On the use of definitions in sociology

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Abstract

Definitions may seem marginal to the sociological enterprise but can be very useful; however, they can also lead to serious errors. Examples of both are given in this article. Different types of definitions are presented, and their relevance for sociology is highlighted. A stipulative definition, for example, is very useful in sociology, as opposed to lexical and ostensive definitions. The definition of a concept that is used in a sociological analysis has to be sociological in nature, and the concept cannot have the same meaning as it has in everyday language. Additional items to bear in mind when a definition is put together are discussed, including some tips on how to proceed that come from political science (Sartori, Collier, Goertz). A definition can also be very helpful in the research process itself by indicating which are the important aspects of some phenomenon to focus on (Weber, Blumer). On the negative side, a term that is not properly defined may lead to misunderstandings as well as to a false sense of agreement with other uses of the term.

Keywords

concept, definition, theory, theory construction, Weber

Definitions may seem marginal to the sociological enterprise but they can be very useful; however, they can also lead to serious errors.[1] Examples of both are given in this article, which also contains information on how to construct a sociological definition, and how a close study of definitions can be of help in empirical research.

When definitions are discussed in sociology, which is not very often, it is typically because of what they have to say about a specific phenomenon or concept (for exceptions, see e.g. Bernard, 1941; Dodd, 1943; Hage, 1972: 62–84; Cohen, 1989: 127–46).

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The literature on the meaning of single sociological concepts is large, but less important to the issues discussed in this article.[2] Its focus is instead on the definition of sociological concepts in general: how a definition is structured in a certain way and why.

The illusion of the perfect definition

Whenever you work on a definition, it is tempting to try to find the perfect definition, a definition that captures the very essence of some phenomenon in such a way that your analysis will be dramatically improved. The classical example of this is Plato's ideas – a kind of abstract form into which all specific instances of some phenomenon can be included.

The existence of such an essentialist definition is, however, an illusion; and there are mainly two reasons for this. One is that sociology is not concerned with producing a definition that somehow represents 'the truth', in the way that, say, law or ethics do (Weber, 1978: 4). When an item is defined in a legal text, it represents the only acceptable way, in so far as the law is concerned. Similarly, in ethics, behavior may be defined as being in accordance with a moral truth or not.

To look for 'the perfect definition' is also illusory for a second reason. This is that, according to existing research, it is not possible to include all phenomena on a certain topic under one and the same definition. From Antiquity onwards, it was generally believed that a concept both can and should capture the essence of a phenomenon. Plato was cited above, but Aristotle and most thinkers after him have also advocated this view. Using a terminology that was not developed until many centuries later, so-called sufficient as well as necessary conditions must be fulfilled for this type of definition to be correct.

This, however, has been shown *not* to be possible, both through logical arguments, in philosophy, and with the help of experiments, in cognitive science. Wittgenstein is usually credited with being the first to have pointed out that it is not possible to gather all instances of some phenomenon under one and the same definition. The famous example he uses in *Philosophical Investigations* is that of 'game' (Wittgenstein, 1953: 31–4). All the different types of games that exist do not have a number of sufficient and necessary features in common. There is instead a so-called family resemblance between all the different games: some have one feature in common, others have some other.

Some years after Wittgenstein's pioneering analysis, which is generally seen as having ended the so-called classical theory of the concept, cognitive scientist Eleanor Rosch presented a similar analysis (e.g. Rosch and Mervis, 1975; Rosch, 1978; 1987; Earl, 2018). What she was able to demonstrate was that people do not define things by describing their key features; instead they compare them to a general picture they have of some phenomenon. If you see a new kind of bird, for example, you will typically compare it to what you see as the prototype of a bird (say, a pigeon).

Today, several decades later, a number of competing theories exist for how people create and define the kind of categories and concepts they use. Besides prototype theory, there is also exemplar theory, theory theory, semantic networks theory and Lakoff's theory of metaphors (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Novak and Canas, 2008; Margolis and Laurence, 2014). While these are somewhat different, they all have in common the

idea that it is not possible to define something by enumerating its sufficient and necessary conditions.

How to construct a useful definition

The first answer to the question of how to construct a useful definition is that it should be stipulative in nature. A stipulative definition is usually contrasted to lexical and ostensive definitions (e.g. Robinson, 1954; Gupta, 2015). A lexical definition is of the type you find in a common dictionary, which can be a dictionary in your own language or in that of another. These definitions typically focus on the meaning of a word in its everyday sense. You may not, for example, know what 'dissonance' means, or what the English equivalent of the German word 'U-Bahn' is. What you get from this type of a dictionary is not an exhaustive or precise definition, but one that is good enough for you to use the word and understand it. The purpose and function of this type of definition are practical; it helps you in your everyday life.

An ostensive definition is one that is given by pointing to examples. Again, this is a type of definition that is mainly used and useful in everyday language. You can, for example, indicate what a certain color looks like by pointing to some object with that color. This type of definition can be helpful when you teach, and also as a preliminary to presenting a full definition. It is, however, not recommended when you write up your research for publication.

What is most useful for sociologists is the stipulative definition. In this type of definition, the writer decides what the definition will be like, and also says this. To use a stipulative definition represents an opportunity to introduce clarity and precision into the text; it also allows the writer to highlight his or her possible improvement of a concept, and show what this consists of. The stipulative definition is, in other words, well suited for the reconceptualization of a concept.

There exist some unofficial rules for what a good definition should look like. It should first of all be as clear and concise as possible. Superfluous words should be eliminated; and as few sentences as possible used. A definition is often accompanied by an explication, which has as its task to explain and throw light on the definition (e.g. Merton, 1966; Weber, 1978: 57, n.4). The explication is usually longer than the definition.

Even if the explication succeeds in unpacking the definition and making it easier to understand, it also stops at a certain point. It does not, for example, give much attention to such items as context, scope and what name to give to a concept.[3] When you want to figure out the meaning of a quote from a text, you can always go back to the original passage, and in this way reconstruct the original meaning. This, however, is not possible with a definition, which is intended to stand alone. In this respect, it is more like an aphorism, which deliberately excludes everything but a central thought.

What has so far been said in this article fits all types of scientific definitions, whether they come from the natural sciences or the social sciences. When you produce a definition of a sociological concept, however, it has to be formulated in such a way that it clearly is *sociological*. Sociologists typically study patterns of social behavior, something which means that such patterns should also form the heart of the definition. Since sociology is pluralistic, there are different views of what constitutes the basic unit in

sociology. To mention the classic ones: social action (Weber), social facts (Durkheim), social forms (Simmel) and the class struggle (Marx).

It should also be pointed out that sociology does not simply study behavior, unless it takes a behavioristic stance. The element of *meaning* has also to be included in the analysis. This demand finds its clearest expression in Max Weber's view of sociology, where the basic unit is social action, which is defined as action that is invested with meaning (Weber, 1978: 4). The element of meaning does not explain why some social action comes out as it does, or that it has a certain effect; it is, however, *one* factor in this process, and a factor that needs to be included in the analysis.

An example may be useful at this point. The first chapter of *Economy and Society* is devoted to the presentation and explication of the basic concepts of sociology (Weber, 1978: 3–62). The chapter is built up in a very systematic way. Weber begins by giving a general definition of sociology, which is centered around social action. This is then followed by a number of other definitions that all build on this foundation, going from elementary ones to more complex concepts.

A social relationship is, for example, defined as two social actions that are oriented to one another. These can be either open or closed. The latter form the foundation for an organization, together with the idea of how actors should behave (*Ordnung*; order). Organizations that have a staff can take different forms, such as firms, churches and states. All of these definitions are followed by explications.

Weber's definition of 'conflict' can be used to illustrate what a carefully constructed definition of sociology may look like. After having first defined what constitutes a social action, a social relationship and an order, Weber presents the following definition: 'A social relationship will be referred to as "conflict" (*Kampf*) insofar as action is oriented intentionally to carrying out the actor's own will against the resistance of the other party or parties' (Weber, 1978: 38). This definition constructs a sociological definition in two moves. First, there is a direct reference to the concept of social relationship, which has been defined earlier in the chapter by Weber (actors who orient their social action to one another). And social action, to recall, constitutes the basic unit in Weber's definition of sociology (Weber, 1978: 4, 26–7). Second, a descriptive definition is provided of what Weber means by 'conflict', which has been deliberately constructed in such a way that it falls under the concept of 'social relationship'.

In Chapter 1 of *Economy and Society*, Weber occasionally comments on how to construct different types of definitions in sociology. If you, for example, want to emphasize the similarity between norms and laws, you will provide one set of definitions (pp. 33–6). If you at some other point want to relate law to domination, a different aspect of the law will be selected (p. 215).

The same phenomenon can, in other words, be given different definitions. It will also often be given different definitions in different sciences. A crime will, for example, be defined in one way in sociology and in another way in law. Another reason for different definitions is that a word can be a homonym, that is, mean different things (e.g. Merton, 1966).

There is also the fact that a concept may change content over the years. Many examples of this exist in sociology, including that of class. The concept of class was

originally linked to the idea of class struggle (Marx), then to life chances (Weber), and more recently to social mobility (e.g. Goldthorpe, 1987).

The current definition of a term should ideally express the cumulation of sociological insights over the years. If this is actually the case has to be to be investigated when a concept is used, unless a whiggish view of sociology is adopted: the current definition is always the correct one. Adding to the difficulties, there usually are a number of definitions of some concept in the contemporary literature. A close study of these, guided by a knowledge of which aspect of some concept or phenomenon one wants to emphasize, is needed in this case. Sociological dictionaries can be helpful, but one should also be wary of these. These are perhaps best used in the same spirit as when a tourist uses a pocket dictionary to get a first and helpful hint of what some foreign word means. The next and indispensable step, for the sociologist, is to consult high quality studies and statements by key researchers in the field.

The temptation to mix sociological definitions with everyday definitions

To what has just been said about the importance of investing definitions in sociology with a content that is clearly sociological in nature, the following can be added. It has to do with the fact that one feature of sociological terms that sets them apart from terms in many other sciences, is that they are also used by people in their everyday language. Sociologists, for example, sometimes take a term that is used in everyday language and turn it into a sociological concept (such as role and inequality). Sociological terms may also enter everyday language (such as charisma and lifestyle, e.g. Merton, 1982; Merton and Wolfe, 1995).

The problem with this is that the same term will have one sociological definition and another everyday (or lexical) definition. If the everyday meaning is used, the research will have difficulty in creating a sociological analysis and may instead end up with one that is based on folk wisdom. When different definitions of the same term are used, that also increases the chances of what can be called *the illusion of agreement* appearing. The same word is used but with different meaning, resulting in a superficial agreement.

In some situations, it can be added, there even exists an incentive to use non-sociological definitions instead of sociological ones. This can be the case when some issue or phenomenon is ~~honestly~~-charged. In this case, you may be applauded for using the 'wrong' definition. It can also lead to funding, attention, political support, and so on, that might otherwise not be forthcoming.

politically or socially

More on how to construct a definition: from political science

Political scientists have shown more interest than sociologists in the different ways in which a definition can be constructed; and they have done so as part of their discussion of concepts. The work that is presented in this section comes primarily from the area of comparative politics, where the discussion of concepts has been especially intense.[4]

According to a seminal article by Giovanni Sartori in 1970, political scientists were at the time paying far too little attention to concepts (Sartori, 1970; see also Collier and

Mahon, 1993). They either ignored concepts or used them poorly, in Sartori's view. They applied, for example, concepts that had been developed, with one set of problems in mind, to similar but different phenomena. Sartori referred to this as 'conceptual stretch-ing'. The problem with proceeding in this way is that it produces concepts that are vague and confusing; 'conceptual stretching' turns into 'conceptual straining' (Sartori, 1970: 1041).

Sartori also introduced another term that was to become central to the discussion of concepts among political scientists. This is the so-called 'ladder of abstraction', often referred to as the 'ladder of generality' among his followers. The basic idea is that the more attributes or properties you remove from the definition of a phenomenon, the more general the concept will be. Conversely, by adding adjectives to a concept, you can better specify the phenomenon (see also e.g. Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

An example may clarify. If you take the concept of revolution, you have a concept that is very broad in its application. There are political revolutions, religious revolutions, and so on. In Sartori's terminology, the *extension* of the concept of revolution is wide. Its *intension*, on the other hand, becomes narrower, the wider the extension is. The reason for this is that it denotes fewer concrete properties.

What this means is that a concept can be made broader or narrower by adding or subtracting adjectives. By adding, say, the adjective 'religious' or 'political' to 'revolu-tion', you can make it more precise. In a similar way you can make the expression 'religious revolution' or 'political revolution' more general by removing the adjective.

Another important contribution to the way a concept and a definition are constructed has been made by David Collier and his collaborators. They worked with the insight of Wittgenstein and cognitive scientists that concepts cannot be constructed in such a way that they satisfy both sufficient and necessary conditions. Referring to so-called family resemblance concepts, they have instead suggested that concepts can be constructed so that they fulfill some, but not all of what characterizes a phenomenon (e.g. Collier and Mahon, 1993).

Again, an example may be helpful. Let us assume that the following four phenomena can typically be found in a welfare state: unemployment compensation, workers com-pensation, pensions, and health insurance (Goertz, 2006: 75). We may then define a welfare state as a state where at least two of these four criteria are present (or three, if we want to increase the intension of the definition).

Apart from Collier and the scholars around him, there are also some other political scientists who have taken part in the discussion of concepts and made interesting con-tributions (for a list, see e.g. Adcock and Collier, 2001: 532, n.3). Of these, in particular, Gary Goertz should be mentioned since he has summarized the Sartori-Collier tradition in a very helpful way in what has become a standard work, *Social Science Concepts: A User's Manual* (Goertz, 2006).

Goertz has also added importantly to the tradition he describes, for example, by pointing out that it may be helpful not only to define what a concept is, but also what it is *not* (what Goertz calls negative scope). If you study war, for example, it is important also to be clear what non-war is. Another interesting insight is Goertz's observation that quantitative scholars tend to eliminate definitions and concepts from their analyses, while qualitative scholars are very interested in these. What he refers to as 'Goertz's

Second Law' reads as follows: 'The amount of attention devoted to a concept [including its definition] is inversely related to the attention devoted to the quantitative measure' (Goertz, 2006: 2).

Goertz is currently working on a second edition of *Social Science Concepts*, and this edition will be of extra interest to sociologists. The reason for this is that during the last few years Goertz has worked closely with sociologist James Mahoney to bring qualitative and quantitative methodologies closer together (e.g. Goertz and Mahoney, 2012b). One of their ideas is that just as quantitative social scientists can learn from the way qualitative sociologists define and work with concepts, so qualitative sociologists can learn from quantitative sociologists how to operationalize concepts. According to a recent co-authored article by Goertz and Mahoney, 'qualitative researchers adopt a semantic approach and work hard to identify the intrinsic necessary defining attributes of a concept' (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012a: 206). 'Quantitative scholars', in contrast, 'assume an unmeasured or latent variable and then seek to identify good indicators that have a causal relationship with the latent variable' (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012a).

The definition as a prescription for what to study

So far in this article, the issues of how to construct a definition, and what type of definition to use, have been discussed. This, however, does not exhaust the topic. Definitions can, for example, also be used as active tools in empirical research; and it is to this topic that we now shall turn.

The principal way in which a definition can impact actual research is by being used as *a prescription for what to study*. Drawing on the terminology of Herbert Blumer, who is one of the people who has made this argument for concepts, we may refer to this aspect of a definition as its *sensitizing quality* (Blumer, 1954; 1969). A concept, he says, directs you to what should be observed and analyzed. Robert K. Merton expressed similar ideas and so has Max Weber. According to Merton, concepts 'constitute the definitions (or prescriptions) of what is to be observed; ... the concept defines the situation, and the research worker responds accordingly' (1968: 143, 145). Weber's notion of the ideal type assists the sociologist in a similar manner.

What is involved when you use a sociological concept in research, according to Blumer, is a two-step procedure. You first use its definition to steer you in a certain direction, say, toward a charismatic phenomenon. Once you are there, face to face with the phenomenon, you need to take the second step. A phenomenon is always individual, Blumer says, and this is a quality that cannot be captured by a concept. At this stage the researcher should therefore inspect the research object from different angles, in order to get a better handle on it.

Weber suggests a similar but somewhat different way to proceed, drawing on his theory of social science concepts as ideal types. The definition of an ideal type, he says, helps the researcher to zoom in on a certain phenomenon. This represents step one.

The second step for Weber, however, is linked to his argument that you should always begin the analysis by assuming that the actors behave in a rational manner. Since a fully rational type of behavior is very rare in reality, working through the criteria of what constitutes rational behavior – such as full knowledge, full awareness, no errors, and so

on – will indicate to the sociologist which additional factors need to be studied and accounted for. In step two, in brief, you try to change the ideal type description with the help of the deviations from the rational model.

How to use concepts and definitions in actual research is also often discussed in sociology under the heading of how to operationalize concepts. This represents an area of its own in sociology; and only the following two comments will be made. First, the ideal for many sociologists is that there should be a smooth and uninterrupted 'flow' from the concept and its definition to its operationalization (e.g. Lazarsfeld, 1958: 100; 1966: 187; see also e.g. Homans, 1967: 10–14; Hage, 1972: 62–84). This, however, is not possible without eliminating the abstract quality of a concept; and it is precisely this quality that makes a concept a concept (e.g. Sartori, 1970: 1045). Second, what has just been said about Blumer, Merton and Weber also means that concepts do not necessarily have to be operationalized, to be of help in actual research.

The two sides of the definition

In discussing definitions, it is important to be clear that a definition is a two-sided phenomenon: (1) the description of what a phenomenon or what a concept means (_definiendum_); and (2) the word used for the phenomenon or concept (_defienens_). It should also be emphasized that the _definiendum_ belongs primarily to written language, and especially to written language of a scientific character. In spoken language, formal definitions are rarely used or referred to. They are too complicated for this and would make spoken language awkward.

In everyday language, it is instead the _definiens_ or the word that is being defined, which is typically used. While this can make for quick and easy communication, it also invites misunderstandings. A word typically has many meanings, and even if the context helps to ground what has been said in one of these, there is plenty of room for slight misunderstandings.

These slight misunderstandings may be the oil that makes everyday interactions go smoothly, but in scientific discourse the situation is different. Here they will instead make scientists think that they agree in situations in which they do not. What is created is what was referred to earlier in this article as _an illusion of agreement_.[5] Unless the _definiens_ is carefully spelled out, an agreement between two sociologists about some term will often be of the illusory kind.

Something similar may also take place in the mind of the individual researcher. When you think about a certain phenomenon, in your dialogue with yourself, it is usually hard to remember the exact formulation of a definition, thereby increasing the chances that you will introduce some changes that you are not aware of.

It is not clear how to counter this. On the one hand, there is something artificial about a written definition, which makes it hard to remember and to cite it in a discussion. It is true that as a discussion develops, precision is often added on key points; and this is clearly helpful. It is also possible for the individual researcher to memorize key definitions, so that these they can be taken out and inspected, so to speak, when one wants to think about some phenomenon or make oneself clear in a discussion.

Definitional work and contested definitions

In this section I will discuss two examples of what may be called definitional work and also introduce the notion of contested definition. The term 'definitional work' comes from science and technology studies and stands for sustained work on definitions ('interpretive practices and social action involved in providing definitions', Ashmore, Mulkay and Pinch, 1989: 28). The first of the two examples describes an attempt by US sociologists to develop a set of definitions that all sociologists should use. The second comes from some lectures that Robert K. Merton gave in the 1950s in which he tried to teach students how to work in a constructive way with definitions.

The attempt to decide once and for all how certain concepts in sociology should be understood and defined started in 1937 when a few sociologists who were members of the American Sociological Society formed a Committee on Conceptual Integration. The task of the committee was to deal with 'the chaotic inconsistencies which exist [among sociologists] with respect to their basic conceptions and definitions' (Hart, 1943: 333–4). The committee worked for several years before it finished its work and then disbanded.

The main result of the activities of the Committee on Conceptual Integration was a report with a series of recommendations on how to create truly scientific definitions of concepts (Hart, 1943; see also Bernard, 1941: Dodd. 1943; Shanas, 1943). The basic idea that informed the work was that sociologists must try to agree on using the same definitions. The impact of the Committee's work was, however, minimal since it is not possible to freeze definitions or legislate on them. It was also the last time an official attempt of this kind was made in sociology.

Merton's suggestion for how sociologists should work on definitions, to improve theory, was very different. His ideas were presented in his class on theorizing at Columbia University in the 1950s (e.g. Merton, 1951; for the general context, see Swedberg, forthcoming). Before you start doing empirical research on a certain topic, Merton told his students, it is absolutely imperative to set aside a good chunk of time to do work on the main concept that will be used in the study. The reason for this is that once you are engaged in actual research, you will not have the time for this type of work. And in its absence, you will not be able to use the concept effectively.

Instead of simply knowing how some concept is defined, Merton said, you need to work with it in a sustained manner, and understand what kind of basic sociological problem it addresses. This is absolutely central. Proceeding in this way makes it possible to truly grasp the core idea of the concept; it also helps you to use the concept in a flexible way, something that is absolutely imperative when you are conducting an empirical study.

Once you have established the basic problematic of a concept and worked it through, you are ready for the next step. This is to determine what kind of problems still remain to be solved in order to improve the concept, and try to address them. When you do this, you should not try to come up with your own solutions but instead use the work of others who have already worked on similar problems and solved them. And here comes the important part: the only studies that are truly helpful in this respect, according to Merton, are works of high caliber. Works that deal with the concept you are interested in but are of secondary quality should be disregarded, because what is more important than anything else is to link up your concept to the core of the sociological tradition.

An example may make it easier to understand Merton's suggestion for how to proceed before you use a concept in actual research. The example that he himself often chose to illustrate his ideas, when he lectured on this topic, was that of social control. Merton first traced this concept back to a sociological classic; he then showed how it had been improved by other thinkers.

Merton began by stating that the original formulation of the problem of social control can be found in the work of Durkheim, more precisely in Durkheim's ideas on how the group influences the behavior of the individual. After explaining how Durkheim viewed the relationship between the group and the individual, Merton pointed out that Durkheim had little understanding of the psychology of the individual. This presents a problem, he said, that needs to be solved; and this can be done by bringing in some of Freud's ideas.

While this meant that the notion of social control now became more sophisticated, the result was nonetheless static since both Durkheim and Freud lacked a sense of history and how social control changes over time. To deal with this problem, Merton said, you may want to use some ideas from the work of Marx. The concept of social control as it exists today, Merton concluded, could be further refined by bringing in some ideas from anthropology and social psychology (Malinowski, Fromm and Kardiner).

One of the issues that neither Merton nor the sociologists working on definitions in the 1930s paid attention to was the fact that some concepts and their definitions are highly politically and socially charged. The term 'essentially contested concepts' by philosopher W.B. Gallie was created to draw attention to this phenomenon (Gallie, 1956; see also e.g. Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu, 2006). In cases of this type, there is a disagreement about a concept, not because of confusion about its meaning but because different values are attached to the phenomenon that the concept attempts to capture. Common examples of contested concepts are democracy, equality and social justice.

Just as there are contested concepts, there are also contested definitions; and this raises the question of how to deal with these. A minimum requirement, it will be suggested here, would be to state clearly that the phenomenon in question is contested and hence also its definition. Besides providing one's own (stipulative) definition, it would also be helpful to the reader if other definitions are cited as well, together with a brief explication of why they exist. This would be in the spirit of Max Weber's statement that scholars should always be honest and explicit about facts that are 'inconvenient' from their own perspective (Gerth and Mills, 1946: 147; Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu, 2006: 241, n.10).[6]

Remaining topics to explore

By way of summary, it can be said that the most important function of a definition in sociology is to bring clarity and precision to the analysis and the research process. A definition may also be useful in several other ways: it can operate as a prescription for what to look for in the research; it can help you avoid what has been called the illusion of agreement; and it can become the focal point for a more solid understanding of a concept (by engaging in Merton's type of sustained, definitional work).

But there also is quite a bit more that needs to be better known about definitions. The following are a few such topics:

- Next to no knowledge exists today of the way in which sociologists use definitions in their work. A quick look at JSTOR, both for sociology in general and the three leading US journals (*AJS*, *ASR* and *Social Forces*), shows that a large number of articles do not contain any definition at all, nor do they address the issue of how to define key terms. More precise knowledge is needed on what this means and what the reasons for this phenomenon are. Are, for example, Goertz and Mahoney correct in assuming that it is primarily related to the different approaches of quantitative sociologists and qualitative sociologists?

- What has just been said is about the use by sociologists of definitions in their published work. But one would also like to know how they deal with definitions in the research process itself. Are definitions, for example, also used for heuristic purposes? You can, for example, put together a definition, just to see where it leads. You can also take some information and try to compress it into a definition, again, just to see what happens.

- It would also be interesting to know more about the way that definitions are used in other sciences. It was earlier mentioned that different sciences look at definitions in different ways. In November 2018, for example, scientists from many countries met at a conference to decide on a new definition of a kilo (e.g. Gibney, 2018).

- Something similar can be said about the role that definitions play in the everyday language of people. Studies of sexuality show, for example, that men and women define what constitutes a sexual act differently (Stinchcombe, 1995). One may also wonder if the idea of 'the definition of the situation' should not be included in the discussion. Definitions are typically linked to single words and concepts, but as the well-known sociological expression of 'definition of the situation' reminds us, larger units may also be involved.

- Finally, it seems clear that anyone who refers to a central term or a concept, without saying something about the way it should be interpreted, runs the risk of being misunderstood. This is especially the case if the term is used in everyday language; if it differs from what is generally meant by this term in one's science; or if there are competing schools in one's science, with each having its own understanding of some term. To remedy this, a few words of explanation should ideally always accompany the use of key terms.

What this short article has hopefully succeeded in showing is that the topic of definition touches on some important issues in sociology. If handled well, definitions can improve the analysis. If handled poorly, they may undermine it.

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2. There are many articles, chapters and books that are devoted to discussions of single socio-logical concepts and that, as part of this, often contain definitions of these (e.g. Parsons, 1967; Merton, 1984; Parkin, 1985–2011; Luhmann, 1992). The same is true for sociological diction-aries, social science encyclopedias and similar types of work (e.g. Boudon and Bourricaud, 1989; Marshall, 1994; Smelser and Baltes, 2001; Ritzer, 2007). Some works on concepts also touch on issues that are relevant to a discussion of definitions, such as Somers (1995) ('a historical sociology of concept formation'), Merton and Barber (2004: x) ('sociological seman-tics'), Koselleck (2002) (so-called conceptual history), and Toulmin (1972) (history of the evolution of scientific concepts).

3. In discussing the issue of 'social sadism and sociological euphemisms', Merton notes that many important sociological concepts have been given names and definitions that are 'bland' in comparison to the phenomena they describe:

   > analytically useful concepts such as social stratification, social exchange, reward system, dysfunction, symbolic interaction are altogether bland in the fairly precise sense of being unperturbing, suave and soothing in effect. To say this is not to say that the conceptual repertoire of sociology (or of any other social science) must be purged of such impersonal concepts and filled with mawkish, sentiment-laden substitutes. But it should be noted that analytically useful as these impersonal concepts are for certain problems, they also serve to exclude from the attention of the social scientist the intense feeling of pain and suffering that are the experience of some people caught up in given patterns of social life. (Merton, 1973: 131)

4. In political science, as in sociology, the topic of definition is closely linked to that of concepts. It should be noted that currently no generally accepted theory for what constitutes the nature of a concept or a definition respectively exists (e.g. Robinson, 1954: 2–3; Gupta, 2015, for definitions; Margolis and Laurence, 2014; 2015, for concepts). One way to draw a dividing line between the two is to say that a definition can be described as a norm or convention for how to describe the meaning of a word in certain situations (such as in a dictionary, a scientific paper, and so on); while a concept is a natural unit of human language or what cognitive psychologists call a mental representation (see e.g. Pinker, 2007: 94, 282).

5. No research has been carried out in cognitive psychology on what is here called the illusion of agreement, as far as I know. For some similar phenomena – the idea of false consensus and the illusion of explanatory depth – see e.g. Ross, Greene and House (1977); Rozenblit and Keil (2002). False consensus refers to situations in which you erroneously believe that other people

agree with you; and the illusion of explanatory depth to situations in which you think that you
understand how something works, while in fact you do not.

6. Weber writes, for example, in 'Science as a Vocation': 'The primary task of a useful teacher is
to teach his students to recognize "inconvenient" facts – I mean facts that are inconvenient for
their party opinions' (Gerth and Mills, 1946: 147).

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