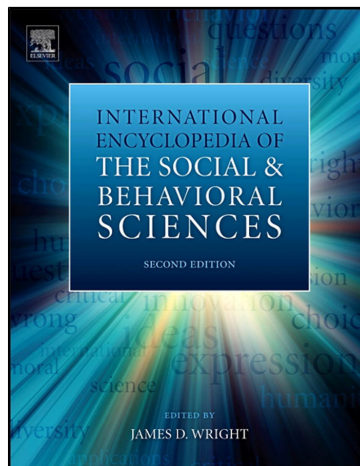


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## Methodology of the History of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

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### Abstract

The history of the social and behavioral sciences (SBS) gets varying coverage in different disciplines. Regardless of these differences, we sketch a general and descriptive methodology for the historiography of SBS. The approach is not to seek for a consistent reconstruction of how to correctly write history, but to observe historians of SBS at work empirically. This, at best, results in a collection of models of best practice that can guide future research on the history of SBS. In all brevity, we do this for five units of analysis: (1) Actors; (2) Ideas; (3) Instruments; (4) Institutions; and (5) Contexts.

The past of the social and behavioral sciences (SBS), their 'history,' gets varying coverage in different disciplines. While the natural sciences are well covered within the 'history of science' field, this is not the case for the SBS. A comparable overarching specialty 'history of SBS' does not exist, and the various SBS disciplines handle the problematic of their past differently. In some disciplines we find specialized journals, research groups, and doctoral programs, whereas in other disciplines some or even all of these specializations are lacking. The intensity with which the trajectories of the disciplines are researched varies strongly.

Regardless of these differences, in this article we venture to draw a portrait of one aspect of the historiography of SBS, its methodology. We start by describing several analytic perspectives that histories of SBS can take and subsequently develop briefly what might be called an empirical methodology of history in the SBS.

### Analytic Perspectives

The history of a particular discipline consists of narratives about former periods and the trajectory of the discipline. Different approaches to writing such a history have evolved over time. A 'philosophy of science' perspective strives to reconstruct the logical structure of the system of propositions, their relationship to underlying assumptions, and to particular statements. The aim is to advance scholarship by distinguishing good science from bad science, truth from error. A 'history of science' perspective is less concerned with the logical preconditions of science but with the detailed reconstruction of particular cases of scientific research, theorizing, controversy, and debate. The *sociological perspective* on the history of science and scholarship analyzes the opportunity structures enabling scholars to fulfill their professional obligations by emphasizing the role of norms; the modes of assigning prestige and recognition to scientists; the influence of historically contingent institutional arrangements; the forms of collaboration; and the prevailing convictions, cultural moods, and world views held by scientists. Sociologists of science are not concerned with history per se but make use of past cases and arrangements, partly because it is easier to show a detached stance toward bygone situations, but also because present-day practices are less observable than 'closed cases,' and finally because sometimes past affairs are better documented

and archives more easily accessible. More often than not practitioners from these three branches got their original training in different fields of scholarship. As a consequence, the exchange of ideas, the communication across disciplinary boundaries, and therefore the mutual enrichment have been diminishing over the last decades. These fields – philosophy of science, history of science, and sociology of science – became increasingly exclusive areas, i.e., specialties in a narrow sense, and tended to look inside rather than to neighboring discourses.

A further peculiarity stems from the fact that analyzing science requires some familiarity with the subject itself; in the early days of the philosophy of science movement, its exponents claimed that one needs to have training in the particular discipline one studies in order to carry out such endeavor with success. When the 'history of science' field began to blossom in the early twentieth century, the requirements have been even more far-reaching; students were expected to be universally educated cosmopolitans mastering several languages and disciplines, and to command a good knowledge of with the history of thought from the early periods on (George Sarton functioning as a role model). Only when the second generation of sociologists of science entered the stage, the attitude toward the subject under investigation changed considerably. Adopting the habitus of anthropologists, these scholars left the historical approach behind and went into the field like ethnographers. Members of (scholarly) tribes were asked to make their laboratories available to participant observers who then recruited 'local' informants to explain what they were doing when they professed to study, e.g., the nature. Alleged ignorance functioned as a device to identify the assumptions underlying the practices of science. Detailed historical knowledge, or even awareness of the field's past, was deemed to undermine the methodical alienation that is a prerequisite for any good ethnography. When this mind-set had been established successfully within academic discourse, devotees of social studies of science applied their novel conceptual schemes to past stages of scientific research too. As a side effect, these mostly constructivist scholars got rebuttals from ontological realists. The 'science wars' of the 1990s left behind what warfare usually does: burned grounds, with both parties claiming ultimate victory.

The portrait would not be complete without mentioning a fourth type of history of science authors: Scholars writing the history of their own discipline. At best their contributions show

a discipline's degree of reflexivity; at worst they worship the successes of their authors' teachers. Usually such *historians of their own discipline* lack any training in history and do not look at their case from a comparative point of view; nonetheless, they sometimes deliver rich source material for further studies. In most cases, their audiences are discipline-compatriots, and references to philosophy/history/sociology of science literature are weak or even inexistent. Very often this type of historical analysis follows the lines of reconstructing the development of particular theories and covers the past primarily as a huge reservoir of ideas.

Today, history of science and philosophy of science, besides regular calls to collaborate more closely, are relatively separate communities with distinct patterns of scholarly communication. Specialized journals mark the boundaries of the discourses. Few departments and graduate programs unite both fields – however, SBS are very rare research topics in history of science departments. History of science primarily deals with the history of natural science; the same holds true for the interdisciplinary field of science studies. The whole field of sociological investigations has been split apart, and the only remaining shared denominator is the preference not to analyze their own disciplinary field and its trajectories over time.

Some aspects of the history of SBS, ideas, and theories in particular, are part of standard university curricula in some disciplines, but this has not led to a consolidation of the history of SBS as an autonomous field of research. Organizations devoted to the history of particular SBS disciplines are rare, one notable exception being the History of Economics Society (founded in 1974), whereas several associations are concerned with the history of a multitude of disciplines (e.g., Cheiron: The International Society for the History of the Behavioral & Social Sciences, founded in 1968; the European Society for the History of the Human Sciences, founded in 1982). Major international SBS associations have, if ever, only reluctantly introduced adequate sections or research committees. For instance, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) has no section on the history of the discipline (cf <http://www.aaanet.org/sections/>, accessed September 2012). The same applies for the European Association of Social Anthropology and the European Sociological Association. Compared to the other sections, American Sociological Association's History of Sociology section is relatively small. The Research Committee History of Sociology of the International Sociological Association is kind of an exception: It is relatively old and prospering. There is also a scarcity of specialized journals, with the *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, the *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, *History of the Human Sciences* and a few others as exceptions.

### An Empirical Methodology

There are countless alternative understandings of the very notion of methodology extant in SBS literature, but most fruitful in our context seems to be an understanding inspired by the Paul F. Lazarsfeld's dictum that while a sociologist studies man in society, the task of the methodologist is to study the sociologist at work (Lazarsfeld, 1982: 171). Our task, thus,

is not to seek for a logical and consistent reconstruction of instructions for how to correctly write the history of SBS, but to observe how historians of SBS do their craft. This, at best, results in a collection of models of best practice that can guide future research on the history of SBS.

In principle, historiography in the SBS is concerned with five kinds of units of analysis:

1. Actors: The history of individual scholars, of groups of like-minded authors, of generations and cohorts
2. Ideas: The history of concepts, theories, and research programs
3. Instruments: The history of methodologies, methods, techniques, and research practices
4. Institutions: The history of institutions and organizations
5. Contexts: The history of the embeddedness of science in larger social, political, cultural, and economic environments.

### Actors

Traditionally studies of the history of SBS focus either on actors or ideas. Looking at actors as the unit of analysis, it can be observed that the most prominent level of aggregation is the individual. The vast majority of publications in the history of SBS are engaged in one way or another with individual scholars. Practically all leading figures from all SBS disciplines received coverage of their life and work in longer or shorter biographies (and the present Encyclopedia follows the path of its predecessors by including biographical articles on leading individuals). The standard mold of intellectual biography, life, work, and influence, claims much of the space, besides regularly raised reservations about obvious shortcomings (Gross, 2008). Collins argues persuasively that even genius-like authors happen to develop their ideas in chains of interaction with others (Collins, 1998) but his elaborated methodology found only very few follow-ups (Savelsberg and Flood, 2011). Missing in Collins' argumentation is, however, the role of the private life of scholars, which has rarely been studied systematically but is covered widely in all types of autobiographical writing. Some books contain chapters on teacher-student relations, collaboration with like-minded contemporaries, and debates with competitors (Merton and Riley, 1980). Another branch of this literature is concerned with particular research groups, schools, departments, universities, etc. (e.g., Bulmer, 1984a; Dahrendorf, 1995; Farrell, 2001; Wheatland, 2009). At an even higher level of aggregation, we have prosopographies, collective biographies, and investigations making use of the concept of generation (Blaug and Vane, 2003; Fleck, 2011). Rather popular are reports on the development of disciplines in particular nation-states (Halsey, 2004; Calhoun, 2007).

Mostly lacking are investigations on structured career patterns and the demographics of disciplines, glimpses of which can be found in the *World Social Science Report* (UNESCO, 2010; Mills et al., 2006). Sociologists focusing on actors seldom transgress Rankean narrative history by employing conceptual schemes form their own discipline. Merton's paradigm for sociology of knowledge (Merton, 1996: 208) did not attract many followers whereas in recent years,

Bourdieu's field theory and his distinction between different modes of capital entered center (Bourdieu, 1988).

## Ideas

The reconstruction of the succession of leading ideas revolves around central concepts, theories, etc., mostly in the manner of the history of ideas approach in philosophy and human sciences (Grafton, 2006). At the core of a history of ideas approach stands the vision that ideas beget ideas, either by differentiation or by refinement. Whereas professional historians of ideas tend to analyze single entities or unit-ideas (Nisbet (1970) following Lovejoy (1936)), historians of SBS prefer compositions of ideas, or 'theories,' as their unit of analysis (Parsons et al., 1961; Coser, 1971; Weiler, 2014; Isaac, 2012). In the beginning, the succession of systems of propositions, their configuration and reconfiguration, has been seen as following a path of progress; later stages were seen as improvements compared to older versions, and the overall perspective remained more or less linear: later theorists were able to see further because of their standing on the 'shoulders of giants' (Merton, 1993). Since the middle of the 20th century, however, historians of SBS ideas tend to restrict their attention to particular outstanding individuals, either in the way of writing intellectual biographies of single authors or analyzing small groups of closely connected individuals, often under the label of schools (Schumpeter, 1954; Bottomore and Nisbet, 1978).

One can further differentiate the ideas according to their 'epistemic' status. Ideas, in their broadest possible meaning, can be ranked according to the degree of their explicitness. The history of ideas approach offers a variety of concepts: The 'zeitgeist' is one well-known candidate, 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi, 1966) another one, and Ludwik Fleck's 'style of thought,' a third one (Fleck, 1979). All three share the characteristic that members of later cohorts are able to identify those thoughts easily, whereas even the most outstanding coevals had troubles to transcend them.

More explicit are sets of ideas that have been assembled into research programs. Such programmatic announcements are by their very nature explicit, and usually appear in plural. Lakatos was the first who elaborated the concept of research program (Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970). This concept has for instance been applied to economics (Marchi and Blaug, 1991; Boumans, 2012). At the core of a research program is a set of propositions which are of crucial relevance for the whole program and which is therefore defended against attempts to prove them wrong. In this area, there is considerable overlap with SBS theorists striving to reconstruct past research programs, but their neglect for the social conditions of the original formulation of the program as well as some SBS historians' exaggerated claim to explain all aspects of a research program by social factors renders collaboration difficult.

Several attempts at conceptual and theoretical innovations have been ventured recently: A dialogical turn (Levine, 1995; Camic and Joas, 2004) or a new sociology of ideas (Camic and Gross, 2001; Camic, 2010) were proposed. Outstanding studies by social science giants as Albert O. Hirschman (1991) and Robert K. Merton (Merton and Barber, 2004), who traced the rhetoric of reaction and the emergence of the concept of

serendipities, respectively, did not find followers so far but offer a distinct perspective on the trajectory of bundles of ideas (Zuckerman, 2010, 2011).

## Instruments

A much less frequently covered aspect of SBS's historical development concerns 'instruments.' In the hard sciences, the very notion of instruments refers to clear-cut real things, such as air pumps, microscopes, and petri dishes in the early days, and highly complex and costly things in recent times, such as satellites orbiting our planet, medical imaging from X-ray radiation to DNA sequencing, not to mention colossal machineries like CERN's Large Hadron Collider. In SBS it is less clear what instruments look like. Abbott (2011) argues persuasively that the humanist's tool is a well-stocked library, offering physical access to huge numbers of publications assembled according to a not too arbitrary system of classification. But there are other types of SBS researchers, empirical sociologists, psychological experimenters, and economic or demographic modelers among them. Not only do they need money to hire helping hands, they also developed and adopted real instruments over the course of decades: Questionnaires, coding handbooks, machines to process punched cards, devices for storing data as magnetic tapes, etc. Furthermore, assembling a group of people for a focus group interview needs an appropriate space, asks for utensils to record what has been spoken or to make use of Super 8 mm film, later replaced by video and more recently digital cameras. For field researchers it might be sufficient to possess a pencil and a notebook as devices, accompanied by the quintessential humanistic instruments: a trained brain and a good memory.

From a more systematic point of view, one could argue that established search strategies, methodologies, techniques, and finally exemplars also belong to the category of instruments. At the level of search strategies, SBS scholars can be divided crudely according to their inclination toward the average man, Quetelet's 'l'homme moyen,' on the one hand and the genius on the other hand. If one is committed to the first perspective, every single individual observed could be exchanged for another one (Igo, 2007), whereas in the opposite branch of scholarship, the researcher is looking for particularities, following an idiographic approach which has its vanishing point in the unparalleled individual, the great man of the old days. Ordinary SBS research happens in between these two poles, some of it based on what one could properly name an instrument, other lacking such independent existing gadgets. Most of the scholarly discussion on search strategies is located in a philosophical frame of references. Some German philosophers, for example, called their respective thinking 'philosophical anthropology' by referring to basic assumptions about mankind. Others debated nearly the same under the title of universals, or in cultural anthropology with regard to cultural relativism. All these contributions assume that a particular set of capabilities is demonstrated or even better possessed by all men and women.

Less abstract than search strategies are methodologies. The debates on methodology are dominated either by experts in

research methodology or philosophy of (social) science. Due to their competences and interests, they seldom study the historical trajectory of particular methodologies in detail, but rather their potential refinements or abstract justifications. A historical analysis of methodologies would accentuate the contingency of particular developments, by highlighting personal influences, philosophical or *meta*-theoretical fashions, and opportunity structures at particular cognitive microenvironments to detect the roots of novel methodologies or to identify which forces support continuity in once established routines (Bunge, 1998; Outhwaite and Turner, 2007). At this level of abstraction, methodologies are transformed into routine techniques of doing research, and what has been said about potential lanes of analyzing methodologies can therefore be applied (Platt, 1996; Steinmetz, 2005; Savage, 2010).

A particularly interesting phenomenon is the case of exemplars. Thomas S. Kuhn made them famous and drew attention to the fact that ordinary scholars very often imitate exceptional models (Kuhn, 1962). A serious history of such model studies which functioned as exemplars in particular disciplines for a particular period of time is a strong desideratum in the history of SBS (Lazarsfeld, 2011).

Switching the perspective of analysis from the instruments to their qualities, one can ask for the degree of adequacy of each instrument both in synchronic and diachronic perspective. Is a particular search strategy, methodology, etc., used only in particular microenvironments (such as departments, schools, research institutes, etc.) or is it dominant at the national or even international level? How did it happen that this routine was established locally, nationally, or internationally? A second question could be directed toward the lineage of a particular instrument: Have there been predecessors, and how have they been transformed into the new shape; did the advocates of the new tool quarrel with those who favored the old one, or did they ignore particular rivals? What has been said about competitors in time could also be applied to synchronic opponents (see Merton, 1996).

## Institutions

Analyzing institutions is quintessential in furthering our understanding of what happens in science and scholarship. Opportunity structures (Merton, 1995) can be seen as the conditions that shape scholarship with regard to resources; opportunity structures emerge, diffuse, and differentiate over time and space. We can describe (1) the location where scholars exhibit their profession (ranging from stable cognitive microenvironments as departments to more temporary collaborations and encounters), (2) the audiences they address, and (3) the modes of governance to which they are subjected. (1) Up to now, both sociologists and historians of science investigated primarily units of relatively stable shape and paid less attention to the more fleeting opportunities to exchange ideas. Traditional academies did not play a big role in SBS, but research networks of the 'invisible college' type and occasional happenstances as the coming together of a class of fellows at one of the centers of advanced study, offering not only the 'leisure of the theory class' (Bell, 2000: 448) but serendipitous

stimulation for each of them, deserve closer examination (Heilbron et al., 2008). The still underresearched forum where ideas were exchanged, evaluated, and further developed are publications, and journals in particular. These media deserve to be studied more deeply because they exhibit the assignment of status and reputation via peer review and direct the attention of the members of each discipline toward those contributions which need to be recognized. The procedures of peer review have been studied by scientometricians since decades, however poorly recognized beyond these circles, and have been quite recently more visibly debated (Lamont, 2009). Journals, through their development over time and changes in their policies caught the attention of only very few sociologists and historians of SBS (Besnard, 1979; Lepenies, 1981; Abbott, 1999), whereas encyclopedias of the social sciences are still waiting to become the subject of serious investigations, besides their obvious role in shaping the knowledge of the covered disciplines and exhibiting the distribution of the cultural capital within them. Translations are another instance of exchanging ideas and shaping the international migration of ideas, and recent attempts to analyze them demonstrate the fruitfulness of this kind of investigation (Pollak, 1986; Heilbron, 1999; Sapiro and Bustamante, 2009). Academic and non-academic publishing houses, their market (and, consequently, book selection) strategies, their distribution policies and technologies further are crucial factors in shaping the gestalt of SBS.

(2) The addressed audience might be other academics only, the lay people, or clients, either from the private or the public sector of any society or state (Fleck et al., 2009; Fleck and Hess, 2014). Seeing addressees as clients points to their influence on what is at the core of scholarship, whereas looking at them as uneducated and unsophisticated audiences only invites to see the 'masses' vis-à-vis the known experts (Lazarsfeld et al., 1967; Halliday and Janowitz, 1992). The distance between those who do science and those who support them or pay for them varies in history, but at any given time any variant of scholarship is embedded in larger environments, offering the mandarins time and resources at different levels of generosity, stimulating or discouraging their striving for the truth (Ringer, 1969; Lepenies, 1988; Calhoun, 2007; Fleck, 2011).

(3) Since science policy decision makers are part of the audiences, too, there is some overlap of the modes of governance with the aforementioned audiences. However, but the power relationship is reversed: Scholars are on the receiving side and those who supply funds are in the position to dictate the rules, as it happened recently with the imposition of new public management's audit culture (Strathern, 2000; Münch, 2007, 2011). The widely debated Mode-2 perspective (Gibbons, 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001) has rarely been discussed with regard to developments in SBS (Albert, 2003; Kropp and Blok, 2011). Earlier instances of models of governance have been investigated both with regard to the role of the state in general (Wagner, 1990) and philanthropic foundations (Bulmer, 1984b; Fisher, 1993).

The increased interest in institutional thinking did not have sustainable consequences for writing the history of SBS so far. Both small-scaled (e.g., sabbatical, project research, teamwork, etc.) and large institutional frameworks have been researched only in the sociology of science, particularly in the world



polity approach (Drori et al., 2003, 2006). Even when small environments have been researched as, e.g., departments, the explanations for their rise and decline did not take into account the larger institutional settings, very much to the disadvantage of their results.

## Contexts

Since the beginnings of sociology of knowledge and sociology of science, contextualization is the distinct feature of any externalist approach to study the texts of surrounding authors and/or the nontextual (political, institutional, etc.) environment. Galison (2008) rightly emphasized that we need a specification of the meaning and the range of the concept 'context' and its application in history of science and related fields of research. We will highlight only two types of contexts here, which affected the trajectory of SBS over the last two centuries. These are governance on the one hand and political regimes on the other hand. In addition to what has already been said with regard to the first, we want to draw attention to another feature: patterns of internationalization of SBS. Most analyses still follow the directions laid out by modernization theory since the 1950s. Patterns of diffusion and imitation accompanied by some pinches of cultural imperialism dominate most of the publications and this might be appropriate if the focus of one's analysis is on the macro-level of the science system: What has been labeled 'isomorphism,' the consolidation and following impact of the modern world polity and culture system on different branches of scholarship and institutions worldwide, is at the moment the most prominent approach (Drori et al., 2003, 2006). Several studies on the 'Americanization' of disciplines' theories and methodologies elsewhere could be mentioned here (Haney, 2008; comp. Heilbrun et al., 2008). Another recent enhancement of contextualization is provided by putting globalization of science and scholarship on its head, to bring the contributions of peripheral scholars to the attention of scholars at the center (Patel, 2010) or offering insights from distinct patterns of a politics of academic autonomy (Beigel, 2013). The recent flourishing of behavioral economics could be mentioned as an illustrative record, where a disreputable empirical social research technique, experimentation, became prolific because of its application by sophisticated economists. Their longtime disregard for empirical research has been transformed into an asset because the experimenters were able to design their experiments ingeniously due to their theoretical preponderance.

The impact of political regimes on the SBS has been extensively studied for the Nazi case and its expulsion of mostly Jewish intellectuals (Coser, 1984; Ash and Söllner, 1996; Feichtinger, 2001; Fleck, 2015) and to a lesser degree for the communist world (Sparschuh and Becker, 1997; Keen and Mucha, 1994, 2006; Voříšek, 2012, 2011; Fleck and Hess, 2011). A recently blossoming branch of literature investigates the impact of the Cold War on the cognitive gestalt and social organization of SBS (e.g., Abbott and Sparrow, 2007; Cohen-Cole, 2009, 2014; Engerman, 2009; Erickson et al., 2013; Gerovitch, 2002; Mirowski, 2002, 2005; Robin, 2001; Rohde, 2013; Solovey, 2013; Solovey and Cravens, 2012).

## Conclusion

The history of SBS is a field not yet fully established within academia. In addition, crucial differences in the quality and intensity of historical scholarship exist between the various SBS disciplines. Thus, any attempt to project a methodology for SBS historiography is probably most successful if it conceives of itself as a descriptive endeavor inspecting the existing historical literature, and not as an endeavor of philosophical thinking that attempts to logically deduct prescriptions for how to correctly write the history of SBS.

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