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CHAPTER 2

## On the Near Disappearance of Concepts in Mainstream Sociology

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### Introduction

That you need to use special concepts when you do research in sociology—such as class, status, charisma and so on—is a statement that will seem obvious to most sociologists.<sup>1</sup> But things are not that easy; and despite a voluminous literature on the importance of individual concepts in sociology, the number of empirical sociological studies that dispense with concepts is considerable.<sup>2</sup> As will be shown later in this article, a rough estimate is that this happens in more than 50%. How this development has come about, and what consequences it has for sociology, are the two main questions that this article will try to address.

One way to approach an answer to the historical question of how this state of affairs has come about, is to look at the kind of sociology that was developed at Columbia University in the 1950s and 1960s ('Columbia Style Sociology'—Merton).<sup>3</sup> The reason for proceeding in this way is that some of the sociologists who were active at this university, created what was to become the mainstream view of methodology, including the way that concepts should be looked upon and handled. After this part of the analysis, which is centered on the two-three decades after WWII, I will bring the analysis of the role of concepts in sociological research up to date. This will be done by presenting, and commenting on, some quantitative data on the use of concepts in sociological research during a much longer period, 1923–2012.

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1 For help and good advice I thank Mabel Berezin, Alicia Eads and Hernan Mondani. Alicia Eads produced the figures and all the work that went into these.

2 There exist many articles, chapters and books—and even whole book series—that are devoted to discussions of single sociological concepts (e.g. Becker, 1960; Luhmann, 1992; Merton, 1984; Parkin, 1985; Parsons, 1951, 1967a, 1967b). To this can be added sociological and social science dictionaries, encyclopedias and similar collections, which all contain lists of concepts and/or discussions of these (e.g. Bottomore, 1992; Borgatta and Montgomery, 2002; Marshall, 1994; Boudon and Bourricaud, 1989; Ritzer, 2007; Sills, 1968; Williams, 1983; Smelser and Baltes, 2001).

3 For Merton's preference for the term Columbia style sociology (to, say, Columbia sociology or the Columbia School of Sociology), see e.g. Clark (1996: 313–328).

To repeat, the decision to focus on the development of sociology at just Columbia University after WWII has to do with the fact that the sociologists who were active at this university played a key role in introducing quantitative methods into U.S. sociology (e.g. Platt, 1996; Sørensen, 1998; Raftery, 2001; see also Abbott and Sparrow, 2007). Through the work of Robert K. Merton, Hans Zetterberg and others, they also argued very strongly that all theories must be verified (e.g. Merton, 1949; Zetterberg, 1954). Without this step, the theory was incomplete.

But it should also be pointed out that the discussion of concepts that took place at Columbia University has important roots in pre-WWII developments and was preceded by some important events in this regard. Herbert Blumer, for example, wrote several important statements on concepts, even before he launched the idea of sensitizing concepts in the early 1950s (e.g. Blumer, 1928, 1931, 1940, 1954).

Before WWII some sociologists also made an attempt to import the ideas of operationalism into sociology (e.g. Alpert, 1938; Lundeberg, 1939). These ideas had become popular in the social sciences in the 1930s, mainly thanks to the work of physicist P.W. Bridgman. The central message in *The logic of physics*, in so far as scientific concepts are concerned, was expressed as follows: 'we mean by any concept nothing more than a set of operations; *the concept is synonymous with the corresponding set of operations*' (Bridgeman, 1927: 5; emphasis in the text). At the time, these ideas were hotly debated also among sociologists, even if they are considered dead today.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, several attempts had been made before WWII by single sociologists as well as by the American Sociological Society to once and for all decide how to define important sociological concepts (e.g. Eubank, 1932). In 1937, for example, the Committee on Conceptual Integration of the American Sociological Society was formed; and it tried as best as it could for several years to come up with what Blumer was later to call definitive concepts (e.g. Hart, 1943). Also this effort failed in a resounding way and has left few traces behind.

### Columbia Sociologists on How to Handle Concepts and Variables

Concepts were mainly approached from the viewpoint of methodology, not theory, by the sociologists at Columbia University. And what they meant by

<sup>4</sup> In its literal form, few social scientists adhere today to operationalism. 'Almost all philosophers and social scientists reject this doctrine', according to Gary Goertz and James Mahoney (2012a: 214–215).

methodology was deeply influenced by the publication in 1955 of *The language of social research*, a reader edited by Paul Lazarsfeld and Morris Rosenberg. There is a paradigmatic quality to this work in that it tried to formulate the basic rules for how sociological research should be conducted and what questions should be asked. Methodology should not deal with theoretical issues and the kind of topics that had traditionally been the concern of the philosophy of science. Its main task was to codify ongoing research methods.<sup>5</sup> It was also essential to present these methods in such a way that students could 'acquire knowledge and modes of thinking which [they] might use later' (Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg, 1955: 13).

*The language of social research* is divided into six sections, of which the first is called 'The concept and indices'. According to Otis Dudley Duncan, who reviewed the reader for the *American Sociological Review*, 'it is perhaps this section which is most likely to make a contribution to thinking about ways to conduct research' (Duncan, 1956: 508).

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5 'The Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg (1955) reader on *The language of social research* established the modern concept of methodology' (Abbott, 1998: 159–160). According to Theodor Adorno, who worked with Paul Lazarsfeld at one point in the 1940s, methodology had a different meaning in Europe and in the United States. Referring to the empirical project he worked on, which was led by Lazarsfeld, Adorno wrote,

I was disturbed ... by a basic methodological problem—understanding the word 'method' more in its European sense of epistemology than in its American sense, in which methodology virtually signifies practical techniques for research' (Adorno, 1969: 343).

According to Alfred Schutz, the German term *Wissenschaftslehre* includes in English 'both logical problems of a scientific theory and methodology in the restricted sense' (Grathoff, 1978: 101–102).

Lazarsfeld's view of concepts was close to that of Carl Hempel in *Fundamentals of concept formation in empirical science* (1952a). Hempel's main point is that science is about establishing general principles, and that concepts have to be adjusted to this task. Lazarsfeld especially liked what Hempel had to say about explication of concepts, and approvingly cites the following passage from Hempel's work:

Explication aims at reducing the limitations, ambiguities, and inconsistencies of ordinary usage of language by propounding a reinterpretation intended to enhance the clarity and precision of their meanings as well as their ability to function in the processes and theories with explanatory and predictive force (Hempel, 1952a: 12; Lazarsfeld, 1993: 236).

In a symposium that took place the same year as he published his writing on concept formation, Hempel also gave a paper devoted to the concept of type, including Weber's version of the ideal type. Hempel's main point here was that in order for the type concept to be useful, it has to be cast in the form of testable hypotheses (Hempel, 1952b). He does not comment on Weber's argument that the meaning of the actors has to be taken into account in the ideal type; and that this type of concept can therefore *not* be used in the natural sciences.

The basic message of *The language of social research* on how to use concepts had been formulated by Paul Lazarsfeld. For the next twenty years he would repeat these ideas, using exactly the same formulations (see Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg, 1955: 15–16; Lazarsfeld, 1958, 1966, 1973: 12–14). From this it can be concluded that Lazarsfeld had a firm set of opinions on how to deal with concepts, and that these remained the same over a period of time during which Columbia style sociology was at its most influential.

Lazarsfeld's approach to the use of concepts is imminently practical and easy to follow. He summarized it as follows:

- Step 1.* Imagery;
- Step 2.* Concept Specification;
- Step 3.* Selection of Indicators; and
- Step 4.* Formulation of Indices.

You start the research by having some general idea ('imagery') or a concept. You may, for example, have noticed that some children are more alert and curious than others, and therefore more intelligent. Or you may be intrigued by the fact that one organization is run more efficiently than another, and probably has a better management. These are your imageries or concepts.

Lazarsfeld did not believe in producing definitions of concepts. Neither was he very interested in the initial phase of concept formation: 'I purposely use the word "imagery" in a context where other writers talk of a definition. I do not believe that concepts in the behavioral sciences can ever be defined precisely by words' (Lazarsfeld, 1966: 257).

In step number two you 'take this original imagery and divide it into its components' (Lazarsfeld, 1966: 188). Step number three consists of locating empirical indicators; and here the researcher has to be inventive. This is followed by the final step in which indices are constructed. This is where you close the distance between reality and the concept; and where you 'put Humpty Dumpty back together again' (Lazarsfeld, 1966: 189).

As already mentioned, Lazarsfeld repeated this account, which he referred to as 'the flow from concepts to empirical indices', in a number of writings after *The language of research* (e.g. Lazarsfeld, 1958: 100, 1966: 187). He later, however, limited the applicability of his flow theory to what he called classificatory concepts. As an example of a non-classificatory concept, he mentioned the concept of role. He did not elaborate on the difference between the two kinds of concepts, but simply referred the reader to what Merton says on the concept of role, for a non-classificatory concept.

But Lazarsfeld was still not satisfied with his terminology, and in the 1960s he suggested that the term classificatory concept should be replaced by inferential concept (Lazarsfeld, 1966: 159). The reason for the change in terminology had much to do with Lazarsfeld's work on latent variable analysis. The social scientist notices a phenomenon, and *infers* a latent variable-concept from its existence.

Lazarsfeld's view of the role of the concept in sociological analysis signaled a number of important changes. He was clearly less interested in the theoretical aspects of the concept than in its methodological aspects. It is fair to say that Lazarsfeld had an unproblematic view of the nature of concepts and how these should be used in sociological analysis. In the view of James Coleman, who clashed with him over some of these issues, 'Lazarsfeld had a difficult time understanding sociological theory' (Coleman, 1990: 89).

Lazarsfeld helped to popularize another term besides that of the indicator in the discourse about the concept, as part of his advocacy for multivariate analysis in *The language of social research*. This was *the variable*. The term concept could in his view be replaced by that of the variable, even if he himself tended to use the two interchangeably. He also helped to make the term concept less visible and distant in another way, namely by equating it with some vague and early form of observation ('imagery'). His general lack of interest in the theory of the concept worked in a similar direction.

On the first page in the very first article in the section on concepts in *The language of social research*, there is a passage that gives a sense of what kind of attitude to concepts Lazarsfeld thought would be instructive for students in sociology. The article is called 'Types of integration and their measurement' and had been written by Werner Landecker:

From the modern empirical point of view the problem of social integration is as challenging as it was from the older, more speculative point of view. However, a change has occurred as to the kind of question asked about integration. Nowadays it seems less pertinent to ask: What *is* integration? If this question is asked at all, then it is only in preparation for the more fruitful question: How can integration be measured? And, again this latter step is not of interest in itself but merely as a preliminary step, which leads to genuine problems of research such as these: Under what conditions does social integration increase? Under what conditions does it decrease? What are the consequences of a high degree of integration? Sociology is in need of basic research oriented toward this kind of problem.

To get a fuller sense of the way in which concepts were viewed at Columbia University, it is helpful to look at the work of Robert K. Merton. During the late 1940s he was busy working out the basic positions for *Social theory and social structure* (1st edition 1949). In this enterprise Merton was very aware of Lazarsfeld's ideas on methodology, which he on the whole was in agreement with.

For one thing, Merton agreed with Lazarsfeld that the step from concept to concrete reality must be taken for a theory to be useful, and that the way was to locate indicators and create indices with their help. He wrote:

In non-research speculations, it is possible to talk loosely about "morale" or "social cohesion" without any clear conceptions of what is entailed by these terms, but they *must* be clarified if the researcher is to go about his business of systematically observing instances of high and low morale, of social cohesion or cleavage. If he is not to be blocked at the outset, he must devise indices which are observable, fairly precise and meticulously clear.

MERTON, 1948: 514

Like Lazarsfeld, Merton also used the terms concept and variable interchangeably. At one point in *Social theory and social structure*, for example, he writes that 'concepts, then, constitute the definitions of (or propositions) of what is to be observed; they are the variables between which empirical relationships are to be sought' (Merton, 1949: 87, 1968: 143).<sup>6</sup> When variables or concepts are linked together, Merton added in the next sentence, you have a theory: 'when propositions are logically interrelated, a theory has been instituted'.

In the various editions of *Social theory and social structure* (1949, 1957, 1968), which to some extent can be viewed as the theoretical counterpart to *The language of social research*, Merton is primarily arguing that it is crucial to link up concepts to empirical research, while he has very little to say about the nature of concepts or their theoretical tasks.<sup>7</sup>

6 That the tendency to equate the term variable with that of concept was widespread at the time can be illustrated with the name of one of the most famous sociological concepts of the 1950s: the pattern variable (Parsons, 1951).

7 In recalling his time as a graduate student at Columbia University around 1950, Maurice Stein has described that there was a general sense that big things were about to happen in sociology. 'Tomorrow! Tomorrow! [We felt we were] just on the verge of everything! Lazarsfeld is going to develop the perfect scale and Merton was going to develop the perfect theory about that scale' (Dandaneau and East, 2011: 135).—In discussing Merton's tendency to equate the concept with the variable it should be added that at one level he always seems to have loved to coin new terms and create new concepts. But it is also clear that after Columbia style

According to Merton, there exists a general and unfortunate tendency for concepts in sociology to lag behind social developments, but this is something that research can remedy ('*conceptual lag*'; Merton, 1957: 92, 1968: 146). By being skillful in reading empirical reality, the sociologist can also improve existing concepts. As an example of this, Merton mentions Edwin Sutherland's insight that the notion of crime also includes law-breaking activities of people in respectable professions ('white-collar crime').

Merton does not seem to have felt that there was any problem with equating the notion of the concept with that of the variable. He never compared the two nor commented on the fact that while the concept is a very old and multifaceted tool, which has been discussed and commented on over the centuries, this is not the case with the variable. A variable refers to the assumption that the attribute of some entity varies relatively to something else and can be modelled in various ways with the help of mathematics. A variable can be expressed in quantitative terms; and it is not an actor.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it differs

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sociology had peaked and the alliance between Merton and Lazarsfeld had fallen apart, Merton felt freer to engage in this type of activity. As an example of an important statement about concepts from Merton's later period, one can mention his introduction of the notion of *proto-concept* in 'Socially expected durations: a case study of concept formation in sociology':

A proto-concept is an early, rudimentary, particularized, and largely unexplicated idea (which is put to occasional use in empirical research and, indeed, often derives from it); a concept is a general idea which, once having been tagged, substantially generalized, and explicated can effectively guide inquiry into seemingly diverse phenomena. Proto-concepts as a phase of theoretical work—a frequent phase in such work—make for early discontinuities in scientific development if only because they obscure underlying conceptual similarities in diverse substantive fields of inquiry by attending to the particularities of each substantive field; concepts make for continuities by directing our attention to similarities among substantively quite unconnected phenomena (Merton, 1984: 267).

Another example of a late but general contribution to the theory of concepts from Merton's side can be found in his discussion of the failure of many sociological concepts to adequately deal with pain and other forms of suffering. 'Sociological euphemism' is Merton's term for sociological concepts that are incapable of capturing 'social structures which are so organized as to systematically inflict pain, humiliation, suffering, and deep frustration upon particular groups and strata' (Merton, 1973: 131). In dealing with this type of situation, Merton says,

analytically useful concepts such as social stratification, social exchange, reward system, dysfunction, symbolic interaction are altogether too bland in the fairly precise sense of being unperturbing, suave, and soothing in effect (Merton, 1973: 131).

8 I have been unable to find any discussions of the variable from a general theoretical perspective, be it in the literature on the philosophy of science or elsewhere. For a detailed analysis of how the variable is often used in sociological research, especially the work of Abbott is useful. See e.g. Abbott, 2001c.

from a concept in that it is not based on a natural mental representation, as cognitive psychologists would say; it is instead the product of human ingenuity.

The closest that Merton ever came to a general analysis of the variable can be found in his discussion of what he called methodological empiricism (Merton, 1948: 513–514). In much of the sociological research that is being conducted, Merton said, variables are not properly defined. Sociologists are often very interested in seeing how, say, A, B and C are interrelated—, but much less so in what each of these stand for. One consequence of this disregard for properly defining a variable is that it becomes hard to integrate the findings of empirical research into the discipline. Instead of a gradual cumulation, you end up with ‘a buckshot array of dispersed investigations’ (Merton, 1949: 96). The notion that researchers would treat a concept differently, once they had begun to think of it as a variable, does not seem to have occurred to Merton. All that was needed to replace a concept with a variable, in other words, were better definitions of the variables.

### How Influential was the View of the Columbia Sociologists?

What was the impact of the ideas that were developed at Columbia University on the concept and the variable on the research practice of sociologists? Some of the people who were active at the time thought that it had been substantial. Twenty years after the publication of *The language of social research*, Arthur Stinchcombe, for example, reviewed the second edition of this work; and he began his account with the following words: ‘The first edition [from 1955] of *The language of social research* was probably the most important book in the history of methodology in the discipline’ (Stinchcombe, 1974: 126; see also Sørensen, 1998: 242; Platt, 1996: 29).<sup>9</sup> It is also true that the approach to

9 To equate concepts with variables also seems to be characteristic of the first sustained attempt in U.S. sociology to explore the process of theorizing, the so-called theory construction movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Zhao, 1996). In *Constructing social theories* by Arthur Stinchcombe, concepts are equated with variables in an unproblematic manner. ‘A ‘variable’ in science is a *concept* which can have various values, and which is defined in such a way that *one can tell by means of observations which value it has in a particular occurrence*’ (Stinchcombe, 1968: 28–29, 38). The same tendency can also be found in *Theoretical Sociology: From Verbal to Mathematical Formulations* by Hubert Blalock which refers to ‘concepts or variables’ (e.g. Blalock, 1969: 28). This is similarly true for Blalock’s presidential address at ASA in 1978, which was devoted to ‘measurement and conceptualization problems’, and in which the author refers to what he calls ‘theoretical variable’ (Blalock, 1979: 881). Finally, the discussion of indicators that was central to Lazarsfeld’s approach to concepts has continued till today and is still very much alive, both when it comes to how to locate the



concepts in *The language of social research*—to equate these with variables and to look for indicators for variables—is still predominant in sociology (e.g. Abbott, 2001b: 66–67; Goertz and Mahoney, 2012a, 2012b).

It would of course be helpful to know in more detail, and especially at the level of research practice, what happened when Lazarsfeld, Merton and others started to advocate that concepts can be equated with variables and that the term ‘concept’ might just as well be dropped. Did it have a profound impact on the work carried out by sociologists and, if so, how? A solid historical study would be the best way to address this question.

Such a study, however, does not (yet) exist. In the meantime, a preliminary and tentative kind of answer can be given by proceeding in the following way. If you look at the frequency with which the word ‘variable’, on the one hand, and ‘variable’ plus ‘concept’, on the other, have been used in all sociological articles since the 1950s, you will get a rough sense for how their authors viewed the importance of using variables and concepts in empirical sociological research. In proceeding in this way, you basically tap into the general universe of words and terms that sociologists have drawn on, when they thought about their research and how to present it to their colleagues. The general idea behind this way of proceeding, in other words, is that if you use an analysis that is based on variables, and *also* think that sociological concepts are important to the analysis, you will be likely to at some point use the word ‘concept’. If you do not think sociological concepts are that important and that you can do without them, you are similarly likely to *not* use this word.<sup>10</sup>

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indicators and how to handle them (e.g. Sullivan and Feldman, 1979; Land and Ferris, 2008). A student who is interested in learning the technique of how to construct indicators can, for example, easily find good instructions for how to proceed (see e.g. de Vaus, 2002: 55). There also exists a number of works on various types of validity which have as their goal to ensure that the chosen indicators capture what they are supposed to capture (e.g. Adcock and Collier, 2001). There exists little discussion, in contrast, of the fact that the move from concept-to-variable-to indicator (1-2-3) is often reduced to a move from variable-to-indicator (2-3).

- 10 One may ask the question if it is not possible to discuss and use a sociological concept without using the word ‘concept’. The answer to this question is that you can probably do this, even if it is very hard to refer to the key issues of any sociological concept without using the word ‘concept’. There is also the fact that articles that discuss concepts without using the word ‘concept’ are probably quite rare and do not affect the general trend, which is what is being discussed here. Another issue that this question raises is the following. It is impossible to write a sociological article without using any sociological concepts (type ‘society’, ‘social structure’, ‘norm’ and so on). The awareness of the author that he/she uses concepts and that these raise special issues does, however, seem to differ quite a bit—going all the way from the author not being aware of this fact at all, to the author who is perfectly aware of the advantages (and problems) with using concepts.

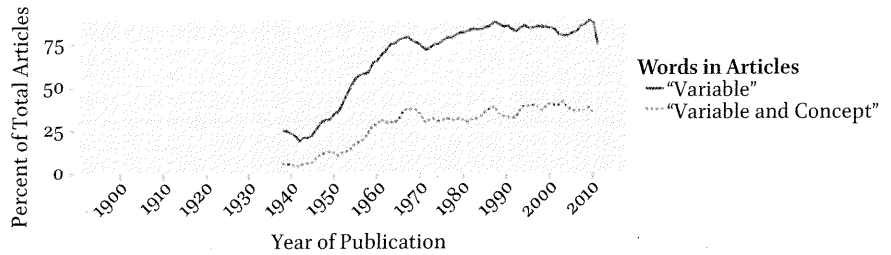


FIGURE 2.1 *Percent of articles in the American Sociological Review (1936–2012) containing the words “variable” or “variable” and “concept”*

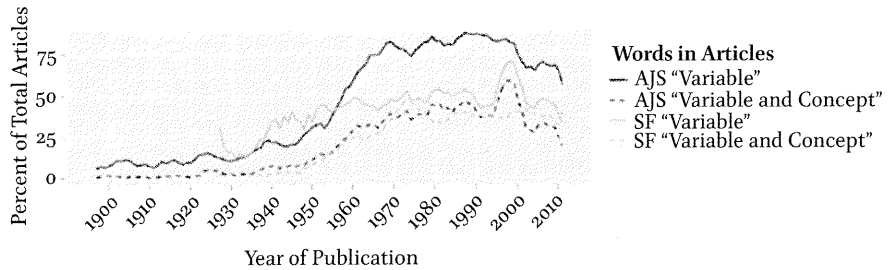


FIGURE 2.2 *Percent of articles in AJS (1895–2012) and Social Forces (1925–2012) containing the words “variable” or “variable” and “concept”*

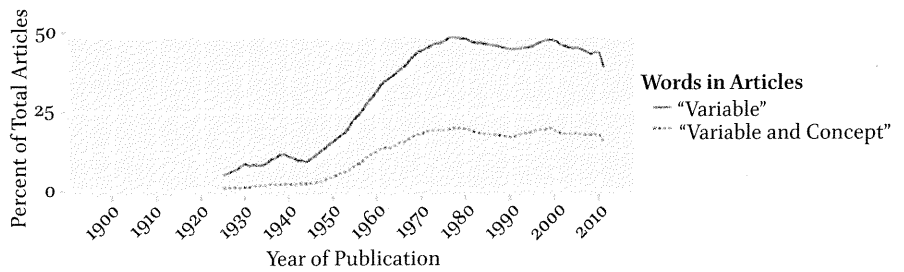


FIGURE 2.3 *Percent of articles in all sociology journals (1936–2012) containing the words “variable” or “variable” and “concept”*

Figures 2.1–2.3 show the frequencies with which the words ‘variable’ and ‘variable’ plus ‘concept’ have been used in different sociological journals since a few decades back. All of these largely largely tell the same story, but in what follows I have chosen mainly to comment on *The American Sociological Review* (1936–2012) since this journal is often seen as the organ of mainstream sociology.

Keeping in mind that this way of looking at things is merely suggestive, the results indicate the following broad conclusions. First of all, it would appear that the tendency to drop the notion of the concept from variable analysis goes much further back than to the post-war period when the main works of Lazarsfeld and Merton were produced. Given this fact, the impact of Lazarsfeld and Merton appears to have been less important than what you may have thought.

It would also appear that over time the proportion of articles in *ASR* that use the word 'variable' in relation to those that use both 'variable' and 'concept', has remained more or less about the same. During this period, however, the absolute number of articles that use the word 'variable' in relation to all articles in *ASR* has doubled several times. The type of analysis that draws on variables has in other words become much more prevalent after World War II—and with it also a special attitude to the concept. If one were to summarize the impact of Columbia style sociology in the 1950s, based on this exploratory analysis, it would be as follows. While the tendency to equate the concept with the variable existed well before World War II, Lazarsfeld et al probably helped to provide an intellectual justification for it, popularize it and turn it into mainstream sociology.

It is not advisable to cite exact figures, based on the material from *ASR*. Nonetheless, looking at the period 1980–2010, it would seem that at least half of the empirical analyses (perhaps even more), dispense with referring to concepts. Again, this argument becomes even stronger if we assume that a solid sociological article would contain at least a line or two in which concepts are discussed, rather than just mentioning (or not) the word 'concept'. The result of at least half (and perhaps even more) is also true for *AJS* and all sociological journals (in JSTOR).

In the critique of variable sociology that emerged in the 1990s, it was argued that the notion of sociological theory has been impoverished and often replaced with statistical models in which the analysis of variables is central (e.g. Abbott, 1992, 1997; Hedström and Swedberg, 1998; Manzo, 2007). Many of these models operate in principle by adding up the number of variables used in the explanation of some phenomenon ('additive models'—Sørensen, 1998: 249; see also e.g. Ragin, 2008: 112–114). Variables do the acting rather than individuals or groups (e.g. Abbott, 1992). To all of these critiques, it can now also be added that there exists a tendency in variable analysis to ignore concepts and just refer to variables. As the analysis of variables grew in popularity, so did this attitude among sociologists.

The exploratory analysis of the role of concepts and variables in *ASR* during 1936–2012 that has just been refereed to, may be able to capture some aspects

of the general development of sociologists' use of concepts and variables, but it would clearly have been much better if it had been based on a close reading of, say, all the individual articles in *ASR* or on a good-sized sample of these. By proceeding in this way a tentative and suggestive finding would have been replaced by a solid one.

There does however exist a solid content analysis of *ASR*; and as it so happens, some of its findings are also relevant for this paper. This is 'The use of conceptual categories of race in American sociology, 1937–99' by John Levi Martin and King-To Yeung (2003). What the authors of this article were interested in was not how concepts in general had developed over time in mainstream sociology, but how one specific concept had done so. This was the concept of race; and Martin and Yeung carried out their analysis through a solid content analysis of a sample of articles that had appeared in *ASR* during 1937–1999. During this period, they note, the articles that were empirical in nature had doubled and come to totally dominate the journal (from 42% in the late 1930s, to 84% in the late 1990s; Martin and Yeung, 2003: 527). The number of studies that took race into account also rose very sharply during 1937–1999; and the method that was used in these studies was typically regression analysis or a regression-type model.

These are important findings about the concept of race in sociology. But Martin and Yeung also found something else that speaks to the issue of this article. This is that while a growing number of analyses did include race in the analysis, the view of race changed. It became, to cite the authors' summary formulation, 'broad but shallow' (Martin and Yeung, 2003: 538). One reason for this change, Martin and Yeung argue, was technical in nature and mainly due to the fact that race was often just added as a control variable.

Martin and Yeung do not differentiate between concept and variable in their analysis, but mix the two in their discussion of what they call 'the conceptual category of race'. In the terminology of this article, one can however say that in becoming 'broad but shallow', their analysis of the concept of race illustrates what may happen when the line between concept and variable becomes fuzzy or dissolved.

### Concluding Remarks

The insights about concepts that can be found in the article by Martin and Yeung are important but have not led to much debate. On the whole, the interest of sociologists in the theoretical aspects of concepts is very low today and has been low ever since the days of Lazarsfeld and Merton. Some exceptions

do exist, even if they are not many and have not received much attention (e.g. Bulmer, 1979, 2001; Bulmer and Burgess, 1986; Prandy, Stewart and Blackburn, 1974; Abbott, 2001a).

It has recently been suggested that there exists more of an interest in discussing concepts among qualitative sociologists than among those who use quantitative methods (e.g. Goertz and Mahoney, 2012a, 2012b). According to Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, who have written a book on the different cultures that have emerged around qualitative and quantitative studies in social science, quantitative scholars and qualitative scholars differ in the following way when it comes to concepts:

For qualitative scholars, the relationship between a concept and data is one of *semantics*, i.e. meaning. These scholars explore how data can be used to express the meaning of a concept. For quantitative scholars, by contrast, the relationship between variable and indicator concerns the *measurement* of the variable. These scholars focus on how to use indicators to best measure a latent construct.

GOERTZ and MAHONEY, 2012b: 140

Exactly how qualitative sociologists have looked at concepts since WWII remains an interesting task to explore. My own sense is that they basically view the concept as part of methodology, as opposed to as part of theory, as advocated in this article. In this sense, qualitative and quantitative sociology are roughly in agreement.

The last question to discuss, which is perhaps the most important, has to do with the consequences of *not* using concepts in a sociological analysis. With some exaggeration I have called this article 'the near disappearance of concepts in mainstream sociology', but hopefully the reader will agree that the number of empirical articles that do not even mention concepts is disturbingly large.

A first point to make in this context is that it is clear that you can ignore sociological concepts in empirical research and still produce high quality work on many issues. The analysis may seem more realistic this way, being closer to reality as well as far away from artificial theory. Add to this that it makes things easier not to have to deal with the tricky and bothersome question of how to operationalize concepts such as, say, status, class and charisma.

But there is also a price to pay if you choose to proceed without explicitly drawing on sociological concepts. You not only cut yourself off from a wealth of good ideas, you also run the risk of having your research being ignored since it cannot easily be integrated into the sociological tradition if it does not refer to concepts and theory, but exclusively to some topic. Whatever sense of realism

and relief that is temporarily produced by dispensing with concepts, should to my mind be weighed against the fact that research without concepts may have great difficulty in surviving and influencing future research. Science without concepts risks ending up as the famous portrait in *The picture of Dorian Gray*: first looking young and vital for quite some time, but ultimately collapsing as a result of a misspent life.

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