Tests of Concepts
in Herbert Blumer's Method*

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Social Thought & Research, 2000, Vol. 23, 1&2

Abstract

Herbert Blumer left unclear the bearing of his method on substantive arguments that he made about social unrest, social problems, public opinion, race relations, and mass society. These arguments could scarcely have been grounded upon that well-known fundamental of his method, direct observation of ongoing social interaction. They are, however, consistent with another central principle discussed in Blumer's essay on method – empirical tests of concepts. Several of his articles on substantive concepts suggest the kinds of results that may be pursued with concept testing.

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When is a forty-year-old research report worth reading? When it is an example of Herbert Blumer's empirical research. Blumer persuasively asserted that sociologists must examine empirically[1] the social

* I thank Dan Krier and Lesa Marbut for continuing, effective advice about this paper and Robert Futrell for his helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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[1] Blumer advocates inspection of evidence from social life to test ideas about its nature. He does not take the position of an empiricist in a narrow, one-sided sense that calls experience the unmediated source of knowledge. Tucker (1988) argues that Blumer's adoption of terms associated with empiricism may obscure views on science that he drew from pragmatism. Blumer's views emphasize that social objects are formed by concepts, but that social reality is an independent actuality. Blumer in his writing on method makes repeated references (e.g., 1969 pp. 22-23) to the role in research of the "obdurate character" of social reality. Reality, although known in terms of concepts of human creation, has the capacity to "talk back" to the empirical researcher by blocking action toward it premised on faulty understanding.

objects they seek to understand (1969a, pp. 1-60), but left unsaid how he applied this maxim in his own studies. "The World of the Youthful Drug Use" is an opportunity to look over the shoulder of an empirically-engaged Blumer. Decades after it was written and despite its relatively modest scope, it has value as an instance when Blumer was explicit about how he put his method into action.[2]

The bearing of Blumer's method on his substantive arguments[3] is sometimes obscure. For example, about his work on collective behavior McPhail concludes:

> Throughout his career Blumer advocated a method (Blumer 1969[a]) of exploring and inspecting the phenomena to be explained, enabling the scholar to ... talk from fact and not from speculation ... so that he knows that the problem he poses is not artificial, that the kinds of data he seeks are significant in terms of the empirical world, and that the leads he follows are faithful to its nature (Blumer 1969[a], p. 42).
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> There is little evidence that Blumer pursued those steps in his initial development and systematization of ... collective behavior, or at any point in the next four decades ... (Blumer 1978). [McPhail 1989, p. 417]

Ironically, McPhail is citing a particular publication in which Blumer (1978, p. 4) states, "My presentation is based on the study of several scores of instances of social unrest and collective protest during the past four centuries." It is reasonable to think that by the 1970s Blumer could have studied these instances of social unrest and collective

[2] It is worth noting that Blumer's research team did not directly observe ongoing interactions occasioning drug use. Instead, the team explored and inspected this world by engaging the youth (often in group discussions) as informants about their activities, experiences, and meanings that oriented their actions.

[3] Discussions of fashion (Blumer 1969b), public opinion (Blumer 1969c), race relations (Blumer 1988b), mass society (Blumer 1988c), social problems (Blumer 1971), social unrest (Blumer 1978), and industrialization (Blumer 1990) are particular substantive arguments to which this article will refer. They are "substantive" by asserting understandings of the nature of specific social objects which are taken to exist and to be within the reach of empirical tests.

protest. It is hard to imagine that Blumer would claim to have studied them if he had not. Yet, McPhail's (1989, p. 417) conclusion that "there is little evidence" in his work on collective behavior that Blumer pursued a method of "exploring and inspecting the phenomena to be explained" is not entirely unfair. Blumer does not state the instances of social unrest that he studied or how he studied them.

As McPhail points out, Blumer's (1969a pp. 1-60) essay on method insists that sociology's understandings of human group life must be empirically tested. It is not just his writing on collective behavior that discloses little about empirical workmanship or cases. Several of his substantive arguments assert what must be seen as empirical claims which (by his method's standards) ought to have been, but are not explicitly said to be, tested. Rather than supposing that he failed to heed his own principles, however, it can be imagined that Herbert Blumer did undertake empirical studies of public opinion, race relations, social unrest, social problems, mass society, and fashion. The point, however, is not to assert a biographical fact. It is to consider the kind of empirical study which might have contributed to his important substantive conclusions. Blumer usually does not clarify the empirical basis of these substantive arguments, but several of them show a consistency with the emphasis his method gives to "testing concepts." Despite receiving considerable emphasis from Blumer, the idea of testing concepts seems not to have attracted the attention given to other aspects of his essay on method, especially his advocacy of naturalistic inquiry.

Blumer does not say in any detail how to empirically test concepts or when he did so. Nevertheless, several of Blumer's articles, from "Morale" (Blumer [1943] 1988a) through "Social Unrest and Collective Protest" (Blumer 1978) criticize failures of specific concepts and suggest improvements in them. These arguments about concepts tell us little about how Blumer reached his conclusions, yet suggest the kinds of results that might come from empirical tests of concepts. Nor, does Blumer's essay on method say much about procedures in testing concepts. It does, however, explicitly present a

rationale for testing concepts that is justified by Blumer's views on science and social life.

The meaning and importance of testing concepts grow directly from Blumer's views on the nature of science. Blumer's essay on method starts with his well known perspective on "human group life" and its implications for methods that are true to its nature. The close relationship of perspective and method he spells out, raises issues even for those who generally endorse Blumer's views (Hammersley 1989; Baugh 1990). Blumer's remarks about concept testing help to resolve some of these issues. To understand the place of concept testing in his method, however, it is helpful to examine the place of the concept in his view of science. Blumer's own substantive arguments, although not explicitly presented as the fruits of concept tests, help to project the kinds of results that may be pursued with Blumer's method.

Perspective and Inquiry

The decisive premise of "naturalistic inquiry" is the obligation that Blumer places on method to respect the nature of the reality under study. Consequently, his essay on method devotes detailed attention to the nature of social life. Social life is action, and sociology is a science that studies action.

> [F]undamentally human groups or society *exists in action* [p. 6] .... The life of any human society consists necessarily of an ongoing process of fitting together the activities of its members [p. 7]. Such articulation of lines of action gives rise to and constitutes "joint action" [that has] a distinctive character in its own right [p. 17] .... [T]he domain of social science is constituted precisely by the study of joint action and of the collectivities that engage in joint activity [p. 17] ... The activities of members occur predominately in response to one another [p. 7] .... (Blumer 1969a pp. 6-17) [Original emphasis].

Joint action and collectivities form the core of sociology's area of study. Blumer states that inquiry into the nature of joint action and

collectivities shows them to be guided by processes that construct and share meanings. The perspective of symbolic interactionism expresses an understanding of this nature.[4]

> [H]uman beings in interacting with one another have to take account of what each other is doing ...; they ... direct their own conduct or handle their situations in terms of what they take into account. [p. 8] ... Social interaction is an interaction between actors and not between factors imputed and them [p. 8] ... [M]utual role-taking is the *sine qua non* of communication and effective symbolic interaction [p. 10] .... Human group life on the level of symbolic interaction is a vast process in which people [through interpersonal and self interaction] are forming, sustaining, [casting aside,] and transforming the objects of their world as they come to give meaning to objects [p. 12] (Blumer 1969a pp. 8-12)

Naturalistic inquiry is guided by the principle that method should be true to the nature of human social life as conceived by this perspective. This control over method by perspective is captured by Baugh's (1990) characterization of Blumer's writing on method as "ontological."

His criticism of "variable analysis" illustrates Blumer's (1969a [1956], pp. 127-139; view that research can be misdirected by a method that does not approach social reality from a proper perspective. It highlights respects in which his method contrasts with the approaches of a good deal of the sociological research of his time and today. Blumer argues that variable analysis fails to respect the character of human group life. He opens mildly by observing a "laxity in choosing variables (p. 128)." He adds that a "disconcerting lack of generic variables" tends to limit a variable analysis to a depiction of a "particular here and now (p. 129)." He reaches the core of his viewpoint when he says that we

[4] Among the facets of his elegantly-interconnected perspective, the central places of action, joint action, and large collectivities (as distinguished from free-floating meanings, individual action, and interpersonal encounters) deserve renewed emphasis.

> must look at human group life as chiefly a vast interpretive process ... through which ... experience [is] transformed into activity. Any scheme designed to analyze human life has to fit this process .... Variable analysis is markedly disposed to ignore this process. (Blumer 1969a pp. 132-133).

The interpretive process, fundamental to human group life, does not merely mediate the effects of a condition measured as a variable. Interaction in human group life is not a "conveyor belt" merely passing on impacts of variables. People and groups use intentions and other meanings within an interpretive process to form their adjustments to a condition like industrialization. Blumer finds that variable analysis is insensitive to the character of the immediate context that the interpretive process also takes into account. For example, the actual social changes responding to a given level of industrialization will vary locally as they are shaped by locally-built-up social transactions (Blumer 1990). It is particularly important to note that Blumer expects for local responses to exhibit significant differences because these responses are created by interacting people and groups, not caused by the values of variables. Taking into account their intentions and what else they know of their situations, people interact to build up (or eschew) adjustments to the conditions represented by variables. The decisive methodological point here is that research neglectful of the nature of these situated local interactions cannot provide understanding of social action. This is precisely because variable analysis does not respect the *nature* of social life. Where this process is decisive for social action, variable analysis is not a method well chosen to advance sociology as an empirical science.[5]

More generally, limitations afflict any technique of research that fails to square with sociologists' deepest understanding of the nature of

[5] Blumer's criticisms are so blunt that it is easy to miss brief qualifications granting his imprimatur to a research practice he otherwise thoroughly pilloried. Blumer in this instance appears to restore broad and significant usefulness to variable analysis with a brief paragraph which includes these statements: "[I]n many instances the interpretation ... may be fixed .... Where such stabilized interpretation occurs and recurs, variable analysis would have no need to consider the interpretation. (Blumer 1969a, p. 134)." Despite this qualification his arguments on variable analysis seriously circumscribe the usefulness of studies which fail to examine how conditions represented as variables enter into and are responded to by interpretive processes. This much seems to be true even in stabilized schemes of interpretation. Contrary to the statement quoted from Blumer, even stable interpretations guide action and mediate effects of variables.

what we are studying. Blumer is convinced that symbolic interactionism sees furthest into the nature of social reality and that method must be selected accordingly. Hammersley (1989 p. 217), despite much that he favors in Blumer's aims and views, finds a dilemma in this close interdependence between Blumer's perspective and method.

> Blumer takes symbolic interactionism as a relatively fixed and certain body of knowledge about the nature of human social life.... Blumer seeks to justify naturalistic method in terms of symbolic interactionism and then establishes the validity of symbolic interactionism on the basis of naturalistic method. The circularity of this argument is obscured by his implicit reliance on the idea that the nature of the social world can be directly apprehended.

Blumer, however, certainly recognizes that concepts can mislead us. He makes it clear enough that neither particular concepts nor the broader perspective is absolute. One way that Blumer shows that he does not take symbolic interactionism as a "fixed and certain body of knowledge," is his pointed challenges to readers to test the concepts of symbolic interactionism for themselves. His insistence on empirical testing explicitly includes the concepts comprising symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969a p. 50, *passim*). While perspective guides selection of methods, method guides empirical studies to refine and re-form the concepts of a perspective. Each concept used by the perspective of symbolic interactionism is subject to testing that may cause it to be sustained, modified, or cast aside.

Hammersley's suggestion that Blumer relies on "the idea that the nature of the social world can be directly apprehended" also deserves attention. It is true that Blumer calls for the "direct examination of

the empirical social world (Blumer 1969a p. 47)," but he is emphatic that this occurs in terms of concepts used to give form to the social objects under study. Even though, he does not specify research protocols for making observations (treating them as limiting blinders giving a misplaced sense of objectivity), Blumer's method leaves no room to imagine that raw reality is directly known. Concepts are essential to indicate and act toward social reality. "Exploration" and "inspection," his broad characterizations of the tasks of research, must use concepts. Blumer does not spell out detailed research techniques, but he does make clear that what we ascertain about social reality is mediated by concepts, not directly apprehended..

It also should not be overlooked that some consequential empirical observations can be established without refined, subtle techniques. Blumer's (1988c) observation that sectors of a mass society are interdependent, yet sufficiently autonomous to change independently, is central to his inventive discussion of mass society. A crux of his argument regarding public opinion is the observation that various actors have drastically different impacts on public decisions. Although these are telling facts for arguments about significant concepts, they do not require refined techniques or special protocols of procedure to be ascertained.

Blumer's emphasis on empirical tests of concepts, thus, clarifies both of the issues raised by Hammersley. In principle, both the concepts of symbolic interactionism and the efficacy of naturalistic inquiry are matters for empirical and pragmatic appraisals.[6] "Direct observation" does not mean some sort of unmediated apprehension of

[6] Blumer often attempts to show a need to test and re-form concepts by evaluating the lack of progress shown by a sociological field. Cumulating results and generic concepts are goals of science that Blumer repeatedly sees sociological research fields as failing to attain (e.g., Blumer 1971, 1988c). His criticisms typically pin blame on concepts. He also proposes directions for improving concepts and in some instances re-forms an existing concept. Invariably, Blumer is working with central concepts of the discipline. In addition to testing concepts, Blumer sometimes mentions examining relations between concepts as an aspect of his method.

reality, because reality is indicated or inspected only with a concept. Blumer's substantive articles are usually silent concerning empirical cases and method, and he did little to illustrate concretely the procedures of exploration and inspection in his essay on method. His method, however, gives broad indications of the importance of empirical studies test concepts. In Blumer's view, empirical research undertaken to advance sociology as a science should test concepts.

Baugh (1990), also a sympathetic critic, points out tensions between Blumer's perspective on social life and his avowal of scientific aims for empirical research. Meaningfully-guided, situated, interactively built-up social action constitutes social life. Blumer's maxim that method must respect nature directs empirical studies toward subjective, local, created antecedents of action. These premises circumscribe the logical possibility of generalizing about causes of social action's emergence.

> ... Blumer contended that the inherent limits of [research] were set by the qualitative inconstancy of the factors merging in ... social action, especially by ... *emergence*. Yet, the manner in which such emergence is conceived raises a pivotal issue for social research. If ... qualitative emergence is [spontaneous] ... , then *any* mode of social research is rendered problematic, apparently becoming limited to a historical reconstruction of action (Baugh 1990 p. 87 [original emphases]).

Although Baugh is careful to add that Blumer does not portray social life as randomly spontaneous, he raises reasonable questions for sociologists who are attracted to the fluid imagery of symbolic interactionism and who, like Blumer, are also committed to scientific aims. How does a method that respects the locally-built-up nature of social life yield more than descriptions of interactions and situated meanings? How can knowledge from empirical studies of emergent spontaneous, meaning-guided actions systematically accumulate? This dilemma becomes less acute when we recognize the kind of science Blumer's method seeks from empirical studies. The scientific result often envisioned by sociologists is explanation in terms

of a cause. Although the difference is not absolute, Blumer's method sees the scientific fruit of empirical studies as grasping the nature of social objects. The results of empirical studies accumulate, not as verified, lawful causes, but as refined concepts to serve as instruments for indicating social objects and understanding their operations.

Blumer's method is justified by his perspectives on science and the nature of social life. His emphasis on direct observation of ongoing interaction and his criticisms of other methods are at many points corollaries of symbolic interactionism. Concept testing, however, is equally fundamental in his method. Rather than merely reflecting his particular perspective on society, it derives from the central place given to concepts in his views of science and how scientific understanding is empirically improved.

Empirical Tests of Concepts

The notion of "concept" is central to Blumer's depiction of his perspective and method. Particular functions and the complex form that concepts are given in his scheme clarify what about a concept can be empirically tested. While he does not explicitly present them as issuing from empirical tests of concepts, some of Blumer's substantive arguments illustrate the kinds of results that may be pursued with empirical tests of concepts.

The Concept in Blumer's Scheme

As Blumer (1969a [1931], pp. 153-170) once took the trouble to affirm, a science without concepts is unthinkable. He sometimes refers to sociology's subject matter as "social objects." A social object is indicated, unified, and understood with a concept. In an important sense sociological concepts form social objects. Blumer's emphasis on sociological concepts conforms with a more general perspective on how human beings understand and act toward reality. A concept allows an individual to indicate objects to himself and to

others. It guides human action toward the reality whose nature it attempts to grasp. Understanding, action, and interaction are predicated on concepts of the social reality toward which they are directed. This is the fundamental and distinctive way humans address and adjust to reality. A concept tends to be sustained when it guides actions that are not blocked. In these instances understanding or action guided by a concept is experienced as satisfactorily meshing with reality. When experience suggests orientation toward an object has gone awry, an attempt can be made to adjust by re-forming our concept of it.

The scientific aspects of sociology are specialized concepts. Use, assessment, and adjustment of concepts through tests against obdurate social reality are prominent in Blumer's underlying image of empirical research. His explicit emphasis on the concepts orienting sociologists toward reality is not a mere preliminary to elaborate techniques of sampling, measurement, and data analysis. Concept testing is at the heart of his view of science. Empirical study tests a concept by assessing how it orients understanding and action. Tests of concepts apparently depend on a human capacity to detect insufficiencies in guided understandings and actions. When action (including understanding) toward a social object is unsuccessful, a prepared mind may "catch"[7] indications of reality's obduracy and reform the concept that guides subsequent actions. Thus, according to Blumer, a concept focuses empirical study and—in being sustained, re-formed, or discarded—is also the result of empirical study.

[7] "Catching" is not "direct apprehension." Other (perhaps mundane) concepts are needed to indicate and interpret ways a sociological concept being tested does not square with empirical social reality. A mind is prepared to catch indications of reality by perspective more than by mastery of precise research techniques. Minds are prepared and sensitized differently. Indications made and noted by one may not be noted by others, particularly if they are not routine. Note that both Blumer's attempts to change sociology by criticism and persuasion (rather than with data) and his views on how scientific fields have changed historically are consistent with the overriding importance he attributes to the concepts by the discipline and by individual researchers.

Concepts discussed by Blumer are too complex to be conveyed by a definition. Extended discussion and several subsidiary terms are needed to convey a concept. A sociological concept in Blumer's sense is analytical by spelling out essential constituent elements of a social object. Where others might see a multi-variate field, Blumer (true to the term's etymology) sees one concept that "grasps together" many elements. The subsidiary terms identify disparate elements or moments united in a concept. His statements on social problems (Blumer 1971) and on social unrest and collective protest (Blumer 1978), for example, specify stages and the mechanisms that carry a process forward from one stage to the next. In asserting the nature of mass society, Blumer (1988c) discusses essential analytical elements of the concept. Elements are not discussed as variable properties, but as characteristics essential to the make up of a social object.

A concept is synthetic by uniting its elements with imagery or logic (Blumer 1990 p. 161).[8] Accordingly, a particular emphasis of Blumer's substantive arguments is to assess the imagery that unites a concept. Becker (1998, pp. 10-11) credits Blumer with convincing students of the crucial importance of sociologists' "underlying imagery of ... the phenomena" and of the inadequacy of the imagery provided by leading perspectives on social life. Becker gives the sense that few escaped the grip of the conviction Blumer conveyed and adds (1998, p. 11):

> But once you accepted the idea that our usual social science imagery is lacking something, what do you do? Why is our imagery so bad? How do we improve it? I suffered, with other students the difficulties that came from seeing the problem but no solution. Blumer let us down there. He was merciless in exposing the failure of sociologists to respect, or even to know much about what he always called "the obdurate character of social life as a process of interacting selves."

[8] A concept "grasps together" its several elements with an "underlying imagery," "unifying logic," and "inner logic." Explored carefully, the contexts in which Blumer uses each of these labels might distinguish their meanings. Here they are roughly equated. Each indicates that a concept (in Blumer's sense) has an underlying unity, which, one supposes, is imagery, if "pictured," and is logical, if the mechanisms of its connections are spelled out.

Students persuaded and poised to respond to the power of his critiques were without a sufficient guide to rectify these shortcomings.[9] Although it does not specify concrete research operations, Blumer's essay on method (published long after the seminar scenes Becker is recalling) continues this earlier emphasis on the imagery unifying a concept. Several of his substantive articles can be consulted as guides to the kinds of results that might be sought by testing concepts.[10]

[9] Becker (1998) continues on to provide valuable suggestions about such practical guides to research.

[10] Tests of *concepts* must be distinguished from tests of *hypotheses*. Blumer does compare a concept in its initial development with a hypothesis in the sense that "its value is suggested but unknown (Blumer 1969a [1931] p. 166)." However, he strongly and extensively criticizes hypothesis tests for a host of shortcomings. He argues, for example, that hypothesis-testing protocols are taken as, but actually are not, "a guarantee that one is respecting the nature of the empirical world (Blumer 1969a p.29)." He remarks, "The hypothesis rarely embodies or reflects the theory ... so crucially that [the theory] rides or falls with the fate of the hypothesis being tested," and none of "those theoretical schemes that are now passé disappeared because ... hypotheses deduced from them did not stand up (Blumer 1969a p. 30). Concept testing, on the other hand, is a fundamental, yet relatively unremarked-upon aspect of Blumer's method. Awareness of it helps us to understand how Blumer (1978) could have studied "several scores of cases" for an article that such an acute and chronic critic as McPhail (1989) found to lack an empirical basis. It seems very likely that over many years Blumer had been inspecting and exploring these cases to evaluate and re-form the concepts of social unrest and collective protest. This inference suggests that the article is comprised of re-formed, unified, and elaborated concepts which are the results of his empirical research. More broadly: (1) The notion of testing concepts is essential to understanding the method described in *Symbolic Interactionism* (Blumer 1969a). (2) It provides a standpoint for interpreting how Blumer might have conceived of his substantive arguments. (3) It indicates a rationale for research that merits further attention. Although it is intertwined with other fundamentals of his method, concept testing can be understood and used independently.

Empirical Tests and Substantive Results

Empirical testing of concepts is the main objective of empirical research described by Blumer (1969a pp. 42-45, 158).[11] It is the means to assess and improve sociological understanding of social reality.

> When I declare that the content conceived in a concept can be studied separately, what I mean is that one can take an abstraction . . . [empirically] test and specify its characters, ascertain its range, and endeavor to determine more of its nature.... [This] is constantly being done in science.... [T]hrough the concept one may detach a content of experience and make it the object of separate study. It is only with this possibility that science may come into existence (1969a p. 158, 159).

Empirical studies test and adjust understanding of a social object as it is captured by the concept we have of it. The result of a concept test turns on encountering either indications unanticipated by our concept or the absence of features anticipated. Either may be taken as an opportunity for a new understanding with a re-formed concept (Blumer 1969a, pp. 153-170). Here Blumer's insistence on the obduracy of social reality is crucial. Social reality "talks back" (1969a pp. 22-23) to the researcher situated and able to "hear" it. Its character is not plastic before our concepts.[12]

[11] This discussion neglects Blumer's advocacy of direct observation of ongoing interaction and taking the role of the other in research because they are better known.

[12] The prepared researcher who interprets human group life with the concept at hand is only in a proper posture to note the fit of a concept to this obdurate social reality. This method does not guarantee results. Concept testing certainly must significantly depend on the readiness of a researcher to open himself to experience and monitor and express what he "catches" as social reality "talks back." Blumer thinks that this sociological use of human conception and perception is decisively conditioned by the "guiding imagery" of social reality used. But, an account of how the researcher scrutinizes and inspects what he indicates to himself with a sociological concept is missing. Perhaps this is why Baugh (1990), for example, says that Blumer does not address the "epistemological" side of research methods. He leaves the process through which concepts are reformed, sifted out, and put to use virtually

We do not know to what extent Blumer's substantive arguments ensued from empirical tests of concepts. Yet, several of his articles can suggest the types of results he might have envisioned from the concept tests discussed in his method. First, the substantive articles under consideration here are not aimed at naming new concepts (although they sometimes name new elements of a concept). Their main business is to assess and re-form central concepts that already enjoy wide currency and long use in sociology. His emphasis on improving existing concepts is in keeping with Blumer's (1969a, p. 169) warning not to "manufacture [concepts] with reckless abandon, with no concern as to whether there is need for them." New concepts are appropriate when needed to indicate and grasp a new range of facts. Otherwise, it appears, studies faithful to Blumer's method will test and perhaps re-form existing synthetic concepts that grasp together several elements into a coherent social object.

Blumer's articles on the concepts of fashion, mass society, and public opinion suggest the kinds of results that may be sought by testing concepts. Relative simplicity makes Blumer's (1969b) argument about fashion an accessible exemplar of results from empirical testing to re-form a concept. Incidently, in a rare reference to a particular empirical case, Blumer discloses that studies of the Paris clothing fashion scene influenced these results. His argument weeds out elements unjustifiably included in the concept, assigns lesser significance to a unifying logic, and proposes a direction to search for a new unifying imagery. Blumer (1969b pp. 276-278) finds that the elements of aberrant irrationality and trivial social consequences, as well as an imagery of class differentiation, are not adequate characterizations of fashion. These empirical claims are a basis of his conclusion that the concept of fashion should be changed. His argument is not that

unspecified. Judging from his substantive arguments, he may have thought that a crude empiricism would suffice for the circumstances and the questions of sociology in his time. It is conceivable that Blumer would accept a range of research techniques applied to testing concepts, because he advocates flexible exploration from many angles.

existing elements and logic of the fashion concept are "wrong" or never useful. Blumer acknowledges, for example, that Simmel's concept of fashion as class differentiation orients us to understand some instances of fashion. Yet, it does not illuminate important instances of fashion in modern life. Blumer does not set forth a new imagery of fashion, but suggests that the search for one concentrate on examining attempts to anticipate the leading edges of public taste in modern life.

Blumer (1988c) does re-form the concept of mass society. The unifying logic that he suggests depends on an apparently empirical claim. The concept is built upon the imagery that sectors of a mass society are interdependent, yet change independently. Blumer proposes that the dynamic of ongoing mutual adjustments among changing societal sectors should be at the core of our understanding of mass society. In a third substantive argument, Blumer (1969a pp. 195-208) criticizes the underlying logic of one concept of public opinion. The censure turns on a disparity between the concept of public opinion used in polling and Blumer's understanding of how public opinion actually enters into public decisions. Public opinion polling counts equally the response of each respondent. Blumer's understanding is that different individuals and groups have vastly unequal consequences for actual public decisions. Although Blumer does not identify the specific information he inspected, it is unmistakable that to appraise a concept he is asserting what amounts to an empirical claim.[13] These three articles are not exceptions. Criticizing existing concepts, indicating constituent elements, and portraying unifying imagery are prominent in other substantive arguments made by Blumer. The justifications for his arguments often amount to empirical claims. Statements that groups differ widely in impacts on

[13] It is interesting that the telling fact that Blumer makes the basis of his criticism of public opinion polling was already well known, especially among sociologists. Here, as elsewhere, Blumer seems to explore the implications of crude, even obvious, empirical facts for concepts, rather than collecting more facts with sophisticated techniques.

public decisions, that class differentiation often is not central to the dynamic of fashion under modernity, and that sectors of mass societies change independently are the kinds of results that can arise from empirical tests of concepts. Blumer's substantive arguments remain important to this day. If empirical tests of concepts helped to produce them, testing concepts is an aspect of his method that should not to be ignored.

Industrialization as an Agent of Social Change (Blumer 1990) suggests another outcome of concept testing. When it was written in the early 1960s, this study was ahead of its time in identifying problems of theoretical schemes concerning industrialization (Strauss 1991; Lyman 1991; particularly Udy 1991). Its arguments sustain effective criticism at a very high level, yet Blumer left his manuscript unpublished—perhaps because his studies did not allow him to identify an "inner logic" to unite industrialization as a concept (Blumer 1990 pp. 145-167). This result is discouraging, because it suggests that a great deal of coherent study can be invested by a brilliant sociologist without achieving his aims. Nevertheless, *Industrialization* also suggests that much can be learned about what is misleading in a concept even when research does not succeed in re-forming it.[14]

Blumer (1990 pp. 161-164) sought to constitute industrialization as a social object by grasping what is essential and generic to its nature. Showing affinity with Weber (Maines and Morrione 1990), he discusses requirements for a generic concept of industrialization.

> What is needed is a high level of abstraction, which will enable one to disengage what is logically essential to industrialization in its "pure" form. Such an abstraction would trim off what is adventitious, accidental, incidental, and unique in the empirical instances in which industrialization operates (Blumer 1990, p. 162).

[14] Blumer concludes that further studies would be needed to understand and act toward industrialization. This common way our literature says "I don't know" is uncommon in Blumer's writing.

He ends the report on his study in pessimism about forming such a concept of industrialization. He finds much to observe about the concept of industrialization, but does not find imagery that sets it apart as a class of social objects. One shortcoming that he sees is the failure to capture how industrialization enters into human group life. This highlights an important aspect of Blumer's views concept and is signaled by an inability to represent industrialization with imagery representing how it distinctively operates, has its effects, is shaped, and can be addressed by public policy. What is decisive also may be elusive, and understanding of what is decisive in the nature of a social object is what Blumer's method seeks through concept testing.[15]

Blumer (1964d) points out that sociology's concepts seldom are generic. To undertake empirical studies to make a concept generic is, indeed, to aim high. Certainly few can afford to invest effort on the scale that would be required to arrive at a generic concept. Short of borrowing Blumer's genius for persuasion and polemic, what can one reasonably expect to accomplish by testing concepts? Blumer's substantive arguments suggest that specification of conceptual elements, criticism of underlying imagery, and revision of unifying logic may be achieved by concept tests. Those who value understanding of the nature of human social life (as distinguished from prediction and explanation of it) will find such results valuable enough to accept a more explicit place for concept testing among the legitimate objectives of empirical studies.

[15] It is likely that Blumer's method of testing concepts carries no certainty of yielding desired results. One of his arguments in particular (Blumer 1969d) expresses pessimism about the prospects for sociology to produce generic concepts. A generic concept is the particular hallmark of mature sciences that permits counting to be significant as well as generalization of reproducible causal effects. A lack of generic concepts thwarts identification of causal variables in both case studies and multiple case comparisons. A tested concept has usefulness if only for the special purpose of understanding one case which can then be distinguished as distinctive. Work can accumulate in refined concepts.

On the other hand, concept testing lacks the security of steps laid out by a protocol of research, as in hypothesis testing, and the safety net of a fallback product, as in the thick descriptions and newly-coined terms of ethnographies. Also, Blumer's studies of particular concepts (social unrest, for example) apparently stretched over decades. To be more widely implemented, how to test concepts must be clarified and a briefer cycle from empirical study to publication permitted. Those who wish to test concepts will be assisted by some specification of procedures more definite than "exploration" or "inspection" and by objectives more proximate than forming a generic concept. The researcher must articulate the value of the results of empirical concept tests, and the community to whom their results are communicated must define concept testing as a legitimate form of empirical study. This is particularly so because few can hope to achieve the quality attained by Blumer's substantive arguments. If it is to be a routine rationale for empirical studies, results must somehow accumulate from the short term projects of many, rather than—as for Blumer—from the lifetime of one. These legitimations and specifications of testing concepts as an aim and procedure are worth pursuing so that it may become as viable a form of research as it is important.

Conclusion

Blumer is noted for advocating the sort of understanding that comes from grasping the situated meanings needed to take the role of the other whose actions are under study. Blumer's arguments about method, however, suggest more than this (rightfully taken) justification for ethnographic study. They remind us that Blumer's own substantive writing about public opinion, mass society, fashion, social problems, and other concepts often does emphasize elements that cannot be directly observed in local interactions. These substantive arguments do not deny the centrality in social life that Blumer elsewhere attributes to meanings and interaction. They build upon it to characterize the nature of collectivities and their acts. Grasping to-

gether the elements of such "large"[16] social objects requires additional understandings beyond those gained by taking the role of the other. In securing understandings of *what* these objects *are* and *how* they *act* Blumer re-forms views of how people and groups build up social life.

Blumer's rationale for testing concepts comes out of particular understandings of the nature of science and, more broadly, of how human life deals with obdurate reality. From this perspective sociology is just another (perhaps more rationalized) attempt to unblock action toward and understanding of social objects. Blumer's essay on method presents empirical tests of concepts as the essential scientific pursuit. This view of science marks a distinctive path across sociology's aims and practices. Conceivably studies could be undertaken to test concepts whenever the purpose of research is to improve sociology as a science. More modestly, empirical research to test and re-form concepts deserves attention as a counterpoint to "variable analysis" (including qualitative studies that concentrate on naming explanatory factors.) The present obscurity of concept testing, however, suggests that the day when Blumer's views on science and concept testing dominate sociology is not at hand.

Finally, it deserves to be repeated that in making his substantive arguments Blumer seldom proposed new concepts or renamed existing

[16] Blumer (1958, while defining the field of collective behavior) contrasts the character of interaction in small and large groups. Small groups have immediate face to face interactions and relationships. We can see that it is these interactions that are well studied using the direct observation. On the other hand, many important interactions in a large group are not face-to-face. Blumer notes that this significantly changes the character of the interaction. It also limits the utility of direct observation. Dispersed in time and space, and as a result likely to be remote from an observer, only small slices of the indirect coordination of the joint action in any large group can be captured by direct observation. Although, Blumer cautions against resting our sense of the nature of human group life on studies of "the products of interaction" rather than interaction itself, studies of large groups, must rest on inspection of documents and other products.

ideas. ("Symbolic interactionism" is a notable exception.) He took central, established concepts (race prejudice, the color line, power relations, collective protest, social problems, mass society, public opinion) and sought to improve them. Herbert Blumer certainly had the vision and talent to form new concepts analogically, speculatively, and from casually selected inspirations. To empirically test the fit of an existing concept's elements and its unifying logic against "scores of instances" would certainly have been a more tedious, difficult task for him. What a knotty problem and prolonged process it would be to attempt to separate the generic from the adventitious or incidental for the large social objects he studied. Blumer's argument on method shows why he thought this more difficult task is also more important for sociology.

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The World of Youthful Drug Use*

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Social Thought & Research, 2000, Vol. 23, 1&2

The World of Youthful Drug Use

Introduction

This report presents the results of our efforts to establish a program designed to induce youthful drug users to abstain from further use of drugs. This program was conducted under Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Grants #65029 and #66022, and ran for a period of eighteen months.

The program was inaugurated on the premise that just as youths inducted each other into the use of drugs, they might be organized to use their influence on each other to desist in such use. We had been impressed by some success attending efforts of this sort in the case of older opiate addicts. We had evidence that a number of such older opiate addicts who wished to divorce themselves from their addiction were able through combined association and effort to have reasonable success in maintaining sobriety and in helping others to give up their addictive habit. We reason analogically that a similar kind of enterprise might be fruitful

* We wish to thank Dr. June Leahy for bringing this article to our attention and Dr. Neil Fligstein of the Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, for granting us permission to print this research report—editors.