Common sense knowledge of social structures: the documentary method of interpretation in lay and professional fact finding

Sociologically speaking, "common culture" refers to the socially sanctioned grounds of inference and action that people use in their everyday affairs and which they assume that others use in the same way. Socially-sanctioned-facts-of-life-in-society-that-anybona-fide-member-of-the-society-knows depict such matters as the conduct of family life, market organization, distributions of honor, competence, responsibility, goodwill, income, motives among members, frequency, causes of, and remedies for trouble, and the presence of good and evil purposes behind the apparent workings of things. Such socially sanctioned, facts of social life consist of descriptions from the point of view of the collectivity member's interests in the management of his practical affairs. Basing our usage upon the work of Alfred Schutz, we shall call such knowledge of socially organized environments of concerted actions “common sense knowledge of social structures.”

The discovery of common culture consists of the discovery from within the society by social scientists of the existence of common sense knowledge of social structures. In that discovery the social scientist treats knowledge, and the procedures that societal members use for its assembly, test, management, and transmission, as objects of theoretical sociological interest.

This paper is concerned with common sense knowledge of social structures as an object of theoretical sociological interest. It is concerned with descriptions of a society that its members, professional sociologists included, as a condition of their enforceable rights to manage and communicate decisions of meaning, fact, method, and causal texture without interference—i.e., as a condition of their “competence”—use and treat as known in common with other members, and with other members take for granted. Specifically the paper is directed to a description of the work whereby decisions of meaning and fact are managed, and how a body of factual knowledge of social structures is assembled in common sense situations of choice.

The documentary method of interpretation

There are innumerable situations of sociological inquiry in which the investigator—whether he be a professional sociologist or a person undertaking an inquiry about social structures in the interests of managing his practical everyday affairs—can assign witnessed actual appearances to the status of an event of conduct only by imputing biography and prospects to the appearances. This he does by embedding the appearances in his presupposed knowledge of social structures. Thus it frequently happens that in order for the investigator to decide what he is now looking at he must wait for future developments, only to find that these futures in turn are informed by their history and future. By waiting to see what will have happened he learns what it was that he previously saw. Either that, or he takes imputed history and prospects for granted. Motivated actions, for example, have exactly these troublesome properties.

It therefore occurs that the investigator frequently must elect among alternative courses of interpretation and inquiry to the end of deciding matters of fact, hypothesis, conjecture, fancy, and the rest, despite the fact that in the calculable sense of the term "know," he does not and even cannot "know" what he is doing.

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1 The term “collectivity membership” is intended in strict accord with Talcott Parsons’ usage in The Social System and in Theories of Society, I, Part Two, pp. 239-240.
prior to or while he is doing it. Field workers, most particularly those doing ethnographic and linguistic studies in settings where they cannot presuppose a knowledge of social structures, are perhaps best acquainted with such situations, but other types of professional sociological inquiry are not exempt.

Nevertheless, a body of knowledge of social structures is somehow assembled. Somehow, decisions of meaning, facts, method, and causal texture are made. How, in the course of the inquiry during which such decisions must be made, does this occur?

In his concern for the sociologist’s problem of achieving an adequate description of cultural events, an important case of which would be Weber’s familiar “behaviors with a subjective meaning attached and governed thereby in their course,” Karl Mannheim \(^3\) furnished an approximate description of one process. Mannheim called it “the documentary method of interpretation.” It contrasts with the methods of literal observation, yet it has a recognizable fit with what many sociological researchers, lay and professional, actually do.

According to Mannheim, the documentary method involves the search for “... an identical homologous pattern underlying a vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning.” \(^4\)

The method consists of treating an actual appearance as “the document of,” as “pointing to,” as “standing on behalf of” a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of “what is known” about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other.

The method is recognizable for the everyday necessities of recognizing what a person is “talking about” given that he does not say exactly what he means, or in recognizing such common occurrences and objects as mailmen, friendly gestures, and promises. It is recognizable as well in deciding such sociologically analyzed occurrence of events as Goffman’s strategies for the management of impressions, Erickson’s identity crises, Riesman’s types of conformity, Parsons’ value systems, Malinowski’s magical practices.


\(^4\) Ibid., p. 57.

Bale’s interaction counts, Merton’s types of deviance, Lazarsfeld’s latent structure of attitudes, and the U.S. Census’ occupational categories.

How is it done by an investigator that from replies to a questionnaire he finds the respondent’s “attitude”; that via interviews with office personnel he reports their “bureaucratically organized activities”; that by consulting crimes known to the police, he estimates the parameters of “real crime”? What is the work whereby the investigator sets the observed occurrence and the intended occurrence into a correspondence of meaning, such that the investigator finds it reasonable to treat witnessed actual appearances as evidences of the event he means to be studying?

To answer these questions it is necessary to detail the work of the documentary method. To this end a demonstration of the documentary method was designed to exaggerate the features of this method in use and to catch the work of “fact production” in flight.

An experiment

Ten undergraduates were solicited by telling them that research was being done in the Department of Psychiatry to explore alternative means to psychotherapy “as a way of giving persons advice about their personal problems” (sic). Each subject was seen individually by an experimenter who was falsely represented as a student counselor in training. The subject was asked to first discuss the background to some serious problem on which he would like advice, and then to address to the “counselor” a series of questions each of which would permit a “yes” or “no” answer. The subject was promised that the “counselor” would attempt to answer to the best of his ability. The experimenter-counselor heard the questions and gave his answers from an adjoining room, via an intercommunication system. After describing his problem and furnishing some background to it, the subject asked his first question. After a standard pause, the experimenter announced his answer, “yes” or “no.” According to instructions, the subject then removed a wall plug connecting him with the counselor so that the “counselor will not hear your remarks” and tape-recorded his comments on the exchange. After these were completed, the subject plugged the microphone in and asked his next question. After he received
the answer, he again recorded his comments, and thus proceeded through at least ten questions and answers. The subject had been told, “Most people want to ask at least ten questions.”

The sequence of answers, evenly divided between yes’s and no’s, was predecided with a table of random numbers. All subjects asking the same number of questions were administered the same series of yes and no answers. Following the exchange of questions and answers the subject was asked to summarize his impressions of the entire exchange. An interview followed.

The following are illustrative unedited protocols.

CASE 1

**SUBJECT:** Ok, this is the situation that I am presented with. I happen to be of the Jewish faith and I have been dating a Gentile girl now for about two months. My dad is not directly opposed to this situation, but I feel at the same time that he is not exactly pleased with it. Mother feels that as long as Dad is not directly opposed to this situation that I should go ahead and continue dating until he makes some direct statement to the contrary. My reason for feeling why he is not too pleased with this is that he has never said don’t date her, but at the same time he will come up with digs and sayings that make me feel very ill at ease about dating the girl. My question is, do you feel under the present circumstances that I should continue or stop dating this girl? Let me put that in a positive way. Do you feel that I should continue dating this girl?

**EXPERIMENTER:** My answer is no.

**SUBJECT:** No. Well, that is kind of interesting. I kinda feel that there is really no great animosity between Dad and I but, well, perhaps he feels that greater dislike will grow out of this. I suppose or maybe it is easier for an outsider to see certain things that I am blind to at this moment.

I would like to ask my second question now.

**EXPERIMENTER:** Okay.

**SUBJECT:** Do you feel that I should have a further discussion with Dad about this situation or not? Should I have further discussion with Dad over this subject about dating the Gentile girl?

**EXPERIMENTER:** My answer is yes.

**SUBJECT:** Well I feel that is reasonable but I really don’t know what to say to him. I mean he seems to be not really too understanding. In other words he seems to be afraid really to discuss the situation. I mean at least it appears that way to me so far. But I guess if it is worthwhile to me, if I really want to continue to date her that I will go on and have this discussion with Dad. I really don’t know what to say because I mean I am dating her. I am not in love with her or anything but I really never know what is going to come out. I guess we should have a discussion based on what the future possibilities might be and how he would feel about that. He may not be too strongly opposed now because we are only dating, but perhaps he sees future complications that he would really like to get off his chest at the moment. I am ready for my third question now.

If after having my conversation with Dad and he says to continue dating her, but at the same time he gives me an impression that he is really not, he really does not want me to date her, but he is only doing it because he wants to be a good Dad, should under these conditions, should I still date the girl?

**EXPERIMENTER:** My answer is yes.

**SUBJECT:** Well I am actually surprised at the answer. I expected a no answer on that. Perhaps this is because you are not quite aware of my dad and his reactions and he seems to be the type of person that is sensitive and therefore he is very careful in the way that he will handle things. Even though he might have said go ahead and date her I perhaps would feel guilty in knowing that he really did not want me to continue to date her. Though I don’t know that it would actually help the situation any. So, well, perhaps we will look into this further and that is another question. I am ready for the fourth question now.

If after having this discussion with Dad and getting a positive answer from him but at the same time felt that this was not his honest opinion do you think that it would be proper for me to have my mother have a serious talk with him therefore try and get a truer reaction to Dad’s opinion on the situation?

**EXPERIMENTER:** My answer is yes.

**SUBJECT:** Well this seems fair to me. I feel perhaps that he would be honester with Mother about the situation. Of course that might present a problem. Would Mother come back and be completely
honest with me? She seems to be more liberal than Dad, not to say that Mother would lie about it, but she would be a little more liberal about things like this and perhaps in her course of conversation with Dad she would try and present my side to him and therefore once again I get two answers. If I look at it that way I don't think that I am going to get to first base anyway, but at least I feel that we are moving along some way. I am ready for my fifth question now.

Do you think that I should tell this Gentile girl who I am dating the problem that I am having with my folks at home or should I wait until, well that is another question. Do you feel that I should tell the girl that I am dating the problems that I am having at home over her religion?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is no.

SUBJECT: Well once again I am surprised. Of course, that might depend on how much you care for the girl and how much longer I feel that I am going to be dating her. But I personally feel that it is only right to tell her for if she is perhaps thinking more serious than I am, she might, it might be best for us to understand the full situation and if she feels that this will be a block then I feel perhaps that would end the situation right there without telling her. I feel that perhaps I am going to show this in different ways and she will be unaware of what the real situation is and perhaps react back to me in a certain way spoiling our dating and everything else like that. I am ready for my sixth question.

If I was to fall in love with this girl and want to make plans for marriage do you feel that it is fair that I should ask her to change her religion over to my belief?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is no.

SUBJECT: Well, no. Well, this has me stymied. No. Well, I honestly feel that I have been brought up in a certain way and I believe that she has too, and I feel pretty strong about the way that I believe. Not that I am completely orthodox or anything, but of course there is always family pressure and things like that. And I am quite sure that she feels, unfortunately I have never seen a family with a split in religion that really has been able to make a success out of it. So I don’t know. I think that perhaps I would be tempted to ask her to change. I don’t think that I would be able to really. I am ready for number seven.

Do you feel that it would be a better situation if we were to get married and neither one of us were willing to talk about the religious difference or to give in on either one side, that we bring our children up in a neutral religion other than the two that we believe in?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is yes.

SUBJECT: Well perhaps this would be a solution. If we could find a religion that would incorporate our two beliefs to a certain extent. I realize that perhaps this might be literally impossible to do. Perhaps in a sense this neutral religion might be something almost made up by ourselves because I honestly feel that religious training no matter which belief it is if not carried to extremes is good, for everyone should have a certain amount of religious training along these lines. Perhaps this might be a solution to the problem. I guess I should follow this along a little bit further and see exactly what happens. I am ready for number eight.

If we were to get married would it be best for us to live in a new community where we will not be in contact with our parents if we were getting a lot of family pressure over religious differences?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is no.

SUBJECT: Well, I kinda tend to agree with this answer. I feel that you wouldn’t be accomplishing too much by running away from the issue and that perhaps it would be one of those things in life that eventually you would just be willing to accept it and that the families and we would get along harmoniously together. At least I hope it would work out if that situation comes about. I think it would be best for both families together that we are not going to work it out if we run away from our problem. So we best remain there and try and work it out. I am ready for number nine.

If we did get married and were to raise our children do you think that we should explain and tell our children that we once had this religious difference or would we just bring them up in this new religion, that is their religion, that we talked about, and let them believe that that is what we originally believed in?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is no.

SUBJECT: Once again I kinda agree with this. I think they should be told because undoubtedly they will find out. And if they did find out that there was this difference that we once had they would
feel that we were sneaking or trying to hide something from them and this would not be the best situation either. So I believe this would be the best situation. I am ready for number ten.

Do you feel that our children, if there were any, would have any religious problems themselves because of us the parents and our difficulties?

**EXPERIMENTER:** My answer is no.

**SUBJECT:** Well I don’t really know if I agree with that or not. Perhaps they would have trouble if confusion set in and they were to feel that they did not know which is right and which is wrong or what side to pick if they did not want to stick with their religion. But I kinda feel that if their religion was a wholesome one which supplied the needs of a religion and that which a religion does supply that there would not be any problems with them. But I suppose that only time will tell if such problems would come about. I am finished with my comments now.

**EXPERIMENTER:** Okay, I will be right in.

The experimenter appeared in the room with the subject, handed him a list of points that he might comment on, and left the room. The subject commented as follows.

**SUBJECT:** Well the conversation seemed to be one-sided because I was doing it all. But, I feel that it was extremely difficult for Mr. McHugh to answer these questions fully without having a complete understanding of the personalities of the different people involved and exactly how involved the situation was itself. The answers I received I must say that the majority of them were answered perhaps in the same way that I would answer them to myself knowing the differences in types of people. One or two of them did come as a surprise to me and I felt that the reason perhaps he answered these questions the way he did is for the reason that he is not aware of the personalities involved and how they are reacting or would react to a certain situation. The answers that I received were most of them I felt that he was for the most part aware of the situation as we moved along in that I was interpreting his answers even though they were yes or no answers as fully meditating over these situations that I presented to him and they had a lot of meaning to me. I felt that his answers as a whole were helpful and that he was looking out for the benefit of the situation for the most part and not to curtail it or cut it short in any means. I heard what I wanted to hear in most of the situations presented at the time. Perhaps I did not hear what I really wanted to hear but perhaps from an objective standpoint they were the best answers because someone involved in a situation is blinded to a certain degree and cannot take this objective viewpoint. And therefore these answers may differ from the person who is involved in the situation and the person who is outside and can take an objective viewpoint. I honestly believe that the answers that he gave me that he was completely aware of the situation at hand. Perhaps I guess that should be qualified. Perhaps when I said should I talk to Dad for instance he was not positive. When I said should I talk to Dad for instance he was not positive what I was going to talk to Dad about. In a full capacity. He knew the general topic but he is not aware how close I am to Dad or how involved the conversation might get. And if his saying “do talk” in knowing that Dad will not listen, well this perhaps isn’t best, or if Dad is very willing to listen he says it may not help. Or don’t talk. Well this once again is bringing in personalities which he is not aware of. The conversation and the answers given I believe had a lot of meaning to me. I mean it was perhaps what I would have expected from someone who fully understood the situation. And I feel that it had a lot of sense to me and made a lot of sense. Well I felt that the questions that I asked were very pertinent and did help in understanding the situation on both sides, that is myself and the answerer and my reaction to the answers like I have stated before were mostly in agreement. At times I was surprised but understood that because he is not fully aware of the situation and the personalities involved.

**CASE 2**

**SUBJECT:** I would like to know whether or not I should change my major at the present time. I have a physics major with quite a deficit in grade points to bring up to get my C average in physics. I would like to switch over to mathematics. I have a little difficulty in it, but I think maybe I could handle it. I have failed several math courses here at U.C.L.A., but I have always repeated them
and had C’s. I have come close to getting a B in math in one specific course because I studied a little more than in others but my question is still should I change my major?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is no.

SUBJECT: Well he says no. And if I don’t then I will have to make up my deficit in grade points which will be awfully difficult because I am not doing too well this semester. If I pull through this semester with seven units of A then I can count on possibly going on to get my degree in physics in February, but then I have this stigma of nuclear physics facing me. I thoroughly dislike the study of nuclear physics. Nuclear Physics 124 will be one of my required courses to get a degree in physics.

Do you think I could get a degree in physics on the basis of this knowledge that I must take Physics 124?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is yes.

SUBJECT: He says yes. I don’t see how I can. I am not that good of a theorist. My study habits are horrible. My reading speed is bad, and I don’t spend enough time in studying.

Do you think that I could successfully improve my study habits?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is yes.

SUBJECT: He says that I can successfully improve my study habits. I have been preached to all along on how to study properly, but I don’t study properly. I don’t have sufficient incentive to go through physics or do I?

Do you think I have sufficient incentive to get a degree in physics?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is yes.

SUBJECT: He says my answer is yes. I think possibly so if I didn’t have a bad scholastic record behind me to follow me up. It would be awfully difficult to get that degree.

Do you think I could successfully do my studying while trying to keep happy relations at home with my wife and still get my work done? I don’t do my studying well at school and I don’t have much incentive to study when I am at home. But when my wife comes home, I like to study. Yet this keeps us from doing things, and whenever she doesn’t do things, it gets on my nerves because there is all this work piling up. Do you think I could successfully do my studying at home?

EXPERIMENTER: My answer is no.
FINDINGS

An examination of the protocols reveals the following:

A. Getting through the exchange.

None of the subjects had difficulty in accomplishing the series of ten questions, and in summarizing and evaluating the advice.

B. Answers were perceived as “answers-to-questions.”

1. Typically the subjects heard the experimenter’s answers as answers-to-the-questions. Perceptually, the experimenter’s answers were motivated by the questions.

2. Subjects saw directly “what the adviser had in mind.” They heard “in a glance” what he was talking about, i.e., what he meant, and not what he had uttered.

3. The typical subject assumed, over the course of the exchange, and during the postexperimental interview, that the answers were advice to the problem, and that this advice as a solution to the problem was to be found via the answers.

4. All reported the “advice that they had been given” and addressed their appreciation and criticism to that “advice.”

C. There were no preprogrammed questions; the next question was motivated by the retrospective-prospective possibilities of the present situation that were altered by each actual exchange.

1. No subject administered a preprogrammed set of questions.

2. Present answers altered the sense of previous exchanges.

3. Over the course of the exchange the assumption seemed to operate that there was an answer to be obtained, and that if the answer was not obvious, that its meaning could be determined by active search, one part of which involved asking another question so as to find out what the adviser “had in mind.”

4. Much effort was devoted to looking for meanings that were intended but were not evident from the immediate answer to the question.

5. The present answer-to-the-question motivated the succeeding set of possibilities from among which the next question was
selected. The next question emerged as a product of reflections upon the previous course of the conversation and the presupposed underlying problem as the topic whose features each actual exchange documented and extended. The underlying “problem” was elaborated in its features as a function of the exchange. The sense of the problem was progressively accommodated to each present answer, while the answer motivated fresh aspects of the underlying problem.

6. The underlying pattern was elaborated and compounded over the series of exchanges and was accommodated to each present “answer” so as to maintain the “course of advice,” to elaborate what had “really been advised” previously, and to motivate the new possibilities as emerging features of the problem.

D. Answers in search of questions.

1. Over the course of the exchange, subjects sometimes started with the reply as an answer and altered the previous sense of their question to accommodate this to the reply as the answer to the retrospectively revised question.

2. The identical utterance was capable of answering several different questions simultaneously, and of constituting an answer to a compound question that in terms of the strict logic of propositions did not permit either a yes or no or a single yes or no.

3. The same utterance was used to answer several different questions separated in time. Subjects referred to this as “shedding new light” on the past.

4. Present answers provided answers to further questions that were never asked.

E. Handling incomplete, inappropriate, and contradictory answers.

1. Where answers were unsatisfying or incomplete, the questioners were willing to wait for later answers in order to decide the sense of the previous ones.

2. Incomplete answers were treated by subjects as incomplete because of the “deficiencies” of this method of giving advice.

3. Answers that were inappropriate were inappropriate for “a reason.” If the reason was found, the sense of the answer was thereupon decided. If an answer made “good sense” this was likely to be what the answerer had “advised.”

4. When answers were incongruous or contradictory, subjects were able to continue by finding that the “adviser” had learned more in the meantime, or that he had decided to change his mind, or that perhaps he was not sufficiently acquainted with the intricacies of the problem, or the fault was in the question so that another phrasing was required.

5. Incongruous answers were resolved by imputing knowledge and intent to the adviser.

6. Contradictories required that the subject elect the real question that the answer answered which they did by furnishing the question with additional meanings that fit with the meanings “behind” what the adviser was advising.

7. In the case of contradictory answers much effort was devoted to reviewing the possible intent of the answer so as to rid the answer of contradiction or meaninglessness, and to rid the answerer of untrustworthiness.

8. More subjects entertained the possibility of a trick than tested this possibility. All suspicious subjects were reluctant to act under the belief that there was a trick involved. Suspicions were quieted if the adviser’s answers made “good sense.” Suspicions were most unlikely to continue if the answers accorded with the subject’s previous thought about the matter and with his preferred decisions.

9. Suspicions transformed the answer into an event of “mere speech” having the appearance of coincidental occurrence with the occasion of the questioner’s question. Subjects found this structure difficult to maintain and manage. Many subjects saw the sense of the answer “anyway.”

10. Those who became suspicious, simultaneously, though temporarily, withdrew their willingness to continue.

F. “Search” for and perception of pattern.

1. Throughout there was a concern and search for pattern. Pattern, however, was perceived from the very beginning. Pattern was likely to be seen in the first evidence of the “advice.”

2. Subjects found it very difficult to grasp the implications of randomness in the utterances. A predetermined utterance was treated as deceit in the answers instead of as an utterance that was decided beforehand and that occurred independently of the subject’s questions and interests.
3. When the possibility of deception occurred to the subjects, the adviser's utterance documented the pattern of the deceit instead of the pattern of advice. Thus the relationship of the utterance to the underlying pattern as its document remained unchanged.

G. Answers were assigned a scenic source.

1. Subjects assigned to the adviser as his advice the thought formulated in the subject's questions. For example, when a subject asked, "Should I come to school every night after supper to do my studying?" and the experimenter said, "My answer is no," the subject in his comments said, "He said I shouldn't come to school and study." This was very common.

2. All subjects were surprised to find that they contributed so actively and so heavily to the "advice that they had received from the adviser."

3. Upon being told about the deception the subjects were intensely chagrined. In most cases they revised their opinions about the procedure to emphasize its inadequacies for the experimenter's purposes (which they understood still to be an exploration of means of giving advice).

H. The vagueness of every present situation of further possibilities remained invariant to the clarification furnished by the exchanges of questions and answers.

1. There was vagueness (a) in the status of the utterance as an answer, (b) in its status as an answer-to-the-question, (c) in its status as a document of advice with respect to the underlying pattern, and (d) in the underlying problem. While, after the course of an exchange, the utterances furnished "advice about the problem," their function of advice also elaborated the entire scheme of problematic possibilities so that the overall effect was that of a transformation of the subject's situation in which the vagueness of its horizons remained unchanged and "problems still remained unanswered."

I. In their capacity as members, subjects consulted institutionalized features of the collectivity as a scheme of interpretation.

1. Subjects made specific reference to various social structures in deciding the sensible and warranted character of the adviser's advice. Such references, however, were not made to any social structures whatever. In the eyes of the subject, if the adviser was to know and demonstrate to the subject that he knew what he was talking about, and if the subject was to consider seriously the adviser's descriptions of his circumstances as grounds of the subject's further thoughts and management of these circumstances, the subject did not permit the adviser, nor was the subject willing to entertain, any model of the social structures. References that the subject supplied, were to social structures which he treated as actually or potentially known in common with the adviser. And then, not to any social structures known in common, but to normatively valued social structures which the subject accepted as conditions that his decisions, with respect to his own sensible and realistic grasp of his circumstances and the "good" character of the adviser's advice, had to satisfy. These social structures consisted of normative features of the social system seen from within which, for the subject, were definitive of his memberships in the various collectivities that were referred to.

2. Subjects gave little indication, prior to the occasions of use of the rules for deciding fact and nonfact, what the definitive normative structures were to which their interpretations would make reference. The rules for documenting these definitive normative orders seemed to come into play only after a set of normative features had been motivated as relevant to his interpretive tasks, and then as a function of the fact that the activities of interpretation were under way.

3. Subjects presupposed known-in-common features of the collectivity as a body of common sense knowledge subscribed to by both. They drew upon these presupposed patterns in assigning what they heard the adviser talking about, its status of documentary evidence of the definitive normative features of the collectivity settings of the experiment, family, school, home, occupation, to which the subject's interests were directed. These evidences and the collectivity features were referred back and forth to each other, with each elaborating and being thereby elaborated in its possibilities.

J. Deciding warrant was identical with assigning the advice its perceived normal sense.

Through a retrospective-prospective review, subjects justified
the "reasonable" sense and sanctionable status of the advice as grounds for managing their affairs. Its "reasonable" character consisted of its compatibility with normative orders of social structures presumed to be subscribed to and known between subject and adviser. The subject's task of deciding the warranted character of what was being advised was identical with the task of assigning to what the adviser proposed (1) its status as an instance of a class of events; (2) its likelihood of occurrence; (3) its comparability with past and future events; (4) the conditions of its occurrence; (5) its place in a set of means-ends relationships; and (6) its necessity according to a natural (i.e., moral) order. The subjects assigned these values of typicality, likelihood, comparability, causal texture, technical efficacy, and moral requiredness while using the institutionalized features of the collectivity as a scheme of interpretation. Thus, the subject's task of deciding whether or not what the adviser advised was "true" was identical with the task of assigning to what the adviser proposed its perceived normal values.

K. Perceivedly normal values were not so much "assigned" as managed.

Through the work of documenting—i.e., by searching for and determining pattern, by treating the adviser's answers as motivated by the intended sense of the question, by waiting for later answers to clarify the sense of previous ones, by finding answers to unasked questions—the perceivedly normal values of what was being advised were established, tested, reviewed, retained, restored; in a word, managed. It is misleading, therefore, to think of the documentary method as a procedure whereby propositions are accorded membership in a scientific corpus. Rather the documentary method developed the advice so as to be continually "membershaping" it.

Examples in sociological inquiry

Examples of the use of the documentary method can be cited from every area of sociological investigation. Its obvious application occurs in community studies where warrant is assigned to statements by the criteria of "comprehensive description" and "ring of truth." Its use is found also on the many occasions of survey research when the researcher, in reviewing his interview notes or in editing the answers to a questionnaire, has to decide "what the respondent had in mind." When a researcher is addressed to the "motivated character" of an action, or a theory, or a person's compliance to a legitimate order and the like, he will use what he has actually observed to "document" an "underlying pattern." The documentary method is used to epitomize the object. For example, just as the lay person may say of something that "Harry" says, "Isn't that just like Harry?" the investigator may use some observed feature of the thing he is referring to as a characterizing indicator of the intended matter. Complex scenes like industrial establishments, communities, or social movements are frequently described with the aid of "excerpts" from protocols and numerical tables which are used to epitomize the intended events. The documentary method is used whenever the investigator constructs a life history or a "natural history." The task of historicizing the person's biography consists of using the documentary method to select and order past occurrences so as to furnish the present state of affairs its relevant past and prospects.

The use of the documentary method is not confined to cases of "soft" procedures and "partial descriptions." It occurs as well in cases of rigorous procedures where descriptions are intended to exhaust a definite field of possible observables. In reading a journal account for the purpose of literal replication, researchers who attempt to reconstruct the relationship between the reported procedures and the results frequently encounter a gap of insufficient information. The gap occurs when the reader asks how the investigator decided the correspondence between what was actually observed and the intended event for which the actual observation is treated as its evidence. The reader's problem consists of having argued that the documentary method is peculiar to the social sciences. There exist in the social sciences many terminological ways of referring to it, viz., "the method of understanding," "sympathetic introspection," "method of insight," "method of intuition," "interpretive method," "clinical method," "emphatic understanding," and so on. Attempts by sociologists to identify something called "interpretive sociology" involve reference to the documentary method as the basis for encountering and warranting its findings.

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6 In his article, "On the Interpretation of Weltanschauung," Mannheim
to decide that the reported observation is a literal instance of the intended occurrence, i.e., that the actual observation and the intended occurrence are identical in sense. Since the relationship between the two is a sign relationship, the reader must consult some set of grammatical rules to decide this correspondence. This grammar consists of some theory of the intended events on the basis of which the decisions to code the actual observations as findings are recommended. It is at this point that the reader must engage in interpretive work and an assumption of “underlying” matters “just known in common” about the society in terms of which, what the respondent said, is treated as synonymous with what the observer meant. Correct correspondence is apt to be meant and read on reasonable grounds. Correct correspondence is the product of the work of investigator and reader as members of a community of cobeilievers. Thus, even in the case of rigorous methods, if a researcher is to recommend, and the reader is to appreciate, published findings as members of the corpus of sociological fact, the work of the documentary method is employed.

Sociological situations of inquiry as common sense situations of choice

It is not unusual for professional sociologists to speak of their “fact production” procedures as processes of “seeing through” appearances to an underlying reality; of brushing past actual appearances to “grasp the invariant.” Where our subjects are concerned, their processes are not appropriately imagined as “seeing through,” but consist instead of coming to terms with a situation in which factual knowledge of social structures—factual in the sense of warranted grounds of further inferences and actions—must be assembled and made available for potential use despite the fact that the situations it purports to describe are, in any calculable sense, unknown; in their actual and intended logical structures are essentially vague; and are modified, elaborated, extended, if not indeed created, by the fact and manner of being addressed.

If many of the features of our subjects’ documentary work are recognizable in the work of professional sociological fact production, similarly many situations of professional sociological inquiry have precisely the features that our subjects’ situations had. Such features of situations of professional sociological inquiry may be more exactly specified as follows.

1. In the course of an interview an investigator is likely to find himself addressing a series of present situations whose future states that a contemplated course of treatment will produce are characteristically vague or even unknown. With overwhelming frequency these as of here-and-now possible future states are only sketchily specifiable prior to undertaking the action that is intended to realize them. There is a necessary distinction between a “possible future state of affairs” and a “how-to-bring-it-about-future-from-a-present-state-of-affairs-as-an-actual-point-of-departure.” The “possible future state of affairs” may be very clear indeed. But such a future is not the matter of interest. Instead we are concerned with the “how to bring it about from a here-and-now future.” It is this state—for convenience, call it an “operational future”—that is characteristically vague or unknown.

An illustration: A trained survey researcher can describe with remarkable clarity and definiteness what questions he wishes answers to in a questionnaire. How actual replies of actual subjects are to be evaluated as “replies to the questions” are incorporated in a set of procedural decisions known as “coding rules.” Any distribution of replies to the questions that is possible under the coding rules is a “possible future state of affairs.” After suitable exploratory work such distributions are clearly and definitely imaginable to trained field workers. But with overwhelming frequency it occurs that even late in the actual course of the inquiry the questions and answers that will in effect have been asked and answered under the various ways of evaluating actual subject’s responses as “replies to the question,” given the practical exigencies that must be accommodated in accomplishing the actual work of the inquiry, remain sketchy and open to “reasonable decision” even up to the point of composing the results of the inquiry for publication.

2. Given a future, any future, that is known in a definite way, the alternative paths to actualize the future state as a set of stepwise operations upon some beginning present state are characteristically sketchy, incoherent, and unelaborated. Again it is necessary to stress the difference between an inventory of available procedures—investigators can talk about these quite definitely and clearly—and the deliberately programmed stepwise procedures, a set of
predetermined “what-to-do-in-case-of” strategies for the manipulation of a succession of actual present states of affairs in their course. In actual practices such a program is characteristically an unelaborated one.

For example, one of the tasks involved in “managing rapport” consists of arranging the stepwise course of the conversation in such a way as to permit the investigator to commit his questions in profitable sequence while retaining some control over the unknown and undesirable directions in which affairs, as a function of the course of the actual exchange, may actually move. Characteristically the researcher substitutes for a preprogrammed stepwise solution, a set of ad hoc tactics for adjusting to present opportunity, with these tactics only generally governed by what the investigator would hope to have finally found out by the end of the conversation. Under these circumstances, it is more accurate to talk of investigators acting in fulfillment of their hopes, or in avoidance of their fears, than of acting in the deliberate and calculated realization of a plan.

3. It frequently occurs that the investigator takes an action, and only upon the actual occurrence of some product of that action do we find him reviewing the accomplished sequences in a retrospective search therein for their decided character. Insofar as the decision that was taken is assigned by the work of the retrospective search, the outcome of such situations can be said to occur before the decision. Such situations occur with dramatic frequency at the time the journal article is being written.

4. Prior to his actually having to choose among alternative courses of action on the basis of anticipated consequences, the investigator, for various reasons, is frequently unable to anticipate the consequences of his alternative courses of action and may have to rely upon his actual involvement in order to learn what they might be.

5. Frequently, after encountering some actual state of affairs, the investigator may count it as desirable, and thereafter treat it as the goal toward which his previously taken actions, as he reads them retrospectively, were directed “all along” or “after all.”

6. It frequently occurs that only in the course of actually manipu-

comes of documentary work, decided under circumstances of common sense situations of choice, define the term "reasonable findings."

The problem

Much of "core sociology" consists of "reasonable findings." Many, if not most, situations of sociological inquiry are common sense situations of choice. Nevertheless, textbook and journal discussions of sociological methods rarely give recognition to the fact that sociological inquiries are carried out under common sense auspices at the points where decisions about the correspondence between observed appearances and intended events are being made. Instead, available descriptions and conceptions of investigative decision-making and problem-solving assign to the decision-maker's situation contrasting features as follows.⁸

1. From the decision-maker's point of view there exists as a feature of each of his here-and-now states of affairs a recognizable goal with specifiable features. Where sociological inquiry is concerned, this goal consists of the investigator's present problem for the solution to which the investigation will have been undertaken. The goal's specifiable features consist of the criteria whereby, as of any present state of affairs, he decides the adequacy with which his problem has been formulated. In their terms, too, the event, "adequate solution," is defined as one of the set of possible occurrences.

2. The decision-maker is conceived to have set for himself the task of devising a program of manipulations upon each successive present state of affairs that will alter each present state so that over their succession they are brought into conformity with an anticipated state, i.e., the goal, the solved problem.⁹

These features may be restated in terms of the rules of evidence. As a calculable state of affairs, an investigator's problem may be regarded as a proposition whose "application" for membership, i.e., whose warranted status, is under review. The rules of procedure whereby its warranted status is decided thereby operationally define what is meant by "adequate solution." In ideal scientific activities an investigator is required to decide the steps that define an adequate solution prior to his taking the decided steps. He is required to make this decision before he carries out the operations whereby the possibilities that the proposition proposes will be decided as to their having actually occurred or not. The task of deciding an adequate solution thereby has logical precedence over the actual observation. The observation is said thereby to be "programmed," or, alternatively, the intended event is given: an "operational definition," or, alternatively, the conditions for the occurrence of an intended event are furnished, or, alternatively, a "prediction" is made.

A prominent argument on behalf of this emphasis is that the documentary method is a scientifically erroneous procedure; that its use distorts the objective world in a mirror of subjective prejudice; and that where common sense situations of choice exist they do so as historical nuisances. Protagonists for methods such as those used in survey research and laboratory experimentation, for example, assert their increasing exemption from situations with common sense characteristics and documentary dealings with them. After World War II a flood of textbooks on methods was written to provide remedies for such situations. These methods are intended to depict the ways of transforming common sense situations into calculable ones. Most particularly, the use of mathematical models and statistical schemes of inference are invoked as calculable solutions to the problems of deciding sensibility, objectivity, and warrant in a rigorous way. Immense sums of foundation money; criteria defining adequate research designs, and many careers rest on the conviction that this is so.

Yet it is common knowledge that in the overwhelming number of researches that are methodologically acceptable, and, paradoxically, precisely to the extent that rigorous methods are used, dramatical discrepancies are visible between the theoretical properties of the intended sociological findings of inquirers and the mathe-
matical assumptions that must be satisfied if the statistical measures are to be used for the literal description of the intended events. The result is that statistical measurements are most frequently used as indicators, as signs of, as representing or standing on behalf of the intended findings, rather than as literal descriptions of them. Thus, at the point where sociological findings must be decided from statistical results, rigorous methods are being asserted as solutions to the tasks of literal description on the grounds of "reasonable" considerations.

Even if it is demonstrable that these features are present, let alone prominent, in sociological inquiries, is it not nevertheless true that a situation of inquiry might receive documentary treatment and still the factual status of its products would be decided differently? For example, is it not the case that there are strictures against ex post facto analysis? And is it not so that a field worker who learned after he consulted his notes what problems he had "in the final analysis" obtained answers to, might reapply for a grant to perform a "confirmatory study" of the "hypotheses" that his reflections had yielded? Is there, therefore, any necessary connection between the features of common sense situations of choice, the use of documentary method, and the corpus of sociological fact? Must the documentary method necessarily be used by the professional sociologist to decide sensibility, objectivity, and warrant? Is there a necessary connection between the theoretical subject matter of sociology, as this is constituted by the attitude and procedures for "seeing sociologically" on the one hand, and the canons of adequate description, i.e., evidence, on the other?

Between the methods of literal observation and the work of documentary interpretation the investigator can choose the former and achieve rigorous literal description of physical and biological properties of sociological events. This has been demonstrated on many occasions. Thus far the choice has been made at the cost of either neglecting the properties that make events sociological ones, or by using documentary work to deal with the "soft" parts.

The choice has to do with the question of the conditions under which literal observation and documentary work necessarily occur. This involves the formulation of, and solution to, the problem of sociological evidence in terms that permit a descriptive solution. Undoubtedly, scientific sociology is a "fact," but in Felix Kaufmann's sense of fact, i.e., in terms of a set of procedural rules that actually govern the use of sociologists' recommended methods and asserted findings as grounds of further inference and inquiries. The problem of evidence consists of the tasks of making this fact intelligible.

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10 The term "results" is used to refer to the set of mathematical events that are possible when the procedures of a statistical test, like chi square, for example, are treated as grammatical rules for conceiving, comparing, producing, etc., events in the mathematical domain. The term "findings" is used to refer to the set of sociological events that are possible when, under the assumption that the sociological and mathematical domains correspond in their logical structures, sociological events are interpreted in terms of the rules of statistical inference.