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Coupling career fairy tale “Fascinating Sociology Class”. How to teach sociology? The sociology of sociology

Abstract

This paper is a simple account of my teaching experience¹, the aim of which is to answer the question: “How can we successfully teach interactionism, labeling theory, grounded theory and other sociological bases related to qualitative methods with the active participation of students?”. Through the examples of sociologists working in the Chicago Tradition, French sociologists working with Pierre Bourdieu, and other examples from American sociology, I show that sociological work is group activity. It is argued in this paper, that to make sociological thinking understandable to students teachers may do well to contextualize key theorists in their narrative/biographical context. The students learn, that sociologists are not magicians or genius individuals who produce attractive theories. Rather, they work in collaboration with other humans to generate knowledge. Moreover, I demonstrate that sociologists’ contributions are often strongly related to and influenced by their broader life context.

Keywords

Teaching sociology; Context of sociological production; Collaborations in sociology; Sociology of knowledge; Career coupling; Chicago School.

Undergraduate and even graduate students frequently complain that their sociology courses, especially dedicated to social theories, the history of sociological thought and sometimes methods are incomprehensible, uninteresting and even boring. In this paper I address the problem of “How can we successfully teach interactionism, labeling theory, grounded theory and other sociological basics related to qualitative methods with the active (and satisfied) participation of students?”.

This paper is not an exhaustive or gold-standard methodological guide on how to teach sociology. Nor is it a continuation of the special issue of the *American Sociologist* about “How to teach sociology?” in which a lot of famous sociologists gave their account about their “teacher’s trick and trade” [following Becker’s expression used in the title of his writing manual for social scientists (Becker, 1998)]. This paper is a simple account, the aim of which is to share my teaching experience.

¹ the oral version was presented during the Meeting of ESA – RN 20 – Qualitative Methods in Lodz in 2008

During the academic year 2006/2007, I delivered a course entitled “Mutual influences in French and American sociologies” at the University of Warsaw to a mixed group of Erasmus and Polish students². I focused on the history of qualitative sociology, using the concept of career coupling.

Because I believe that a close interest in biography links to and can help students understand a particular sociological approach, I used in my teaching the career coupling perspective. I developed the concept of career coupling in 2005 and it was based on my research in the artistic world of violinists and later developed in the world of life-science scientists (Wagner 2006). Career coupling is a social process, which concerns the parallel professional routes of two or more actors who cooperate, each in their own specialty, during the time necessary for them to change their rank in their respective professional worlds. Through this process, the actors hope to progress in their professional hierarchy. This concept consists of an interaction between two or more careers. In my teaching I used the concept of career coupling to analyze the careers of several scientists - sociologists. Instead of presenting and analyzing complex theories and linkages between the work of people I started with a simple analysis of their careers.

Understanding sociology or understanding sociologists?

A close interest in the biography of prolific and influential scientists-sociologists is not new. The times when only the history of ideas, completely separate from the information about the authors of those ideas, was taught at university, are long gone. Today students are often invited to discuss the life of sociologists during the lectures, not only in the corridors, exchanging several anecdotes about the “founding fathers” of these according to my students words “obscure” theories. This important change in how sociology is taught is not only due to the large interest in people’s biographies, but also and first of all because of several works about the biography of scholars, which have been lastly published³. Even a history of the most influential sociological scholars is now written with a biographical perspective – contextualizing major theoretical contributions in individuals’ personal histories (see Chapoulie 2001).

The origin of my lecture and audience: European students

The idea of my lecture about career coupling originally resulted from a misunderstanding. I had have been trained in France and when I moved to Poland I was perceived by my Polish colleagues to be a specialist in French sociology. Of course, I had read a lot of French sociology, but according to my specialization I was “a sociologist of work, trained according to the Chicago Tradition” - in France our group of research was called the “American” laboratory and we were perceived as specialists and strong enthusiasts of the Chicago School(s) and we were unique in France at that time. I was lucky that the sociology of Chicago was not taught at my University and several students expressed their interest for qualitative research and the interactionist perspective. Because interaction means also mutuality, the lecture title was easily set: “Mutual influences in American and French Sociology”. I had 60 hours during two semesters, and I was asked to teach in French, this is why, eight

² The lecture was given in French. For explanation of Erasmus student status see the footnote 3

³ We can observe this tendency which occurs in sociology- the grow of interest in microsociology, for social actor; here we can see that the sociologists have themselves their positionality and the context of their work is of the first importance.

out of fifteen students enrolled on that course were Erasmus⁴ (French, Belgian) and seven Polish; all of them were on the third to fifth year of graduate studies (License or MA) - two from the department of psychology, thirteen sociologists. Due to those circumstances, the place and time, it was a specific class for a specific public.

Sociology class - quick state of the art

Sociology students often complain that sociology is a very difficult subject of learning, they have difficulties in understanding, it seems an obscure knowledge and if they understand it they find it... "boring" (student's expression). It goes without saying that these kinds of comments are unfortunate, but understanding why students feel this way is important to minimise similar criticism in the future.

Several factors seem to influence this negative perception of our discipline. Theories are complex, and students have to deal with all this heritage already starting from the first semester. They also have to very quickly learn a large number of concepts, which is almost equivalent to learning a new language for them, especially for those students without philosophical training (French students do, Polish rarely - depending on schools). Some of my colleagues wish to expose their knowledge in a sophisticated way (which is quite understandable from their point of view) and show various connections between the schools, which is not at all useful - the students comments suggest that they are frequently lost. But also our discipline is not as others - which you can learn without any life-experience. Hughes, who was an excellent teacher, very inspiring for his students (Chapoulie 2001) underlined that it was always more interesting for students to study the phenomena which they know (close to their experience). Similar remark was formulated about French students (in 1970-1985); according to Chapoulie, the sociological theories itself seem to be much more difficult to understand than based on life experience social phenomena observed in-situ (Chapoulie, editor 2000). Taking into account these constatations, I was convinced that the "pure" theory of sociology teaching without historical and biographical context may be a huge obstacle to the understanding of social processes.

"Pedagogical" attitude

I wanted to avoid this kind of situation and I was in a lucky position: as Hughes expected from his "older" and "experienced in work-life" students, I came into sociology with the background of pedagogy of music (piano and theory) and several years of experience of music teaching (children, and adults, amateurs and professionals). I knew from my previous experience that the first obligation of a teacher is to set the clear goals of his/her teaching and the second is simply to

⁴ Erasmus students are the students who participate in the mobility European program of Exchange between universities. They spend 6-12 months in a foreign country, and try to get all their credits in order to complete their university semester (s). For that international population, each university prepares some lectures in the following languages: English, French, German sometimes Spanish. The Polish students also follow these classes, especially because they can get more credits (the lecture in "foreign language" as well as because of the expectation of University administration, which imposes Polish candidates for Erasmus exchange to participate in these lectures). In consequence these classes are composed of foreigners- European and also Polish students.

succeed them all! If not, the teacher is to blame for any failure and not the students) to the teacher and not students (following Dalcroze's⁵ method which I practiced)!

What were my goals for this French-American sociology classes?

Because I believe that history is very important in order to understand each phenomenon - one of the goals was to teach the tradition of research. Why? In order to understand the science! As Clifford Geertz remarked in *The Interpretation of Cultures* "If you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do" (Geertz 1973).

Focus on the sociology of practitioners

The classical analysis of the main Chicago sociologists' biographies gave me the possibility not only to present their life, but first of all to make these young European students familiar with the context of Chicago almost one hundred years earlier in order to perceive clearly why these people elaborated such ideas, and how they did it. I always presented family background and I spent the time presenting their education. I focused much more on the analysis of collaboration, looking for the career-coupling phenomenon, not only with the teacher of that main person, but also between the collaborators (of similar status - other students, or other young researchers) and later even successors. The example of the Chicago School or rather "the Sociological Tradition of Chicago" (Strauss' expression cited in Chapoulie 2001) was perfect for this kind of pedagogical approach.

Example of class 1 - American case - Revolution in Thinking = The People behind the Theories

The unconventional ideas are the most precious element of the researcher's work. The Chicago School constitutes an excellent example of the "production" of such ideas. On the crossing between the sociology of work and sociology of race, Hughes found the interesting phenomenon - of being "Black" in one's neighborhood and "White" at work (Hughes 1994). The revolution in the sociology of deviance was set with Becker's work and labeling theory (1963). The new theoretical perspective was set by Glaser and Strauss (1967) - theory against theory - "grounded theory", and the most famous of all Chicago sociologists - Goffman (1961), who wrote about the total institution. All these studies were revolutionary at that time. What did these sociologists have in common?

The response is simple - the first evident relationship is the teacher-student relationship: Hughes was the teacher, but also the team leader, and the source of inspiration for his students (Strauss, Becker and Goffman)⁶. But they had in common also all the context of Chicago city and the University which played a very important role in their sociological approaches. They shared the experiences of research

⁵ Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (July 6, 1865- July 1, 1950) , was a Swiss musician and music educator. His method is a method of teaching musical concepts through movement.

⁶ They attended also Blumer's classes- and his influence of their work is also important, but this influence is better known than Hughes'es one, it is why I focused in this example- without forgetting other relations, which I mentioned also to my students. We have to keep in mind, that it is a university class, but an introduction for this area of sociology, and I mentioned other connections between people, but focused on some of them- I pushed the students to more deep research, in order to ripen these analyses.

(common activity in the Committee on Human Relations in Industry [CHRI]), worked following the main method (Ethnography), shared common interests in the research topics such as careers, socialization, occupations, modest activities, institutions etcera and they published the results of their research together (e.g. Hughes, Geer and Strauss 1961). We can ask if the relationship between Hughes and Becker, Strauss and Goffman was master/disciple or a less hierarchical collaborating relationship? Both are true, because this example of collaboration is a classical example of career coupling.

When the sociological concept can be helpful

Career coupling process

Career coupling is a social process, which concerns the parallel professional routes of two or more actors who cooperate, each in their own specialty, during the time necessary for them to change their rank in their respective professional worlds. By this process, the actors hope to climb in their professional hierarchy. In other words, the career coupling consists of interaction between two or more careers. Three phases are necessary in order to be able to state that such collaborations are career coupling. (1) matching; (2) active collaboration; and, (3) passive collaboration - the reputation of both collaborators is joint. (Wagner 2006)

Using the simple concept of career coupling - suddenly the theories become clearer. It is much easier to understand Goffman's total institution, knowing Hughes' analysis of "bastard institutions". As well as the influences of Hughes' career study on Goffman's concept of patient's career (he benefited from scholarship CHRI), Becker with Strauss - career study (1956) and Becker's deviant's career (Becker 1963). The relationship between Hughes' method of making analysis, one of the strong points of which was "looking at extremity of cases - seeking for process", it was probably easier to adopt a new view on deviance, which resulted from the so-called "labeling theory". As Chapoulie said "Hughes's reputation was built with the works of his disciples" (Chapoulie 2001:213). This effect is the main effect of the career coupling process.

Several goals were achieved thanks to this analysis. The students learned about various studies and theories, and first of all they learned about the sociology of sociologist's work - nothing is done alone. But with this first American example, the exploration of mutual influences was not sufficient. I switched to the second – the French example.

Example II - French case - People behind People

The French example offers very interesting opportunity to show the sociologists' collaborations. Looking carefully in the biography of the one of the "Big Stars" of French sociology we can find some "traces" of the career coupling process. Even the career of Pierre Bourdieu gives us an interesting example of hidden (and not), but always fruitful (not for all participants) collaborations. It is indeed a classical example of successful career coupling. But successful for whom?

All my students knew some works of Bourdieu - in Poland he is considered to be a genius who wrote at least one book a year (changing subjects) and each work was seminal. But rarely the readers ask themselves how it was possible for one single

person to produce this amount of knowledge - simply alone. Sure - several collaborations were mentioned, but several had been forgotten, omitted... hidden (intentional or not). The “discovery” of each collaborator allows the possibility to show the importance of common work in science. I proposed to my students to play a game “Guess who is behind?”.

As an example some publications could be taken into account. The first concerns the book about Bourdieu’s first fieldwork (as he said in his “autobiography” [2004] - he considered himself to be an anthropologist) which was carried out in Algeria between 1958-60. Four persons at that time closely collaborated with him: the most important was Abdelmalek Sayad, who was his student and key informant. He originated from a village in the Kabyle region in Algeria, and he gave Bourdieu the possibility to travel around this country and to do the research about the condition of housing. Bourdieu could not speak fluently Arabic and at the time of war without the help of a native speaker it would have been difficult to communicate. Bourdieu’s other collaborators at that period were Alain Darbel, Claude Seibel, Jean-Paul Rivet. The works published after this fieldwork were in French: in 1964 “Le Déracinement. La crise de l’agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie” with A. Sayad and the same year “Travail et travailleurs en Algérie” with A. Darbel, R. Castel et J-C Chamboredon. Other books about Algeria were published years later without any sign of collaboration. In the case of publication of other works, the name of collaborators is frequently omitted and the students only remember the lead author – in this case Bourdieu. This is why I focused so strongly on those people in his shadow. This was the case of Jean-Claude Passeron, the co-author of the first successful book - the number one sociological bestseller in France “The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relations to Culture, Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture”(1979)⁷. Three years later it was the next publication in triple collaboration with Jean-Claude Passeron again and Jean-Claude Chamboredon.”Le Métier de sociologue” (1967 “The sociologist occupation”). The mechanism of collaboration and author’s signature is complex. Taking the book about photography as an example could show how difficult it is to discover the “true author”. The title of the book published in 1965 is “Un Art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie”; in several of Bourdieu’s bibliographies in serious sources such as the College of France site, Bourdieu figures as the author with the following mention: “avec (with) L. Boltanski, R. Castel et J-C Chamboredon”. The English version of that book published in 1996 by Stanford University Press and entitled “Photography: A Middle-Brow Art” you can read “with Luc Boltanski and Robert Castel”. What happened to Jean-Claude Chamboredon? One quick look at the book gives one another version of the division of the authorship: this book was published in 1965 in the collection directed by Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Castel. But on the cover of the book, the mention in French “sous la direction” appears only Bourdieu’s name. If you are lucky and you have the book in your hand (French version), you see inside that the authors are Luc Boltanski and Jean-Claude Chamboredon - both names are not on the cover of the book, on which - I insist - the name of Bourdieu as director of the collection is inscribed. In consequence in several bibliographies of this author, that book appears as his own book. Several sources repeat this error mentioning Bourdieu as the author, sometimes with Castel (who was also the director of the collection), with Boltanski; Chamboredon is frequently forgotten - one of the two exclusive authors of this book.

⁷ about the history of that book see Mason 2001,2005 and 2006

Other examples

Always in the situation of teaching it is important to ask whether a scientific universe without collaboration is possible. Looking closer at a famous duo, or even a single person, we can discover others. The game “find his/her pair” continues. The co-author of the famous book printed in 1918-1920, “Polish Peasants” - Thomas and ... Znaniecki⁸. The authors of a book published in 1975 “The Cocktail Waitress. Woman's Work in a Man's World.” - James P. Spradley and the woman in a Man's world - Brenda E. Mann. And we will finish with the famous example of other “big star of sociology” - Robert Merton. This is the story of almost 20 years of common research, findings, a good concept and passion. Harriet Zuckerman did her PhD under Merton's supervision. At this time, in 1968, her mentor published in “Science” under the title “The Matthew Effect in Science, Cumulative Advantage and the Symbolism of Intellectual Property”, an article in which Merton explains a concept very important for science which he called “The Matthew Effect”. Twenty years later, in 1988 he published a kind of explanation about the origin of this concept in a special footnote:

The later fruits of Zuckerman's research appear in Zuckerman “Scientific Elite: Nobel Laureates in the United States” (1977); (...) This is an occasion for repeating what I have noted in reprinting the original “Matthew Effect” in Science. It is now (1973) belatedly evident to me that I drew upon the interview and other materials of the Zuckerman study to such an extent that, clearly, the paper should have appeared under joint authorship. A sufficient sense of distributive and commutative justice requires one to recognize, however belatedly, that to write a scientific or scholarly paper is not necessarily sufficient grounds for designating oneself as its sole author.” (Merton 1988: 607⁹) –text underlined by me.

Working Conclusion - Sociology of Sociology (or sociologist's occupation)

The first important conclusion for my sociology students is as follows: Science is a group activity. An “irreplaceable scientist” does not exist - the organization of science and progress in science were described by H. Becker (1986) in “Writing for Social Scientists. How to start and finish your Thesis, Book, Article”:

Almost all scientific activities require that someone writes something - ‘take out’ the product from the atelier. The science is organized in a way, that these expectations do not lie within one person in particular. If me?, I do not write a book about one subject, it will be you who will do it; if it's not you, it will be someone else. We will not have the promotion, but in the end,

⁸ The Polish students know the first example- for them it is easy to remember Znaniecki- one of the most famous sociologists in Poland, who was the expert of Polish emigration before met for the first time Thomas, and not only key-informant or translator from Polish- he was a research partner, an important scholar on his own and had individual publications before the American collaboration and later. Unfortunately the language of these publications is mostly Polish which is probably the reason of only local fame of Znaniecki. The second reason for his presence in the world sociology areal as the co-author with Thomas is the World War II and isolationist politics of Poland after 1945, which certainly also constitutes an obstacle for the international popularity of Znaniecki's work. The last factor of Thomas domination was certainly the activity of his disciples who took care about the communication concerning that book, and decreased strongly Znaniecki's contribution to this work.

⁹ For my students it was interesting to know that Zuckerman was Merton's wife. I was not able to respond to the question how much this fact influenced this public 1988 declaration of Merton.

someone will write this book if the matter for this book exists; and he will have the promotion" (p.137).

Consequently, we have to recognize that sociological research is a group activity, and not the production of a single lone researcher. So it is important to look behind the author. Behind means looking at his/her background, teachers, colleagues, spouses (Mary-Jo Deegan did it for some American sociologists [Deegan 1990]), students and collaborators... You have to find hidden team members because one of the career effects could be the "vampirization of the reputation".

Vampirization of reputation

This mechanism was perfectly shown with Bourdieu's example - even if he is not an author but director of a collection, his strong reputation conceals the true authors. But I would like to show to my students that doing sociology is the contrary to the widespread standards of our insider communication, which is to focus on a single name - a solo intellectual hero or heroine.

Reactions of students

I would like to provide now some ethnographic data from my class. What happened after all this year of "looking behind" the authors, tracing collaborations and contributions to the work presented as solo work. I did not remark on the differences in the reactions of Erasmus and Polish students (which could indicate that sociology is not taught in the way which I explained). For all of them this "kind of teaching" was new: "Nobody, never spoke to me about the sociology like that!" (French Erasmus Student) "I understand much better now, and this is so interesting in fact!" (Polish MA Student) ; "This is truly fascinating - with all that biographies I learn much easily what happened" (Polish Student); "The stories of these people are so interesting - I started to learn their work - when you learn what happened to Goffman's wife - his writing becomes so true..." (French Erasmus Student); "I realized that even the biggest sociologists are human and that makes... sociology become human to me - it's not an abstract science any more ..." (Polish Student)

And because the sociology is NOT an abstract science they have to prepare the work related with the career coupling effect - the goal was to show how these strong collaborations work between the people engaged in other professional activities. As the validation work I obtained the papers about this very largely spread phenomenon, which is career coupling analyzed by my students in different social worlds, among them the world of post-doc students working in nuclear research (career coupling between mentors and their PhD or post-docs and lab-leaders), another study was a movie based on a long interview of two strong collaborators, one of them was a famous Polish movie director, the other was a cameraman; another work was a paper about the collaboration of famous rock stars: David Bowie and Brian Eno - the author of this work prepared a MA thesis in that topic. And finally, a more classical paper was about the relationship between Freud and his mentor Breuer, conducted by a student of psychology who analyzed it through the concept of career coupling - this paper is in the process of being published in a human science interdisciplinary journal. After these works it was clear to my students and me that sociology is animated by similar mechanisms of social collaboration as other human groups.

Conclusion

Were my goals achieved? As a result, the main goal of sociology was partially reached: we – both, the students and I, – have progressed in the understanding of certain processes which occur in our society. I believe that the sociology should be taught in similar way – the theories should be present in the relation with the context – in a way that it is historically accurate (within the condition that the teacher has the access for this kind of data). This is very important to speak about ethical problems concerning collaboration in academic work. Thanks to my experience I saw that sociological contributions could be contextualized using the concept of career coupling. In that way the students become interested in our discipline, because they realize that this is a science “very on life”, with different aspects which are proper to human activity. The sociology course was taught not as the history of ideas but as the history of human collaborations, and I think that this is a good way of teaching sociology.

In similar vein, the book about the Chicago Tradition by Jean-Michel Chapoulie (2001) is an excellent history of complex collaboration - it is a “bible for the sociologist” who is interested in the research projects’ origins, contexts, backstage of realization in order to understand almost everything about the final product, because the final product of our research is always closely related to the context and our life. Have I mentioned who my Mentor was?

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