Taking a Seminar with Merton

by

Richard Swedberg

Cornell University

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Robert K. Merton is known to have been a brilliant lecturer; and there exist many accounts of how he literally spellbound his audience at Columbia University (e.g. Marsh 2010, Swedberg 2019).[[1]](#endnote-1) In this paper, in contrast, the focus will be on his role in *the seminar*, where he was “a very different person” to cite a former student (Cole 2020a). In what follows an attempt will be made to explore how Merton conducted seminars, and what he tried to accomplish with this form of teaching. One of Merton’s seminar has been selected for special scrutiny: “Selected Problems in the Theory of Organization (Soc 321-322)”. It was conducted twice, in 1955-1956 and in 1956-1957. The main reason for choosing this particular seminar is that Merton here presented an interesting innovation that cannot be found in his written work.

The material used for teaching this seminar was a text by Georg Simmel, which was read line by line by Merton, commented on by him, and then generally discussed. The focus was on Simmel’s ideas, but besides teaching the students the value of these Merton was also doing something else, which was perhaps more important. This was to provide the students with a general technique for how to use the theoretical texts of earlier sociologists in their own research. With its help, the students would be able to make use of older insights in the profession and also add to these.

Merton’s term for this technique was *restatement*; and it can be described as taking a passage in a theoretical work (or a theoretical statement in an empirical study); and then tentatively restate it and discuss the new version, in order to come up with new and useful ideas. The “re” in *re*statement stands not only for the recasting of a theoretical statement, but also for the central role of tradition and cumulation in Merton’s view of sociology. In his view, you do not create a new theoretical idea out of nothing. You draw on the existing tradition of insights, which you should also try to add to.

The idea of teaching the students at Columbia a technique for how to theorize in sociology was not new to Merton. During many years before this seminar, Merton had taught a graduate course in which he tried to teach the students how to theorize *empirical material*, by using three specific techniques. These he called *respecification*, *reconceptualization* and *levels analysis* (Swedberg 2019). By respecification Merton meant the attempt to start with the current way in sociology of describing some social phenomenon, but also to add to it, in order to improve its analysis. Similarly, reconceptualization means that you take an existing sociological concept and try to change it a bit, again to make it more useful. Levels analysis has as its goal to remind the sociologist not to mix up the different levels in a social science analysis, especially to keep apart the individual-psychological level and the structural-sociological level.

*Restatement*, it can be noted, differs to some extent from these three techniques, in that it should be applied to a *theoretical* text, well before the confrontation with empirical material which is always central to a sociological analysis. It was also, as we shall see, an idea that was very well suited to be taught with the help of Simmel, and in a seminar rather than in a lecture course.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The Role of the Seminar: Some Background

While the seminar is a common feature of the modern university, including departments of sociology, it is not very much discussed. This is a pity since it is a very important educational institution. During the Middle Ages there existed two main ways of teaching and learning, the lecture and the disputation. Some discussion also took place, but there existed no full equivalent to the seminar. To create and turn the seminar into an institution was the achievement of the German universities in the 1800s.

The first version of the seminar in German universities appeared in the 1700s in philology, which at the time was defined in a broad manner (e.g. Clark 1989, 2006). It was, however, in the field of history that the seminar first displayed its full potential and became generally used. Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and his students played a central role in this (e.g. Webb 1955).

According to a study of the rise of the historical profession, the seminar form that became dominant from the 1860s and onwards was somewhat different from that of Ranke and his students:

As a rule the practice then took place in specific seminar rooms, where students gathered around a big table and had a library at hand, often called the seminar library. The model of seminar work that spread around Eastern and Northern Europe and the USA thus abandoned Ranke’s improvised form and became institutionalized, with the seminar table as an obligatory accessory. The forms served a purpose. Seating students and young researchers around a table contrasted with the hierarchical teaching from a lectern that used to be normal and gave them a feeling of being at a level with the teachers, from whom they got instruction on how to analyse sources with a critical mind. (Torstendahl 2018:87-8)

The seminar was soon also used in other sciences than philology and history, including the social sciences. Max Weber, for example, taught lecture courses as well seminars as part of his appointments at various universities. These could take different forms, as exemplified by the seminars he conducted during his last few years at the University of Munich (Graf 2020). He here taught both a “Sociological Seminar” and a “Seminar for Young Academics” (*Dozentenseminar*). According to student testimonies, the discussion in the sociological seminar was very lively and Weber acted in an easy and informal manner. He, for example, began the first seminar by saying, “Gentlemen, work is like a *schnaps* for the educated person” (“*Meine Herren, Arbeit ist der Schnaps der Gebildeten*” - Graf 2020:51).

From early on, it was also clear that the seminar could take many different forms. Marianne Weber, for example, organized a kind of mixture of salon and seminar after her husband’s death from the mid-1920s to 1944. After some general conversation, there was a talk, followed by general discussion (Weber, Marianne 1977).

Georg Simmel, a friend of the Webers, taught a private seminar in his home in Berlin that was known as *Privatissimum* (e.g. Gassen and Landmann 1958:210, 243, 296-97)*.*The participants were seated around a table; the number of students was always twelve; and each of them had been carefully selected by Simmel, through an interview that lasted about half an hour. During the seminar Simmel either spoke without notes or read from a manuscript. The topics varied and ranged from philosophy to art.

Sometimes there were visitors to Simmel’s seminar, such as Max Weber, Edmund Husserl and Rainer Maria Rilke. Some of the students who participated would also go on to become well-known scholars, including Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin and Edith Landmann. Martin Buber, who attended Simmel’s lecture courses and also participated in his seminars, was once asked by Simmel what he thought that the students had learned from him. “You taught them how to think,” was Buber’s answer (Gassen and Landmann 1958:223).

Merton and the Seminar

The institution of the seminar was adopted in the late 1800s at several of the leading universities in the United States, such as Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University and Columbia University. This was done as part of the effort to emulate the German research university or the idea that faculty members should not only teach but also do research and educate researchers (e.g. Nisbet 1979). The first seminar given by a sociologist at Columbia University took place in 1894-1895 (Wallace 1992:502).

When Merton first encountered the seminar is not clear, but as a graduate student in sociology and later as a young instructor at Harvard between 1931 and 1939, he would have been well aware of its existence. He may also have read an article that appeared in 1933 in *The Harvard Crimson*, entitled “Seminar vs. Lecture”:

The keynote of the German seminar is reduced size, individual attention, and consequent freedom from superficiality… it offers far more [to the student] than is possible under the lecture system. A premium is placed upon his own discovery and presentation of facts; inevitably he is given a sense of responsibility and a degree of interest that he does not feel when he is merely being lectured at, collectively. “Being pumped into,” said Carlyle, "is never an exhilarating process.” (Harvard Crimson 1933)

In the early 1930s Merton participated in a graduate seminar at Harvard which made a deep impression on him (“Bob talked about it often” – Zuckerman 2020b). The seminar was conducted by L.J. Henderson, a biochemist with interest in sociology; and it can be characterized as a reading seminar, since it was devoted to an explication of Pareto’s general sociology, based on *Traité de Sociologie Générale* (1916). The seminar attracted not only graduate students but also many professors (Merton 1977:120 n 22). In fact, the graduate students were “out-numbered and out-talked and out-shouted” by the professors, according to one of the participants (Nichols 2010:75-6).

The setting and the organization of the Pareto seminar was as follows, according to George Homans:

The seminar met for a couple of hours for the better part of the academic year, I think in the Junior Commons Room of the Winthrop House. Henderson worked slowly through *Traité*, providing his exegesis of selected passages. After each of these he would ask for questions. (Homans 1984:105)

Merton left Harvard in 1939 and spent the next two years at Tulane University. The first seminar he himself taught, however, was at Columbia University, where he started in 1941 and remained for the rest of his career. During his graduate training he had not received any training in how to lecture nor in how to conduct a seminar. He had to learn both “by osmosis,” as he would later put it (Persell 1984:375).

At Columbia Merton taught many seminars in sociology over the years, and the topics varied: social structure, housing communities, the professions, and more. Some of the seminars were what he called research seminars, others teaching seminars (Merton 1980:6-7). Merton was also an active member for many years in the Seminar on the State, which was part of the interdisciplinary University Seminars at Columbia University (Katznelson 2003:121-24). Merton would later praise this seminar for its creative atmosphere and spirit of “benevolent anarchy” (Merton 1968c:39).

Merton sometimes taught his seminars in sociology alone and at other times with a colleague, first with Paul Lazarsfeld and later with Harriet Zuckerman (“joint seminars” - Merton 1998:197). In the fall of 1944 Merton taught his first seminar with Paul Lazarsfeld; and he announced their joint agenda to the graduate students in the following way:

It has become quite clear, as I indicated in the first meeting of the seminar, that Paul and I have distinct emphases in our work. Paul is, above all, concerned with methodology: the logic of procedures, the ways in which given types of data and information can be acquired and how they are analyzed. My primary interest is on content, on theory, that is, the hypotheses with which one operates, and deriving those hypotheses from previously tested theory. One of the chief purposes of the Seminar, therefore, should be to integrate these two emphases: to show how one derives hypotheses from previous theoretical work, and then to examine the logic of the procedures used to test these hypotheses. (Simmons 2005:13-4)

From 1950 to 1960 Merton and Lazarsfeld also co-taught a famous seminar with the title “Selected Problems in the Relations between Sociological Theory and Methods of Research” (Coleman 1980:171, Merton 1998:197, Crothers 1998:218). One student at the time, James Coleman, remembers how he appreciated the lively discussion between Merton and Lazarsfeld. “The interchange”, he said, “was far more instructive than [their] lectures” (Coleman 1990:98).

Another student who participated in a different Merton-Lazarsfeld seminar has the following memory of how the seminar appeared to her in 1964. It was “something of a show in which the stars were, as the students then called them, ‘the two great men’” (Zuckerman 2020a). The scene was the following:

Imagine the two of them sitting at a table at the head of the classroom – all students facing them sitting [on] chairs bolted to the floor. (Columbia did not have seminar rooms designed to encourage conversation as it does now). It was structured as a performance and it was. (Zuckerman 2020c)

Lazarsfeld, she says, used the first few seminars to present his current work. Then it was the turn of the students:

The remaining meetings were devoted to reports from students on their research. In these sessions, Bob and Paul raised questions, pressed for greater clarity and generally tried to make the students’ research reports better than it would have been without their intervention. Paul specialized in working with some students, Bob, others. (Zuckerman 2020c)

The seminars that Merton co-taught with Harriet Zuckerman were different in several respects from the ones he taught with Lazarsfeld, and part of his attempt to establish sociology of science as a distinct subdiscipline in sociology. They were conducted in the 1960s and 1970s and can be described as intensive research seminars. They were also funded with a huge grant from the National Science Foundation, something that made it possible for Merton to hire some of the students on a long-term basis while they participated in the seminar in an on-going manner.

In discussing how Merton looked upon the seminar it may be helpful to say something about the way in which he viewed the task of teaching. Even if he only addressed this topic a few times, and not in much detail, it is still possible to reconstruct his general stance (e.g. Persell 1984,Merton 1980:6-7, Merton 1998). Merton most of all preferred the lecture, followed in order by the seminar, the tutorial, and field training:

I did not take effectively to the research project as a primary means of working with students; my preferred modes of teaching were the lecture in the first instance, the seminar in the second, and above all, working with them on their manuscripts. (Merton 1998:196-97)

While Merton conducted research seminars, it was in his view not possible to center a seminar around a collective research project. The reason for this was that collecting the data took up so much time that “the state of analysis is hardly ever reached and as a matter of fact can hardly be reached in the matter of the task” (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1972:376). In his sociology of science seminars, however, Merton would partly bypass this difficulty by hiring a small core of graduate students for several years while they worked on seminar-related projects (Cole 2020b).

Both in his lectures and his seminars Merton tried to make sure that these were conducted in such a way that he also could develop his own ideas. This was very important to him. The class room, the seminar and the laboratory were examples of what Merton called “creative microenvironments in science”; and in his view, they should be creative not only for the students but also for the teacher (e.g. Merton 1968a:641, 1997). The ideas that Merton developed in this manner he famously called oral publications. These were defined as “the working out of ideas in lectures, seminars and workshops” (Merton 1994:12).

Jonathan Cole, who attended Merton’s seminar in the sociology of science during a few years in the 1970s, has described how a typical seminar was organized at this time:

The seminars were held in seminar rooms, and the seminar rooms involved generally an oblong table; and Merton would sit at the head of the table and students would sit around the table. It was relatively informal the whole thing. It was two hours. Sometimes there was a break, and sometimes there wasn’t a break, depending on where we were in the discussion and the presentations. It met once a week, and generally in the afternoon. And it generally was two semesters…The number of students varied but it was never very large, I mean it was ten or twelve students who would be in the seminar…Everybody gave a presentation, and I would say everybody talked in the seminar, some more than others…Merton played more of a role of a sceptic and a questioner, almost an interrogator, than he did as putting forward his own ideas for you. *He wanted to see how you were able to develop ideas*. (Cole 2020b; emphasis added)

According to Cole, it was the students who chose the topic for their papers and not Merton. “[They] emerged initially from students, and then they would morph under impact of discussion into something which was somewhat different from what was originally intended, or they morphed into several papers” (Cole 2020b).

The students reacted in different ways to Merton’s seminars. Merton was a very stimulating lecturer and leader of seminars, but he was also feared and intimidating to some students by virtue of his stature in the profession. One of his students conducted a survey of more than a hundred of Merton’s students and found that most of them had guessed that Merton was quite a bit taller than he actually was. “It was true, Merton was, in fact, taller than life” (Cole 2004:39). Merton was also in the habit of given extremely detailed comments on the students’ paper, something that was both appreciated by the students and unsettling to them (e.g. Cole, Stephen 2004; Gieryn 2004). “You had to have a fairly strong ego,” one of them later recalled (Cole 2020b).

As to Merton’s own view of the many seminars he conducted, not much is known. A few glimpses can however be found in an interview he gave in 1985 for the journal *Teaching Sociology.* When Merton first met the interviewer he told her that he had just finished a seminar in the sociology of the science. He had monopolized the conversation, he said, something that he usually did not. The reason for this was that he wanted to show the students how he himself worked on a problem, and what this type of process was like:

It soon became clear that few of the students, at any rate, had ever had the experience of listening in on someone *thinking aloud*. Of course, ill-prepared lectures have something of that unorganized, not necessarily disorganized, character. But this session did not purport to be a lecture. It was reproducing in the seminar what takes place at [my] desk in the phase before I had seriously defined a problem and had decided on the main tacks for investigating it. I decided that it would do them no harm to be exposed to the way in which at least one sociologist goes about his work in a preliminary phase. It might lead them to recognize that the linear thinking reported in published work does not necessarily reproduce the typically nonlinear character of the initial effort to clarify and locate a problem. (Persell 1984:358-59; emphasis added)

At another point during the interview, Merton described what he regarded as a very successful seminar:

One of the most memorable seminars I ever ran…was on bureaucracy. It derived from my earlier work condensed into the papers, ‘Bureaucratic Structure and Personality,’ and ‘Role of the Intellectual in Public Bureaucracy.’ The interaction between the students and myself was so intense that sessions would often run on and on, long after the appointed time. *We could not distinguish teaching from research*. (Persell 1984:366; emphasis added)

At the time when Merton was giving the interview for *Teaching Sociology* he was a bit over 70 years old; and he now preferred the seminar to the lecture:

I've always enjoyed teaching until the last few years when I began to get bored with formal classroom teaching. That's why I stopped; why I now teach only through seminars or individual tutor. (Persell 1984:362)

Merton’s Seminar on Selected Problems in the Theory of Organization (Soc 321-322)

The seminar that will now be presented was given twice by Merton, first during the academic year of 1955-1956 and then in 1956-1957. Its full title was “Selected Problems in the Theory of Organization”; and it was a seminar for graduate students that stretched over two terms. During the fall it consisted of a line by line reading of a text by Simmel, followed by comments by Merton and general discussion. During the spring the students made presentations related to problems inspired by Simmel’s text, which were then discussed. A paper was also a requirement. The general purpose of the course was to teach the students how to work with a classical or theoretical text, in order to come up with new and interesting hypotheses that could be tested in empirical research.

In 1955-1956 the discussion was centered around Simmel’s text “Quantitative Aspects of the Group” (Simmel 1950:87-153). The next academic year Merton chose “Superordination and Subordination” (Simmel 1950:190-252). Eighteen graduate students took part in 1955-1956, one of whom was a women; and fifteen during 1956-1957, six of whom were women. A teaching assistant was also present and took detailed notes that Merton kept for his personal archive (Terence Hopkins).

From early on Merton had detailed notes taken of what he said during his lectures as well as seminars; and these also constitute the main source for this paper.[[3]](#endnote-3) The seminars in 1955-1957 were organized in the following way. The students as well as Merton all sat around a table (Kadushin 2020a). During each of the meetings during the fall term Merton first read a passage by Simmel, usually just a few sentences long. He then restated it, using modern sociological terminology. Merton also commented on the passage and mentioned contemporary sociological studies that were relevant and should be part of the discussion. All of this was then discussed in the seminar.

Once this had been done, a new and related passage from the text by Simmel was read by Merton, and the whole procedure repeated. This was done a few times, including the general discussion. At the end of each seminar Merton summed up the sociological problems that had been raised. He also stated how these were related to central concepts in the theory of organization (societies, groups and organizations). The cultural, functional and social psychological dimensions of the problems were also noted.

While Merton’s way of conducting the seminar may not look very systematic from this account, each meeting of the seminar followed a carefully worked out logic that will now be presented. The terminology is that of Merton, except for what has been set within brackets:

**I. SUBSTANTIVE STATEMENTS**

*Statement* [by Simmel]

*Tentative restatement* [by Merton]

*Comment* [by Merton]

*Problems and questions* [Merton, followed by general discussion]

*Cross-references* [by Merton, followed by general discussion]

**II. SUMMARY OF SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF ORGANIZATION** [by Merton]

**III. RELEVANCE FOR CONCEPTS IN THE THEORY OF ORGANIZATION** [by Merton]

*Re: Units of Analysis*: organizations, groups, societies, etc. (Pertaining to Size, Functional Requirements, Activities, Cultural Standards, Social Psychological Processes and Conditions, Miscellaneous)

So much for what happened during the fall term. It is less clear from the material in the archive what happened during the spring term. It seems, however, that during each session one of the students made a presentation that was related to some theme in Simmel that had been discussed during the fall. The student was also responsible for distributing material relating to the presentation in advance to everyone in the seminar. The material consisted of brief excerpts from contemporary sociological studies that were relevant to the problem that the student had selected. The quotes and the presentation were then discussed in the seminar. Each student also produced a paper related to the presentation.

The second time that Merton taught the seminar, he followed the same model except that another article by Simmel was now used. Also this time, in other words, the students sat around a seminar table, together with Merton, and made a “line by line analysis of Simmel with the ideas applied to organizations”, to cite one of the students (Kadushin 2020a). And during the spring seminar each of the students also made a presentation plus worked on a paper of their choice.

How did Merton himself look at the seminar in Soc 321-322? As we know, Merton wanted to use his lectures as well as his seminars to stimulate new ideas in himself or develop existing ones further. We also know that in the early 1950s Merton was especially interested in using Simmel for his work on reference groups. The result of this, including some insights that he developed in the seminar discussed in this paper, was published in 1957 as “Continuities in the Theory of Reference Groups and Social Structure” (Merton 1968b:335-40).

According to an interview on the seminar in Soc 321-322 that Merton later gave, its result had been “modest” for his own part (Jaworski 1998:9; see also Jaworski 1990). What he was probably referring to with this statement are some of the concepts he developed under the inspiration of Simmel during the 1950s, such as visibility-observability[[4]](#endnote-4), completeness[[5]](#endnote-5)**,** and involvement.[[6]](#endnote-6) These are today mostly forgotten, in contrast to such well-known concepts by Merton as serendipity, opportunity structure, and unanticipated consequences.

But it should also be added that the seminar in Soc 321-322 was special to Merton in some respect. In fact, of all the seminars that Merton conducted at Columbia, this was the only one that is mentioned in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968, 3rd ed.). He here says that many important issues relating to the structure of groups were discussed during the seminar. He also mentions the positive impact that the seminar had on his own thinking: “I wish also to acknowledge the helpful criticisms and suggestions by the students in my graduate seminar on Selected Problems in the Theory of Organization” (Merton 1968b:364 n.46; cf. 430 n.119). He then enumerates the names of each of the eighteen students who participated in the seminar in 1955-1956.

And how did the students who took Merton’s seminar in 1955-1957 react to it? Did they enjoy it; and did it help them to understand how to use the classics in their own research? I have only been able to locate two persons who attended the seminar: Charles Kadushin and Arnold Simmel (the grandson of Georg Simmel). Kadushin described the seminar to me as follows: “He [Merton] did start by reading Simmel with a line by line explication and free association to other ideas stimulated by Simmel” (Kadushin 2020b). He also said that “students did join in, but I don’t recall in what fashion.” His general verdict of the seminar was that it was “very successful and stimulating” (Kadushin 2020b). It also helped him later to formulate his ideas about social networks (Kadushin 2012:xi). Arnold Simmel answered the question if he enjoyed the seminar as follows: “the answer is yes, he [Merton] was a very good lecturer and question asker, but personally distant. My fellow students at that time were smart and a friendly crowd” (Simmel 2020).

The New Technique: *The Restatement*

Merton’s seminar on Simmel fell formerly in the area of the theory of organization; and it is clear that Merton believed that the students would benefit from knowing what Simmel had to say on this topic. He himself had learned very much from Simmel, and would later say that “beyond the teachers under whom I studied directly, I learned most from two sociologists, Durkheim and Simmel” (Coser 1975:96). In 1937 Merton had spent the summer in Europe, to improve his German; and at this time he also bought a copy of Simmel’s *Soziologie* (1908; Levine, Carter and Gorman 1976:819; Simmons 2005:6).). This is Simmel’s main work in sociology; it also contains the two texts that were used in Merton’s seminar.

To devote a whole seminar to a line-by-line reading of a text by Simmel was also something that Merton had discussed a few years earlier with one of his doctoral students, Lewis Coser. When Coser was hired at Brandeis University in 1951 he taught a seminar which consisted of a line by line study of Simmel’s essay “Conflict”.[[7]](#endnote-7) Coser would later write his dissertation and a well-known book on the ideas in this essay, by developing their implications for modern sociology: *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Coser 1956, cf. 1954).

But Merton also chose Simmel for his seminar because he wanted to show the students how they could make use of a theoretical text in their own research. He was of the opinion that the classics should not be viewed as finished studies, to be cited now and then in an article, but as attempts to explore central problems in sociology. “They [should be] honored in the manner in which men of science do honor to their predecessors, by extending and elaborating their formulations on the basis of *cumulatively developed problems and systematic researches bearing on these problems*, [not] in the manner in which litterateurs honor their predecessors, by repeatedly quoting ‘definitive’ passages from the masters' works” (Merton 1968b:332; emphasis added).

What Merton wanted the students to learn was, so to speak, how to climb up on the shoulders of giants so they could see further. The classics were the giants, and the students the ones who had to learn how to climb. But there was no point in just looking at things from the height of the giants; this had already been done, and there was no reason to replicate what these had seen. The point was to become acquainted with the insights of the giants *and* *to develop these further*.

The main technique for doing this was *the restatement*. Since it is hard to get a concrete sense for how to carry out a restatement, what follows next is a description of how Merton took a specific statement by Simmel, and then transformed it. He did this, it should be noted, in a slow and didactic manner so that the students would see how it should be done. The “stages” in the restatement procedure were in other words a way of making it easier for the students to follow Merton’s way of thinking aloud.

The description that now follows comes from the very first seminar that Merton conducted, which took place on October 6, 1955. The *statement* by Simmel, with which Merton began, was the following (Merton 1955):

…a group upon reaching a certain size must develop forms and organs which serve its maintenance and promotion, but which a smaller group does not need. [Simmel 1960:87]

After reading this statement aloud, Merton then provided a *tentative restatement*:

Large groups require certain structures which integrate the group and help achieve its purposes; these structures are not required by groups of ‘smaller size’.

This was followed by a *comment* by Merton:

We shall doubtlessencounter many such formalistic statements in which the principal conceptual components are either left wholly undefined or are given no explicit substantive content. It is apparent here that this would become a *fully substantive* statement only if its major categories were specified (e.g. ‘certain size,’ ‘forms and organs,’ ‘maintenance and promotion’).

For the time being, we agree to include such loosely formal statements. It may turn out that they can later be used as guides for *categorizing* the content of descriptive statements about particular organizations.

At this point Merton invited students to focus on *problems and questions* inspired by Simmel’s statement and Merton’s tentative restatement:

[The statement of Simmel that we started with] evidently implies [the following] question: if certain integrative structures required by ‘large groups’ are typically absent in ‘small groups,’ can findings based on small group research be extrapolated to groups in general?

[Simmel’s statement] further implies: the ‘same‘ functional requirements (‘maintenance and promotion’, i.e. integration and achievement of group purposes?) are met by differing kinds of internal organization.

The discussion in the seminar of these questions and problems was followed by Merton’s introduction of some relevant *cross-references*, that is, contemporary sociological literature that could be of help in extending Simmel’s statement to relevant research problems today. They were: Philip Selznick’s *TVA and the Grass Roots* (1949), Alvin Gouldner’s *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (1954) and Peter Blau’s *Dynamics of Bureaucracy* (1955).

Once this had been done, Merton proceeded to the last two points on the agenda. The first was to make *a summary of sociological problems (implied or explicit in sources).* In this case this was a short and succinct formulation of the sociological problems raised by the initial statement by Simmel:

# 1. Extrapolation of small group attributes to larger groups.

# 2. Are the functional requirements of different sized groups different? Which functional requirements vary with group size, which are independent of size?

The second and last item on the agenda was to sum up the relevance of Simmel’s statement for *concepts in [the] theory of organization*. There were two parts to this: *property* and *categories and comments*. The only properties raised in the brief statement by Simmel were related to *size* (*relative and absolute*) and *functional requirements*. As to size, Merton asked the following question: “What are the units being counted – roles, individuals, facets of personality, etc?” For functional requirements, he simply pointed to “needs, promotion, maintenance”.

Again it should be noted that what has just been presented represents only the first statement by Simmel that was discussed during the seminar meeting on October 6, 1955. Merton, as we know, would then repeat the whole procedure with other passages from Simmel’s text. This was how each seminar was organized during the dozen or so times that these were held during the fall term. As the course proceeded, the different stages of the restatement procedure would sometimes meld into one another, presumably because Merton felt that the students were getting the hang of how to proceed.

During the spring term each student had to make a presentation that was centered around a problem that he or she wanted to work on and which had its origin in Simmel’s text. Since a multitude of concepts and ideas had been discussed during the fall, there were plenty of these to choose from. One of the presentations during the spring of 1957 was on “size of organization in relation to other organizational attributes”. Another dealt with “mechanisms of group stability”, and a third with “toleration of deviation from organizational norms”.

To give a sense of what a presentation was like, the one by Arnold Simmel will be briefly described. The “problem area” he had chosen to focus on was “coalition formation between different strata” (Simmel, Arnold 1957). With this in mind he circulated three quotes in the seminar, which together amounted to a couple of typed pages. The first was from *The Social Organization of Australian Tribes* by Radcliffe-Brown; and it dealt with the kind of coalitions that can emerge between different generations in a family (grandparents, parents, and children). The second quote came from *The Human Group* by George Homans; and it added some other potential coalition parties, such as the wife, the mother in law, and the oldest son. The last quote had been selected from *Military Organization and Society* by Stanislav Andreski, and dealt with the kind of coalitions that exist between a ruler, an oligarchy and the masses. What the discussion of these three statements was like in the seminar we do not know.

General Discussion

The word *seminar* comes from the Latin *seminarium*, which means a seed-plot or seedbed: “a piece of ground in which plants are sown (or raised from cuttings, etc) to be afterwords transplanted”.

* *Oxford English Dictionary*

I have never found lecture courses particularly appealing as a medium for learning…Seminars were another matter altogether. In seminars we were induced to perform, to write and present papers, to show what we could do.

* James Coleman, “Columbia in the 1950s”[[8]](#endnote-8)

During a seminar in January 1957, Merton summarized what he was trying to teach the students in Soc 321-322 as follows:

Work of this order is one way of contributing to the growth of sociological theory. Not any new specific findings but major accretions to our knowledge come about through previously dispersed bits, pieces, and even whole cloths being brought together. Simmel’s great utility is in his providing us with initial ideas for discussion. Restated in our current conceptual terms, these topics permit us to range widely, introducing diverse considerations, each of these also being restated, however, in the terms we have elected to use. The result of such operations would eventually be a series of linkages among theories and generalizations not previously seen to have anything in common, in seminar meetings, though, only bare beginnings towards such a series can be made. (Merton 1957b)

Generalizing from this statement, one can say that the technique of restatement represents one way for sociologists to simultaneously draw on *and add to* the sociological tradition by working on a theoretical text (or on a theoretical statement in an empirical study). Merton was always concerned with keeping this tradition alive, not for reasons of intellectual history, but to make sure that earlier scientific insights were made properly use of and also added to. The technique of restatement represents in other words an attempt to add to the theorizing tools that Merton himself had earlier worked out (respecification, reconceptualization, and levels analysis).

Having said this, it is now time to raise the following two important questions: Is the technique of the restatement useful to researchers also today, and should it be taught to students? I will argue that the answer to both questions is “yes”. I will also suggest a few modifications to Merton’s version of the restatement.

The first of these entails both a slight change in terminology and in nature. The focus of a restatement, I suggest, should perhaps not be on locating *the idea or proposition* in the text that has been chosen for a restatement, but rather its underlying *problem*. To do so makes you look for what the author is wrestling with, and what is in need of a solution. During the time when Merton was giving his seminars he was about to publish an article in which he argues that the notion of problem-solving should be complemented with that of problem-finding (Merton 1959). The suggestion that the focus of a restatement should be on the problem in a text is, in other words, well in line with Merton’s own thought.

Secondly, Merton was fond of pointing out that the way in which research is actually produced is very different from the way in which it is presented in written form. This means that the following is typically excluded from an article or book: “the intuitive leaps, false starts, mistakes, loose ends and happy accidents that actually cluttered up the inquiry” (Merton 1968b:4).My suggestion is that since all of this also goes on in a restatement, it should also be explicitly noted when a restatement is summed up. By doing so, some errors may be avoided the next time around.

Thirdly, Merton was well aware that creativity is a necessary ingredient in any successful research and theorizing. Something has to happen that is not logical in nature and cannot be formalized or taught. In the special case discussed in this paper, there exists a link between the process of restatement, on the one hand, and the seminar as a creative microenvironment, on the other; and this should both be explicitly acknowledged and better understood.

It may also be helpful to try to spell out in more detail how a restatement should be carried out, to make it easier to use. Anyone who is interested in teaching the technique of the restatement (or using it oneself) may, for example, want to know answers to questions such as the following: What kind of text should be chosen for a restatement? And once you have selected a text, what *exactly* do you do, in order to come up with new insights?

As to choosing a suitable text, it should be theoretical in nature (or contain a theoretical statement). Being non-empirical and full of ideas, Simmel was a natural choice for Merton. The German sociologist was in his view a “man of innumerable seminal ideas” (Merton 1968b:458, n.13a). In *On the Shoulders of Giants* Merton called Simmel “a sociological squirrel”, evoking the image of someone who moves from one idea to another, a bit like a squirrel moves from one nut to another, just nibbling a bit on each (Merton 1991:286). Merton would later say that he had chosen to focus on Simmel in his 1955-57 seminars because “I had become convinced… that there was much in Simmel that would lend itself to a style of theorizing he himself could never bring himself to do” (Levine, Carter and Gorman 1976:820**).[[9]](#endnote-9)**

But once a promising theoretical text or statement has been located, how exactly should you proceed? What *exactly* should you do? One answer, I suggest, can be found by looking very closely at the way in which Merton himself proceeded as he “thought aloud” during the restatement seminars. He suggested, for example, that you select some interesting theoretical statement and then try to *clarify it*, *specify it*, *generalize from it*, and so on. Merton’s concrete suggestions on this score have been summarized in Table 1. This table has been constructed to work as a guide when you try to come up with ideas and hypotheses, by working on an important theoretical or classical text in sociology.

/Table 1 about here/[[10]](#footnote-1)

Before ending, something should also be said about the form that Merton used for teaching the restatement, namely the seminar. The typical structure of a seminar is that of a small group, with everyone sitting around a table; while in a lecture the speaker stands in front of a seated audience, which can be of any size. If “a lecture is an institutionalized extended holding of the floor in which one speaker imparts his [or her] views on a subject”, as Erving Goffman has put it in “The Lecture”, a seminar can be described as an institutionalized discussion that is collective in nature, but initiated and led by one of the participants (Goffman 1981:165).

As earlier mentioned, the seminar is also a very flexible institution that can take many forms; there are research seminars, teaching seminars, and so on. Its core idea is nonetheless to make possible the important transition from *learning by listening*, and having knowledge presented to you; to *learning through participation in a discussion*, and in this way explore a special topic or theme together with the teacher. Through the equality implied in its structure a seminar also helps the students to become independent thinkers and researchers.

Given the importance of the seminar, it is unfortunate that the scholarly literature on this topic is small (but see e.g. Steen, Bader and Kubrin 1999; Exley, Dennick and Fisher 2019). Many of its features need to be better understood, especially what factors account for the production of independent thinking in a seminar and how this can be increased. Seeing how others “think aloud” seems to be central here. But one also wonders about the role of power and gender dynamics; and what the impact of competition and the pressure to perform are (e.g. Cronqvist and Maurits 2016).

It would also be helpful to have better historical knowledge about the different forms that the seminar has taken and how these were diffused. The seminar was, for example, early adopted in the United States but not in England and France. More information is also needed about specially interesting seminars in social science, such as those e.g. by Parsons-Stouffer, Bourdieu and Habermas (e.g. Toby 1980::136-37, Caré and Chȃton 2018, Fabiani 2018).

The following should be added to the last point. What we know today about earlier scholarship is based exclusively on written documents. This means that the ideas and interesting facts that were expressed during seminars, lectures and in conversation with colleagues and students have been lost. To try to recapture more of *the oral culture of academia*, and not exclusively focus on its *written culture*, should be on the agenda of today’s sociology.

Finally, there exists a distinct affinity between the seminar and theorizing that deserves to be highlighted. In a seminar you start with a special theme, but it is not clear where you will end up; and this accounts for much of its creative tension. Something similar is true for theorizing. Also here you have to start somewhere, but that is all you can say in advance. Much of what happens next is not known until it has taken place. Both a seminar and theorizing are in other words processes during which knowledge comes into being, rather than forms in which knowledge comes in in a fixed form and stays the same. To cite a statement by Merton that in its elegance and suggestive nature could equally well have been formulated by Simmel: “*Thinking is not a thought but an activity*” (Persell 1984:360).

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Table 1. *Restatement* or How to Work with an Existing Theoretical Statement to Come Up with New Ideas and Hypotheses for Empirical Research (Merton)

 Take the theoretical statement and try to

clarify it

specify it

generalize from it

rephrase it

rephrase it in modern sociological language

give examples of the statement (particularize)

spell out its implications

add a concrete context

confront it with similar ideas in today’s sociology

pull out a social structure from the statement

does anything constitute a pattern?

can it be transformed into a social mechanism?

is a process involved?

what would an analogy look like?

1. For information, help and assistance I thank Michela Betta, Jonathan Cole, Charles Crothers, Kenneth Fox, Edith Hanke, Charles Kadushin, Ira Katznelson, Arnold Simmel, and Harriet Zuckerman. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The term restatement is used a few times in *Social Theory and Social Structure* but in a much less precise and formalized fashion than in Merton’s seminar (restate\*; six times). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The archival material for this paper comes from the Robert K. Merton Papers at Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Library. The material on Soc 321-322 can be found in Box 130, Folder 16 and in Box 131, Folders 1-6. What Merton said during the two seminars amounts to about one hundred pages of typewritten, single-spaced material. Ten student presentations from the seminar in 1956-1957 have also been kept. No course descriptions for the two seminars have been found, nor were the discussions in the seminars recorded (which was apparently the case with some other seminars, e.g. Merton 1976:117 n.17). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Merton wrote in a letter to Rose Laub Coser in 1987 that at the time of the two seminars he was still ”struggling to articulate the complementary character of the concepts ‘visibility’ (to refer to an attribute of that which is being seen) and ‘observability’ (to refer to an attribute of the position from which something is being seen or observed)” and that he would “write a short note to straighten this out” (Merton 1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “The concept of completeness refers to a group property measured by the proportion of *potential members* – those who satisfy the requirements for membership as established by the group – [to those] who are *actual members*” (Merton 1968:342). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “The concept of ‘involvement’…refers to the extent to which a person is motivated to meet a given set of obligations, measured relative to the extents to which he is motivated to meet other sets of obligations” (Merton 1956; cf. Merton 1957a, 1968:365). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Coser wrote as follows to Merton on September 9, 1952:

During the first semester of the last academic year [when I was teaching at Brandeis] I gave a seminar on Simmel's conflict in which 4 students and myself went through the article line by line and attempted to clarify the text. The students were undergraduates with almost no previous knowledge of sociological literature and with little sensitivity to theory. I think that the benefit to them consisted primarily of the experience of being forced to read a difficult text carefully—I think they learned to ‘read’ for the first time in their lives. To me the advantage was to be forced to give an attention to the text which went beyond that which one usually gives when reading a book carefully for one's own uses. (Fleck 2013:956 n 2) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Coleman 1990:98. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The fullest account of how Merton viewed Simmel can be found in the course on the history of sociological thought that he gave in 1966 (Merton 1966). In the four pages of single-spaced material that Merton devoted to Simmel he mixed praise with critique. Simmel pioneered a number of topics in “the sociology of everyday life” and is called “the Proust of sociology”. His type of analysis, however, is characterized as “elusive” and “uncategorizable”. “There is indeed no Simmelian method that can be transmitted and applied”. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For Table 1, see the end of the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)