questions could be subsumed under more general ones. Ultee (1989) presented a preliminary answer to the more specific question on disparities in the distribution of occupational prestige.

In answering questions on mobility, the Leyden School computed percentages. By solely opting for this specification, it failed to grasp the implications of the often observed lack of correspondence between the marginals of a father-son mobility table. If the number of sons from higher origins is lower than the available number of higher destinations, the percentage of upwardly mobile persons automatically deviates from zero. The percentage of mobile persons therefore does not indicate an interchange between strata. The British sociologist Goldthorpe was first to recognize that this social fluidity could be measured by odds ratios (Goldthorpe, Payne & Llewellyn, 1978). His specification of questions on mobility patterns into questions of absolute rates (total mobility) and questions of relative chances (social fluidity) was adopted by the Utrecht Mobility Seminar. In the same way, it specified questions on educational heterogamy and mobility between employment and unemployment into absolute and relative ones.

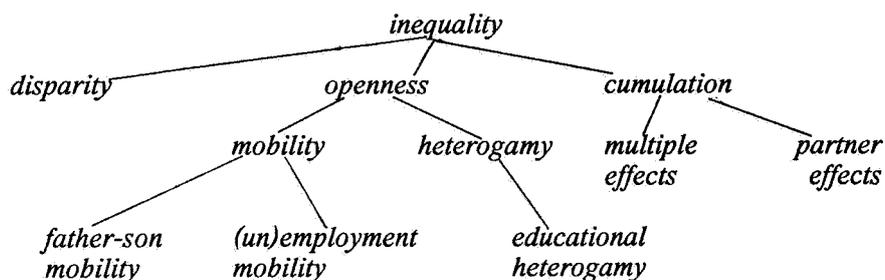
Questions on disparity involve the distribution of a scarce good at one point in time, and questions on mobility the connection between these distributions at two different points in time. It is obvious that if disparities remain the same, this does not necessarily mean social fluidity is absent. Disparities do not fully describe a society's inequalities: mobility *lessens* inequality. Yet the extent to which mobility does so should not be overestimated. Mobility between two points in time does not

preclude mobility over more points in time from displaying cumulative outcomes and from *adding to* inequality. Hence the hypothesis that status attainment and income acquisition are self-reinforcing processes.

Thus an issue arises on the distribution of a scarce good at three points in time. If social fluidity is imperfect, a person's social position at t_1 affects his position at t_2 , and a person's place at t_2 influences his position at t_3 . In addition to the latter impact, the social position of a person at t_3 may be affected by his position at t_1 . If such multiple effects occur, mobility processes make for cumulative advantages or disadvantages, whatever the case may be. Effects of high or low origins reassert themselves. Does reiterated mobility display cumulation or not? Ultee, Dessens & Jansen (1988) and Ultee (1989) provide an answer to this question. It extends Van Heek's sequence, just like questions on mobility à la Van Heek follow up on questions of disparity.

If mobility does not preclude cumulative effects, neither does heterogamy. With data for Canada, the Netherlands and the United States, Ultee, Dessens & Jansen (1988) sought to answer the question 'Why does unemployment come in couples?' It turned out that double unemployment within couples could not be fully explained as a simple byproduct of three pretty obvious correlations: educational heterogamy, the relation between education and unemployment for the husbands, and the relation between education and unemployment for the wives. Dirven, Lammers & Ultee (1990) wondered why the hourly wage for women is positively related to that of their husbands. For seven industrial nations including the Netherlands, they demonstrated that hourly wages not only depend on their own education, but also on that of their working husbands. The positive correlation between the hourly wages of working women and that of their working husbands could not be fully accounted for as a byproduct even after postulating these 'partner effects'. Cumulative effects of heterogamy constitute another extension of Van Heek's sequence of questions. Figure 6 sums up the Utrecht Mobility Seminar's tree of questions.

Figure 6 The breakdown of the problem of inequality by the Utrecht Mobility Seminar



Questions of fit: problems, theories, research methods

Although my main thesis concerns problem articulation, I shall now present subsidiary theses on how developments in theory formation and research methods impinge on sociology's classical questions.

Two theoretical orientations in pursuit of problems: figurational sociology and structural-individualistic sociology

Foreign observers of the Dutch scene have noted that it consists of two nations: figurational sociology and structural-individualistic sociology. I find this observation superficial. It is true, structural-individualistic (Flap & Kuiper, 1981:273) as well as figurational sociologists (Wilterdink & Van Heerikhuizen, 1983:370) have stated that neither of the schools makes many references to the other. But even this juxtaposition shows that the two nations are very much aware of each other. In addition, a perusal of what few references they have made shows that they are not all negative. With their tendency to blur the line between criticism and polemics, figurational sociologists are moreover good at making negative references to other figurational sociologists. And of course the dearth of references does not indicate a lack of influence. One need not be a cynic to observe that persons are influenced strongest by those whose name they dare not speak.

I hold that De Swaan's work shows that if figurational sociology's notions are to develop into full-fledged theories, ideas that diffused from new political economy to structural-individualistic sociology will be helpful. De Swaan's work also makes it clear that if figurational sociology is to make progress in articulating research questions, it could do worse than to explore studies by explanatory sociology's intellectual

masters, the leading persons in new political - and by now social - economy. Figurational sociology started out by taking on a new subquestion of the rationalization question, and later also addressed questions on trends in public violence (a subquestion of the cohesion question, Spierenburg 1984) and in wealth inequalities (a subquestion of the inequality question, Wilterdink 1984). Theory formation halted until De Swaan renewed questions on rationalization and applied such notions from new political economy as externality, dilemma and coalition.

To equalize the two sociologies on the balance, let me now make some critical remarks on that other sociology. As far as theory formation goes, Lindenberg & Wippler's (1978) meta-analytical schemes illustrate how macroquestions might be answered by assumptions on rational actors. However, since their approach has not been linked to specific substantive questions, high yields are not to be expected in the near future. Of course, studies by the Scottish moralists present multifarious problems. This is why they are being rediscovered as classics, but it is also why they were forgotten in the first place and will be again. Sometimes a lot of questions is just too much. Adam Smith targeted only a few problems and attained progress. Structural-individualistic sociology has not yet learned this historical lesson.

In addition, I hold that structural-individualistic sociology, as long as it narrowly applies the assumption of utility maximizing individuals, will only tangentially address two of sociology's main questions. To the extent that it adheres to this assumption, questions of efficiency (rationalization) will remain dominant. The point is not only that questions of cohesion are so difficult to answer by way of this assumption. It remains to be seen what empirical research will come out of Lindenberg's (1982, 1983) theoretical studies on solidarity. The point also is that questions on inequality remain understudied. To answer them, it might be useful to replace the postulate that persons try to improve on the situation they themselves are in by the assumption that they try to outdo their significant others. Or how about doing away with the supposition that people maximize their own interests, and bringing in the premise that people minimize the interests of their rivals?

The fit between research questions and research methods: the case of questions on openness

A superficial examination of the 1980s suggests a trend from quantitative data describing differences among representatives of contemporary Dutch society to qualitative results on societal trends. However, I maintain that the 1980s implemented the idea that quantitative data

from a single survey are no longer to be studied as one file unto itself, but as additions to already existing data. This was demonstrated by research on openness trends in Dutch society. A fit was attained between substantive questions and research methods.

Another case in point is the application of loglinear models (Dessens & Jansen, 1987). Why did almost every Dutch study on mobility and heterogamy in the 1980s apply these models? Was it a new technique everyone used because everybody else did? Or was it applied because it enabled people to answer substantive questions that had hitherto been impossible to answer adequately? By now the latter may be the case, but in the beginning the former was.

Mobility research since the early 1950s has struggled to analyze mobility tables in such a way that the results would say something about the interchange between strata, about how people from low origins fared in the competition for high rather than low destinations compared with those from high origins. Inflow and outflow rates do not register such matters: they are affected by the size of categories and by discrepancies between the number of persons with a certain origin and the number of persons with that destination. At the end of the 1970s in the United Kingdom and the United States, this fit between research questions and research techniques was found in loglinear analysis. Since parameters of loglinear models pertain to odds ratios, they indicate how unequal the outcomes of market competitions are. They compare the chances of people from a certain background to wind up in one destination rather than another with those of persons from another origin. These parameters are not only useful for describing the outcomes of labour market competitions, but also for describing the outcomes of matching processes on marriage markets (resulting in a crossing of husbands' against wives' education).

Epilogue

The reputation of a field is a collective good. Sometimes the ideas of people working in a particular field are adopted by politicians hungry for votes and, if elected, to legitimate their policies. Later voters might reject these policies, which taints others working in the field, even if they were opposed to these ideas from the start. I hold that something of the kind happened to Dutch sociology in the 1980s.

Under electoral pressure at the end of the 1980s a new generation of politicians abandoned a pet idea from the 1960s and 1970s expounded by a particular brand of sociologists, i.e. the idea that society could be fundamentally changed by government intervention. Without defending this idea, I maintain that comparative research from the 1980s provided

an affirmative answer to the question: Have the more modest social democratic reforms lessened inequalities in Western industrial nations? Yes, sociology has more to offer than qualitative studies detailing the trivial, and unreadable quantitative research. But these results were obtained by sticking to a problem and expanding on it. I hope to have shown how in the Netherlands in the 1980s, sociology's specialisms enriched general sociology's classical questions, and how new instances of classical questions were of practical import. Sociology's queries are no longer burning questions, if indeed they ever were. But due to their tree-like structure, they give off a comfortable heat. For the same reason there is fuel for new fires.

The sorry state of sociological research and the dwindling number of sociology students in the Netherlands in the 1980s gave sociology's specialisms a rough time. At various universities, specialisms were shelved, and a retreat behind the supposedly safe borders of general sociology took place. Although I am still prepared to defend the thesis that sociology's specialisms stand to gain from general sociology with respect to problem articulation, the main conclusion I draw from the reconstructions I presented here, is that in the long run these changes within the universities will be detrimental to general sociology.

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