

EDITOR'S REMARKS

The Art of Acknowledgments

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Flipping through the hundreds of books that cross the threshold of *Contemporary Sociology* each year heightens one's awareness of a "sociological language." One aspect of this language—a consistent set of words, phrases, and usages—is often remarked upon and criticized, especially by the St. Georges among us who aspire to slay the dragons of jargon. Unfortunately, words like fractalization, precariosity, pro-financialization, and anti-oppressionist are like catnip to our field, even though they aren't real . . . and even though they are the reason that friends, clever children, and some woodland creatures shy away when we start to talk shop.

A second aspect of the sociological language has received far less attention: our strict conventions about style and tone. While there is a great deal of variation in how capably sociology is written, there is remarkable consistency in how ideas are expressed and the tenor of the language used. These constraints, it seems, are not to be trifled with. For example, I have a friend who enjoys flouting the conventions of academic writing. This friend will make jokes, muse reflexively about the limitations of the arguments being constructed, and even include dialogue—not quotes from respondents, but, you know, Plato-like dialogue—in submissions to our most respected journals. Although it is not surprising that some reviewers and editors take issue with these stylistic choices, the disdain, and even anger, evoked by these violations of convention is telling. The style, to these reviewers, signals a lack of seriousness in the analysis, distracts from the line of reasoning, and undercuts claims to sociological value—they go so far as to chide, "this is not sociology." Clearly, a moral boundary has been crossed.

Granted, there is an argument to be made that sociological writing is a serious business. Sociology would like to keep its seat at the far end of the scientific table, and this requires an air of objectivity, a commitment to sober reasoning, a goodly number of statistical manipulations and asterisks. Even more, sociology's expressive conventions help distance our field from the looser language and logic of journalists, drunken interlocutors, bloggers, and popular politicians.

It is hard not to wonder, however, if we take these conventions of seriousness a bit too seriously. Sure, we occasionally allow some leeway in an article title—an obvious pun, maybe, or, if it's Friday afternoon, a reference to a rock lyric—but that is about as far as it goes. Anti-style is the style of choice in most sociological writing. And this aversion to artfulness is not limited to write-ups of analyses, literature reviews, and methods. It invades even the most personalized components of our writing: the acknowledgment sections and prefaces of our books. Having perused thousands of these, it is striking how formulaic they usually are. They begin with a brief statement on the origins of the project and then turn to obligatory descriptions of long delays and a winding path to completion; next come expressions of appreciation to—and almost always in this order—collaborators, publishers and editors, institutional and financial supporters, the collectivities and individuals who provided feedback, close friends, extended family, children, and spouses.¹ Our scientific demeanor begins before we even go on stage; the bowl, as some say, is hotter than the soup.

¹ Looking back over the acknowledgments section of my own book suggests (somewhat embarrassingly) that I am in no way immune to the pressures of these conventions.

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It is refreshing, then, when someone plays with these conventions, drops the charade of seriousness for a moment, and makes it impossible not to recognize the frames within which we are operating. No one I know of in sociology was better at this than Art Stinchcombe. His acknowledgment sections and prefaces deserve a *Festschrift* chapter of their own. At one point or another he tweaks the nose of all of the aforementioned conventions, and in doing so provides a more honest appraisal of how work gets done and of the person behind the work. Here are some favorites:

Rebellion in High School (1964)

"Probably most people who have not tried to write a long piece of intellectual work feel, as I used to, that acknowledgments are mostly cant and ritual. But it is, as I have found out, virtually impossible to do a sustained intellectual work without both social support and criticism, suggestion, and help. It is also actually the case that those who help do not produce errors, omissions, faults of writing, or inanities of thought that remain."

Constructing Social Theories (1968)

"My wife, unlike most wives who appear in prefaces, has been alternately a hindrance and a help, impatient and patient, destructive and supportive of the enterprise. I would not have married the *Griselda* that most authors evidently marry."

Theoretical Methods in Social History (1978)

"Other questions and comments also convinced me that there are serious questions about the historical accuracy of some of the monographs I use here to illustrate my argument. I am forced to take the irresponsible position that historical accuracy is not my main business here. Each reader and critic who knows the history better than I do will have to judge how far factual inaccuracies damage my epistemological point."

"My wife put up with living in a suburb so that I could have my year at NIAS. When such a conflict of interest occurs in a marriage, it is

illegitimate for one of the partners to appeal over the head of the other to a general public, to argue that it was all worth it. I consequently do not make that appeal in this preface."

"The generosity of the Dutch government makes possible a cosmopolitan intellectual environment, ideal for the kind of research that requires reflection and reading. The ratio of money for reflection to money for busily collecting data has put a disproportionate value on facts rather than thought, and the forward looking policy at NIAS helps redress the balance."

Crime and Punishment: Changing Attitudes in America (1980)

"A preface is supposed to express also the sentimental ties that held the enterprise together and that tied its participants to the world. We quite often hurt each other, got angry, and were ashamed when it turned out that we had been wrong. We were, in short, an ideal-typical work team."

Economic Sociology (1983)

"When I began this work a decade ago my intent was to provide a basis in economic sociology for a much larger book on comparative macrosociology. Recently, when faced with what I had actually produced, my editor at Academic Press said he felt like an Eskimo confronted with a beached whale: perhaps there was a good deal of value in it, but as it was, it was quite unmanageable."

"It will be obvious from what I have said that the process of writing this book was often uncomfortable, and that it is not at all what I started out to write. Nevertheless, when I read it over I get flashes of pleasure. I believe those flashes are more frequent because many people have helped me in one way or another. The fact that the pleasure is compounded with vanity makes it clear that I accept responsibility for the book."

Information and Organizations (1990)

"Carol A. Heimer read the entire manuscript with an eye to the argument that should have

been there rather than to the failures of the argument as written. She also thought that the book should be written in English, which agreed with my convictions better than with my behavior. Being married to a person who criticizes one's work has many advantages, but the most important to me was that she knew me well enough not to try to get me to change things that I would never change. Tempering the wind to the shorn lamb may not be the best thing for the reader, but it helped me to accept more improvements to the text than I would otherwise have done."

"An anonymous reviewer for the University of Chicago Press provided sufficient detail about why the manuscript was beyond redemption to help me repair some parts."

Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World (1995)

"It is essential to doing the sort of work in secondary sources that I do here to be able to browse in a library with a good collection. I mainly used the University of Chicago Regenstein Library for browsing, and I greatly appreciate its hospitality. Except for asking where I could find a pencil sharpener on the third floor, I made only indirect use of the staff."

"I have tried to write this preface in accord with norms of scientific modesty, though all my friends know I have no gift for modesty. I continue with the normative disclaimer that says that all the errors that remain in this book are my responsibility. But I am always nervous at this point that I have been too convincing in the required modesty. I remember too well the comment of my father when I described someone as modest: 'Well, he has a lot to be modest about.' False modesty is the only kind of any use in a preface."

When Formality Works: Authority and Abstraction in Law and Organizations (2001)

"The institutional source of support that heads the list is TIAA-CREF. My retirement pension ought instead to be called TIAA-CREF Emeritus Professorship in Whatever I Please."

"Kai and Per Stinchcombe, my children living at home during this project, were a joy. I do not imagine that improved the book much, but it sure helped make life worthwhile while I wrote it."

"Bruce Carruthers is the senior author of Chapter 5. . . In a certain sense his authorship is recognition enough, and praise from a junior author to a senior author for knowing more, thinking faster, and working harder is out of place. I will therefore make no mention of that, or of my wisdom in choosing him as co-author."

The Logic of Social Research (2005)

"It will become obvious to the reader that my favorite methodologist is myself. It would be a suspicious methods book whose author had not taken his or her own advice. . . . There is, of course, a good deal of vanity in choosing oneself as an exemplar, and pride is one of the chief sins, both in theology and scientific ethics. I apologize for choosing myself whenever I could think of no better example, and for the motivated blindness that has no doubt caused me to miss correctly identifying my betters."

As anyone who has read Stinchcombe's work can attest, his wry sense of humor does not disappear with the Roman numeral page numbers, but percolates throughout the text of his books. He had enough confidence in his ideas—as the excerpts above make clear—to not worry that a touch of lightheartedness and self-deprecation would put his (or the field's) scientific union card at risk. Stinchcombe's tactics (if we can call them that) serve as a reminder that sociology need not be so wedded to the conventions of our sociological language. It is important that sociology and the knowledge it produces be taken seriously, but the field's strengths will never lie solely in its unimpeachable logic, its pure paradigms, or its discovery of immutable laws. Lacking a Newtonian moment, the value of our particular scientific enterprise will always also lie in its creativity—its knack for consistently generating novel insights into social processes and the contexts in which they operate.

As Stinchcombe's work exemplifies, playing with these conventions—whether through humor, reflexivity, or bits of quirkiness—can be a valuable asset in the creative aspects of our written work. When used correctly, this play allows us to look behind the curtain even as the show is being performed, revealing how ideas unfold, the possibilities and limits of claims, and the inspired messiness of a process that is too often

sanitized beyond recognition. It also leads to more lively engagement with our audiences and has the ability to spark new ways of thinking about what questions to ask and what answers are possible. There is, in short, an art to our science, and we stifle ourselves by holding our conventions too dear. So let us pause for a moment, settle back in our chairs, tilt the world slightly to the left, smile, and remember the unique contributions of art.