

How Knowledge Influences Culture

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Abstract

This essay provides a comprehensive review of the sociology of knowledge. In particular, it explores whether knowledge in any specific culture is socially determined or whether knowledge itself is constituted as a social order. It will examine how language may influence how knowledge is practiced and distributed, and assess how individual members of a society incorporate their knowledge and relate it to the collective whole. This investigation includes an analysis of how the Marxist, French, and American sociological traditions define knowledge. This paper will identify the influence of gender, especially how women contribute to the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Further, this paper reviews how a Feminist perspective may contribute to the production of truth, or what we commonly refer to as science, while studying the sociology of knowledge in historical context and how knowledge is socially constructed. Finally, it reviews how various classical sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists in the field of behavioral and social sciences define the sociology of knowledge and examine how knowledge influences culture.

Keywords

Knowledge, Culture, Social Influence

1. Introduction

Sociologist Doyle McCarthy argues that the sociology of knowledge is not merely a specialized area within sociology, like the sociology of deviance or social class (McCarthy, 1996). What the study of the sociology of knowledge looks at is described as some of the broadest sociological questions about the extent and limits of social and group influences in people's lives, and the social and cultural basis of cognition and perception. The study of the sociology of knowledge is identified as one that bears the mark of a "tradition of inquiry" (Shills, 1981), which has lasted several generations through the passing on of essential theories and texts that express both the continuity and changes that it has experienced over time. More spe-

cifically, it argues that two divergent themes explain the intellectual tradition of the sociology of knowledge and its place in a social order. McCarthy (1996) describes these as two propositions: the first, that knowledge is socially determined, and the second, that knowledge constitutes a social order. When we discuss the first proposition that knowledge is socially determined, we are describing how all human thought, ideas, and belief systems are produced by and rooted in specific historical, institutional, and social contexts. Numerous classical sociological authors identify the proposition that knowledge is socially determined as Mannheim's prominent theory of the sociology of knowledge, with roots traceable to notable figures such as Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim. The second proposition that knowledge constitutes a social order is influenced by cultural theory and social constructivism, and shifts the focus to demonstrate how knowledge is not just a passive result of society, but an active influence. From this perspective, language, meanings, and symbols are the instruments that dynamically build, organize, and replicate social reality and power structures; it also explores the historical context and the social constructionist, Marxist, French, and American traditions on how knowledge influences culture.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1. Historical Context

Thus, this first idea is grounded in a historical context, referring to classical sociologists' ideas about how the sociology of knowledge was understood. Marx and Engels (1970) suggested that thinking and consciousness are, from the very beginning, a social product. The very idea is that all human thought and consciousness develop out of real life, the actual social conditions that particular individuals share. Marx then explains that society's productive activities determine all human thought and knowledge, conceived as its visible material structures of work, its institutions of labor and government, and its forms of technology. More specifically, Marx distinguishes between the substructure and superstructure in relation to economic relations. Within these structures, the material base of the substructure and the superstructure forms the foundation that contains culture and ideas, from which all human knowledge develops and changes. The relations between and within these structures ultimately determine a given society's knowledge. This matters because Marx believed that ideas and categories are no more eternal than the "relations they express". They are historical and transitory products (Marx, 1996). It was Durkheim who stated, "social life must be explained not by the conception of it formed by those who participate in it, but by the profound causes which escape their consciousness". We also think that these causes must be sought mainly in the way in which individuals associating together are formed in groups ... This postulate seems to us self-evident (Durkheim, 1982). Therefore, Durkheim suggests that knowledge is determined by how it is produced through the groups formed by individuals' association and participation in what Durkheim calls the collective conscience.

2.2. Social Construction

The second proposition of the sociology of knowledge is that social reality is socially constructed through knowledge; social reality is not a social fact in its own right, but something produced and communicated, with its meaning derived in and through these systems of communication. McCarthy (1996) explains that this proposition is a semiotic study of culture. This approach studies semiotic culture by identifying the symbolic and signifying systems through which a social order is communicated and produced. This course emphasizes meaning, unlike the first proposition, which holds that a distinction can be made between society's material and social existence. This proposition differs, claiming that social and material existence are not distinguishable and are essentially products of a group's collective life. One of the primary points about this proposition that the author makes is that the distinction between substructure and superstructure, on which the sociology of knowledge was developed, disappears, since all of conscious life and thought is present whenever human beings engage in social activities of any kind, including activities known as "material production".

McCarthy (1996) defines knowledge as "any and every set of ideas and acts accepted by one or a social group or society of people—ideas and acts about what they accept as real for them as others." This can include everything from religious beliefs and medical and legal practices to folk music. Cultural knowledge is multiple and diverse, historically constructed, and made up of symbolic and signifying systems that people constantly communicate and reproduce over time. This new sociology of knowledge is more open-ended than the past, recognizing shared meanings that translate into the cultural practices of all institutions, groups, and classes in a particular society. Knowledge is diverse and can mean different things to different cultures. Therefore, we must examine a culture's knowledge relative to that culture.

3. Theoretical Traditions

3.1. Marxist Tradition

Here, we will examine the relevance of ideology to knowledge through what is described as the Marxist Tradition. McCarthy (1996) outlines what Marxism addresses, further identifies ideology, and treats ideology as cultural practice. Marxist theory is one of the oldest commonly used theories of ideology, in which ideologies are distorted, mystified, and false conceptions that are generally opposed to knowledge and consciousness that are true, realistic, and objective. McCarthy (1996) continues by explaining that this theory understands power, status, and interests as the principal determinants of the consciousness of an economic class or group whose thinking is ideological; that is, politically and economically interested. Its ideas rationalize the social and mental conventions that lend credence and support to its property and power. This theory suggests contrasting ideological conceptions with true or real conceptions of the self, the other,

and the world. The idea is that clear oppositions are drawn between science and ideology, and that scientists are free from the influence of those who think like politicians or the bourgeois.

McCarthy (1996) contends that ideology should be perceived as objective, not subjective; rational, not doctrinaire; and identified with equanimity. The very nature of ideology is directly tied to the idea of modernity. The world does not hold fast to a unified worldview, but both the idea of politics and ideology developed in 18th-century revolutionary France alongside novel understandings of how people make their own history. She explains that the term ideology applies to practices that include both acts and utterances whose effects target a group's legitimacy and power. When she mentions those practices, she refers to how they are strategically concerned with power and the effects of groups' positions and claims. While it is a common strategy for an ideologist to adopt a special or superior claim regarding others' ideals and practices, whether political, religious, or ethical, the result is that they become the final judge and overseer of others. Idealists pursue their own interests according to what they believe.

Marx and his ideas of ideology as unreality and ideology's expansion and diffusion. In the first part, McCarthy (1996) explains Marx's idea of false consciousness and how all forms of thinking, knowledge, and consciousness are interwoven with material activity. Therefore, people are conditioned by the social worlds that they inhabit. This leads people in any particular class to believe the ideals passed on to them and to think their shortcomings or misfortunes are due to their own incapacities rather than the fault of the group they belong to; hence, their false consciousness. So, the ideology they ascribe to is itself unreal and a result of conditioning their consciousness.

Foucault (1980) discusses the expansion and diffusion of power; he argues that the concept of ideology is unsound because it obstructs actual truth. This supports the notion that ideals are secondary to reality. Foucault extends this vision by treating "truth" as an accomplishment of the systems of knowledge that govern a social order. He states that each society and age has its forms of discourse within which truths are founded. So, regarding power, Foucault contends that people use truth to govern themselves. It is produced and practiced. Rather than seeing power as a force that conceals truth, Foucault argues that power dynamically constructs truth. All societies function within a "regime of truth", that is, an organization of guidelines that decrees what is recognized as the truth, the devices utilized to approve true or false declarations, and the standing attained by persons responsible for communicating the truth. It is also important to mention that Foucault, in contrast to Marx, did not accept Marxism's claim that ideology disguises some objective or genuine truth. In fact, Marx believed that ideology was a misrepresentation or "false consciousness", designed by the ruling bourgeoisie to conceal the material realities of how they are exploited. This implies that removing ruling-class ideology would reveal an objective truth about human history and labor in the social substructure.

In contrast, Foucault (1980) did not believe an objective truth waits to be discovered outside the realm of power. Foucault suggested that truth is not disguised by power; it results from the production of power. Louis Althusser introduced the idea that ideology exists in what he calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as schools, courts, households, and political parties, to name a few (Althusser, 1971). He basically suggests that the ruling class's dominant ideologies reproduce themselves to preserve the social order. Cultural ideology can be observed in what a culture practices and lives. Ideology appears in symbols, signs, and their meanings within those cultural practices. These ideologies serve a culture's inhabitants by shaping a particular identity. So, according to Althusser (1971), even though he believes ideologies are material practices, they are more importantly lived practices. The idea is that ideology is not only present in the bourgeoisie's collective being, but that it is distributed throughout the social order. These cultural practices work through (ISAs) to reproduce the current social status quo. Foucault focuses on how cultural customs work as dispersed methods of control that active subjects use to rule themselves.

3.2. French Tradition

McCarthy (1996) extends her ideas on the structure of knowledge through her vision of the French tradition. McCarthy (1996) traces the development of structuralism, especially as explained by Emile Durkheim and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Durkheim was among the first to argue that religion was the most primitive social phenomenon and essential to understanding all other collective activities, including law, morality, art, science, and anything involving human collective behavior. Durkheim believed we should examine, in particular, the powerful effects of collective symbols and representations in creating society. In this view, religion is the system of symbols by which society becomes conscious of itself. Religion is especially important to the structuralist nature of Durkheim's views on society, particularly the idea that a society's collective representations were so fundamental to thought that our logical categories of time and space were socially derived. Through the study of religion from a structuralist perspective that incorporates the collective symbols used in a society's religion, i.e., icons, gods, rituals, we may unveil the structure of knowledge in that society. This is where we may discover the social conditions that generate such religious phenomena. We search through those symbols to uncover the reality and meaning they represent. This is to look for the origins of society's categories in the forms of social life as they are. Durkheim believed that social myths and categories are founded in a single domain, and that a people's powerful myths can be used to understand the operations of social phenomena that characterize a social group, such as a religious one.

Lévi-Strauss (1966) introduced his ideas in structural anthropology through his analysis of myths and totemism. He presents his myth analysis through his linguistic model. Myth is part of human speech, in that it is both language and more language. When it includes the elements of speaking, myth manifests its unique-

ness at a third level that contains the two. He contends that myth embraces the structural and statistical aspects of language. He describes mythic time as at once reversible, which belongs to language, and irreversible, which belongs to speaking. He states that a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. He explains that a myth's operational value comes from the fact that the time of its analysis is timeless. It can define not only the past, but the present and future as well. One of Lévi-Strauss' primary conceptions is that structures in our mind contain both the image of the world and the myths it generates.

According to Lévi-Strauss (1966), totemic systems are less historically and socially distinct phenomena than signifying systems that show how human minds categorize and communicate. Totemic myths, like all myths, signify the minds that produce them. Totems are like myths, which show us how the human mind draws from nature and how the categories, i.e., language, that minds interpret (man/woman, living/dead, bat/night owl) serve as conceptual tools for saying things and for elaborating abstract ideas. Thus, totemic classification serves as complex, multilayered signification. One-way totemic classification functions in how men distinguish themselves from one another. The totemic symbols, i.e., animals, plants, and weather, are borrowed from nature to remove the similarities that human beings may share to assert their differences and division.

3.3. American Tradition

McCarthy (1996) further investigates self-knowledge through the realm described as the American tradition. In this case, McCarthy (1996) frames human agency as the central problem of social analysis. According to McCarthy (1996), two distinct traditions within social science emerged in the early twentieth century from Germany and the United States. In Germany, the new discipline of *Wissenssoziologie*, or sociology of knowledge, was established. In the United States, the new school of thought known as *Pragmatism* was founded. Both traditions sought to discover "how individuals think within the particular social context in which they live; how thinking and consciousness are inherited from particular social and historical contexts; how collective dispositions decisively provide the social objects accessible to human beings."

The sociology of knowledge in Germany defined itself by describing thought as a collective art in which individuals participate. They proposed that the impulse to act in certain groups, with particular styles of thought, first makes the world's objects accessible to the acting subject. Scheler (1980) and Mannheim (1936) created the broad framework for the sociology of knowledge. They focused on social existence and knowledge, introducing the first systematic outline of this field. The forms of mental acts through which knowledge is gained are always co-conditioned by society's structure.

In the United States, pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead set out to define the profoundly social character of mind and consciousness (Mead, 1934). In his critique of mentalist psychology, Mead argued that subjectivity is socially

formed because it presupposes processes of abstraction and interpretation. Mead maintained that both social and biological science must investigate subjectivity in both the physical and the conscious. This is because psychological phenomena are not merely subjective, and consciousness is not the subject's property.

George Herbert Mead developed ideas and theories that explain the self as both agent and social object. Regarding the self as agent and social object, Mead introduces the term "the self," or social self, meaning the conscious, self-reflective ego or agent through which human experience is organized and interpreted in how it deals with the world. Mead suggests that the most essential part of the self is its reflexivity: it is an object to itself, capable of entering its own experience, at first indirectly, by becoming an object to itself. This is experienced in childhood as individuals interact with the social environment and adapt to others' attitudes and roles. The self, according to Mead, first appears as a third person, usually through speech, but also through the other's gestures and attitudes. The self is a social object inseparable from the social relations and forms of speech through which it is communicated. Mead's theory accounts for how social reality, as an objective action composed of the child's immediate social and linguistic community, enters the child's developing experience. Then the child learns how the roles and attitudes of the others with whom the child interacts inspire in the child an idea of itself as the object of others' acts. Therefore, the child's first knowledge of itself arrives in the consciousness of the "me," an object which it sweeps into its own depth of experience. It is that the self's "me" is present first as an object among other objects and within the same field of experience. Self-consciousness further develops when one becomes aware of one's own responses and of oneself as an object toward which the child can respond as an "I."

Most notable is how McCarthy (1996) touches on the idea of being outside social theories of how the self resides in the modern community, and how the individual stands in the social order. Our personal identity and how it corresponds with the greater community and culture. This is not seen from a modern perspective, but from a postmodern one. The notion of the self is reflexive, with borders and boundaries shrinking as the self constantly adapts to different social environments. The diversity of cultures and communities is ever-changing in the modern world. McCarthy (1996) also suggests that we even belong to imagined communities. From groups that we may belong to and identify with, i.e., Boy Scouts, Democratic Party, AA, the very nature of ourselves is further imagined. What we may imagine as a direct relationship with a group we belong to is, in actuality, an indirect one. Most members of a particular group we will never meet or even come in contact with anyway.

3.4. Feminist Tradition

McCarthy (1996) argues that feminism must establish a place in the current scientific community. In fact, although Western civilization has made great progress over the past few hundred years, women have been left behind. Men have domi-

nated laboratories, texts, and theoretical paradigms. Therefore, science has developed a culture of sexism that must change. From the “Renaissance” through the “Enlightenment,” men initially dominated the course and development of scientific progress. It has even been to the point, according to the author, that women have been reduced to being identified as the weaker and secondary sex, even to the point that they are not widely allowed to participate as subjects of research in discovering cures for diseases that kill women. They are literally men turned inside out, as nature governs their physical constitutions. It has been more commonly assumed, due to the historical domination by males, that while men were social by nature, it was women who were considered to be mere physical creatures. Feminist epistemology contends that all knowledge, including scientific data, is situated (Anthony, 2026). This means meaning is shaped by the social, historical, and physical proximity of the people who create it (Mertlitsch, 2026). It is also discussed in terms of feminist standpoint theory. The theory proposes that individuals in underrepresented groups often have a clearer understanding of authority structures because they must learn to work within systems of oppression (Anderson, 2000). As a result, they become more aware of the faults and veiled expectations that dominant groups disregard.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this paper examined how knowledge influenced culture from many different viewpoints. From a historical perspective, Marx distinguished between the substructure and superstructure in economic relationships. Within these structures, the material base of the substructure and the superstructure creates a foundation that includes culture and ideas, from which all human knowledge develops and changes. The relations between and within these structures ultimately determine a given society’s knowledge. It was Durkheim who suggested that knowledge is determined by how it is produced through the groups formed by individuals’ association and participation in what Durkheim calls the collective conscience.

Regarding social construction, one of the key ideas about this proposition that McCarthy (1996) makes is that the difference between substructure and superstructure, on which the sociology of knowledge was advanced, vanishes, since all of conscious life and thought is present whenever human beings engage in social actions of any kind, including activities known as “material production”. The Marxist tradition explains how knowledge and culture are shaped by the material and economic core of society, operating mainly to support or contest the ruling class. In the French tradition, it is how knowledge is structured. In particular, it was Durkheim who believed that through the study of religion from a structuralist perspective that incorporates the collective symbols used in a society’s religion, i.e., icons, gods, rituals, may unveil the structure of knowledge in that society. At the same time, Lévi-Strauss introduced his ideas in structural anthropology through his analysis of myths and totemism. In terms of the American tradition, two distinct traditions within social science emerged in the early twentieth century from Ger-

many and the United States. In Germany, the new discipline of *Wissenssoziologie*, or sociology of knowledge, was established (Parsons, 1978). In the United States, the new school of thought known as *Pragmatism* was founded. Both traditions sought to discover “how individuals think within the particular social context in which they live; how thinking and consciousness are inherited from particular social and historical contexts; how collective dispositions decisively provide the social objects accessible to human beings.” The key difference among the materialist Marxist tradition, structuralist French tradition, interactionist American tradition, and Feminist tradition accounts of knowledge and culture centers on where meaning and power are derived from. They dispute whether culture and knowledge are determined by objective, exterior macro-influences (i.e., economic structures or linguistic systems) or produced by subjective, human-operated micro-processes (i.e., social exchanges or gender distinctiveness and power).

So, in essence, McCarthy (1996) suggests that the production of truth, what is known as “science,” must transform its sexist culture. The idea here is that women have a great deal to offer to the scientific community. In order to pursue scientific truth, it must adopt a feminist perspective. As the Age of Reason has liberated humanity in the discovery of scientific knowledge, women must be granted the same liberation. The belief is that, for a successful future in the acquisition of scientific truths, our culture must change and allow women to investigate in all those institutions in our society, i.e., laboratories and universities, that are committed to that cause, which will benefit not only women but men as well. Therefore, as we change the culture of science and no longer depend on men for knowledge, we further change the culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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