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978-0-521-38246-5 - The Methodology of Herbert Blumer: Critical Interpretation and Repair

Kenneth Baugh

Excerpt

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1. What is methodology?

Like many other technical and quasi-technical terms in the social sciences, the word “methodology” has no single, uniform meaning. We must begin therefore with an attempt to become clear about Blumer’s definition of it.

For Blumer, the methodology of science, in its most general expression, is the self-reflection of the scientific enterprise, that is, the study of the principles which underlie scientific inquiry (1969b: 24). This definition implies that, as with every self-reflective endeavor, methodology has an indefinite boundary. Its further reaches pass into the philosophical provinces of logic, epistemology, and ontology, blending fully into the array of their discourses. For this reason, Blumer’s statement defining methodology begins with a discussion of idealism and realism (1969b: 21–2).

On the other hand, methodology is at least provisionally sited in a more familiar place. As the self-reflection of scientific inquiry, methodology is directed to recognize that inquiry in its entirety. From standard practice, Blumer gleans some key elements which fall into the proper focus of methodology: establishing a perspective for viewing the empirical world, raising research problems within that perspective, deciding on appropriate data and the methods for their collection, and prefiguring a framework for interpreting the findings of research (1969b: 26). Methodology addresses these matters not by enacting them, but by developing the *principles* according to which they are enacted.

We can grasp the full significance of Blumer’s definition of methodology by considering how he employs it polemically. Throughout his career, Blumer was an outspoken critic of all attempts in sociology to narrow the domain of methodological discussion to an exclusive concern with methods or techniques. In his very first published paper, he stated:

I suspect that the milling and halting condition of our own science does not come directly from the inadequacy of our techniques, as almost everyone contends, but from the inadequacy of our point of view. The effort to rescue the discipline by

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increasing occupation with method and by the introduction of precision devices is, I venture to suggest, working along the wrong direction (1931: 528).

Speaking before the American Sociological Society in 1947, Blumer up-braided certain of his colleagues:

I believe it is fair to say that those trying to study public opinion are so wedded to their technique that they shunt aside the vital question of whether their technique is suited to the study of what they are ostensibly seeking to study. Their work is largely merely making application of their technique (1948: 542).

More than two decades later, Blumer commented critically upon the “depressing frequency” with which methodology in the social sciences is equated with the study of quantitative procedures (1969b: 24). Aside from direct pronouncements, Blumer in his own methodological writings attempted to exemplify the proper scope of the discussion.

At issue in Blumer’s critical stance is the role of reflection in science. Blumer insists that social science must be reflectively engaged with itself, for otherwise it will perpetuate several serious shortcomings, which we can recount in three steps.

First, Blumer considers the position of those who would simply truncate methodology into method (1966c: iii–vi). Their belief is that the essential character and principles of scientific practice are already established. With these principles as given, the task narrows to one of application, which is essentially a technical problem of translating scientific method into specific procedures:

This focusing of interest and effort on the innovation and perfection of techniques signifies that, in the study of man, no special problem is seen other than to work out appropriate applications of the scientific method. It is for this reason that the interest in ‘methodology’ in the social sciences is so predominantly preoccupied with the development and use of techniques (1966c: iv).

The point here is that technical considerations rely upon methodological principles in an implicit and naive fashion. To thematize these principles and assess them critically is nothing other than the self-reflection of scientific inquiry. Blumer’s insistence upon the necessity of this task is an admonition for social science to grasp itself more critically.

The second concern underlying Blumer’s defense of self-reflective social science involves rejection of a general view frequently interwoven with methodological principles implicitly employed. That view holds scientific method to be an established given. Proponents of this opinion frequently assume without further question that the physical sciences constitute a clear paradigm for all scientificity.

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Yet a close look at the methodological thinking of the physical sciences, Blumer argues, reveals “an arena of difference, ambiguity, confusion, and, indeed, controversy.” The conceptions of science in the natural sciences “do not reflect in any sense a unitary and firmly established view. Instead, they show significant differences along many lines” (1966c: iv). In sum, there is just “no consensus as to what constitutes ‘scientific method’ ” (1966c: v).

We are too easily misled, Blumer continues, by the appearance from time to time of a seeming consensus. To avoid deception we must view such matters in a less parochial context:

The history of the portrayals of scientific method over the past two centuries by natural scientists and sophisticated interpreters shows a . . . picture of differences, change, shifts, and new versions. The nature of scientific method has not been, and is not now, a fixed, established datum (1966c: v).

Blumer’s position poses the challenge of new beginnings. When in 1966 he declared flatly that the most important problem facing the social and psychological sciences is the question of how to study man (1966c: vi), he resumed the problematic that had engaged the founding fathers of the social sciences. For Durkheim, for Max Weber, for Simmel, methodology implied the need for broad-based reflection. These theorists, and of course many others, faced the challenge of inventing a discipline, and could not evade the fundament of such a task. What Blumer is urging is that we, too, remain beginners, and only deceive ourselves in thinking otherwise.

The third and last concern motivating Blumer’s insistence upon a reflective social science involves *specific* methodological principles that are implicitly relied upon. Blumer argues in effect that, although methodology is not established as a fixed datum, it is still developed to the point where it can raise serious objections to certain uncritically employed procedures and techniques in social science. As we will see in the following chapters, Blumer’s specific criticisms extend in several directions and occur on different levels of reflection. But for now, because we are considering methodology only in its most general aspect, let it simply be stated that, in Blumer’s view, social science needs to reflect on its methods and practices in order to correct some current mistakes.

Such, then, is Blumer’s case for self-reflection in social science. His argument is not an attack upon technical competence, but only upon the naiveté, sclerotic dogmatism, and error which can ensue when reflection is plied too narrowly.

It is important to recognize that Blumer’s notion of methodology has no

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initial leanings toward qualitative, or ethnographic, research. Typically, Blumer is viewed in methodological terms as simply a theorist of participant observation. This error apparently draws from two sources. First, in his statement defining methodology (1969b: 21ff.), Blumer does not disengage as thoroughly as he might the definition of the term from its specific implementation. Second, many readers consider only the 1969 paper, “The methodological position of symbolic interactionism,” and neglect the earlier writings. These two tendencies in fact converge: The failure to consider the earlier writings, which differ with the 1969 paper in significant ways, facilitates the analytic blurring of “methodology” with its more narrow implications. In consequence, Blumer is situated wrongly.

We need to center the matter. Blumer’s view of methodology as the self-reflection of scientific inquiry implies a *general* problematic. And such is the outcome. Blumer grapples with issues which are logically prior to the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. Any special attention devoted to the latter is derivative from considerations of a more fundamental nature. Blumer’s message is for all social scientists, not just a coterie of ethnographers.

Having grasped the presiding thought in Blumer’s conception of methodology, we may proceed to the more arduous task of following his implementation of it. In short, we must examine the results of Blumer’s reflection on science, a reflection which bears a certain variegated quality.

For Blumer’s thinking is not of a single piece. Having spanned half a century, it underwent change and development, a fact virtually lost to the Blumer secondary literature. Let us correct matters by proceeding, in the next chapter, to depict Blumer’s methodological thought in its stages of development.

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2. Blumer's development

First phase: Science and interpretation

The first phase of Blumer's development is dominated by two distinct tendencies. On the one hand, Blumer sought to uphold the methodological unity of the sciences. "*A priori*," he said in his doctoral dissertation, "there is nothing in human behavior which prevents the application of the natural scientific method to human behavior" (1928: 32). Yet, one facet of the human studies did indeed trouble Blumer's quest for methodological unity, and that facet was interpretive understanding. Blumer granted the substantive importance of such understanding even as he recognized some difficulties it posed for his view of proper scientific procedure. In consequence, Blumer's first phase is constantly thwarted by a *tensional treatment of science and interpretation*. We will follow this tension through its course in Blumer's earliest writings.

Initial bearings: The dissertation. The doctoral dissertation, *Method in Social Psychology* (1928), opens Blumer's first phase of methodological reflection. The work comprises four chapters. In the first (1928: 1–53), Blumer considers the nature of scientific method as well as some other approaches which had been suggested in light of the putatively special features of human behavior. In the second chapter (1928: 54–246), Blumer attempts to delineate the field of social psychology by critically reviewing how a number of authors had construed it. The third chapter (1928: 247–406), which attempts to align the first two, turns to the methods employed by social psychology to examine them "mainly with respect to their pre-judgments" (1928: 249), that is, their orienting theoretical perspectives. The final chapter looks briefly at the "data and devices" of social psychology.

It is the first chapter, then, where we gather Blumer's view of science. He distinguishes three aspects of scientific procedure: the functional, the logical, and the technical (1928: 2–27). In its functional aspect, science aims

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to simplify perceptual reality by the isolation, conceptualization, and ongoing reconstruction of universal instrumental relations. Blumer elaborates on this aim as follows. The world per se, he notes, is too complex for any “photographic representation;” it is capable of endless combination and division, alternately continuous and heterogeneous, and thus requires a *simplified transformation* in order for knowledge to be possible (1928: 3).

Furthermore, scientific inquiry requires the simplification of experience such that an instrumental relation between objects can be isolated. By “instrumental relation” Blumer means simply that one factor indicates another; “. . . scientific procedure aims at the isolation of a relation between two or more variables” (1928: 6–7). In regard to the objects so isolated, Blumer tells us that they must be durable and repetitive, accessible to others, and transmissible by discourse; in other words, they must be objective (1928: 6).

The most important feature of the relationships isolated by science is their universal character, their permitting no exceptions (1928: 9). Indeed, it is the exception which motivates reconstruction of the universal. How this occurs leads us to the next aspect of scientific procedure, its logical phase.

Blumer acknowledges that there are well-defined logical processes involved in scientific procedure – processes such as induction, deduction, classification, and framing hypotheses – but he denies that these actually occur in any straightforward sequence (1928: 13). In any case, *some* sense of sequence is roughly suggested in the following. Scientific inquiry begins with a problem, that is, with certain phenomena to which the prevailing fund of universal meanings is unable to apply (1928: 14). This motivates a number of activities which accompany and interpenetrate each other: observation, induction, classification, deduction, the framing of hypotheses and experimentation.

In regard to induction, Blumer cautions against viewing it as *the* constituent of true science, since induction leads merely to a “photographic representation” of reality. “What science requires, however, is a transformation of reality into an intelligible and comprehensible picture,” which, in turn, “requires a deductive approach – that is, some scheme of selecting facts” (1928: 16). Instances of interest to science need to be “chosen because of their connection to some conception of the investigator” (1928: 16).

Such a conception is crystallized in the hypothesis, which is a proposed reconstruction of the universal in the face of exceptional instances. The hypothesis, along with experimentation, is a cornerstone of science (1928:

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10); the two, indeed, require each other: "Experimentation should always accompany the framing of hypotheses" (1928: 22). The value of experimentation lies in its character as a closed system – that is, its elimination of irrelevant matters – and thus its facilitating the isolation of functional relationships.

The third aspect of scientific inquiry, its technical character, refers to the particular techniques and methods employed; these Blumer sees as varying from science to science (1928: 24) and hence as requiring no specification in the general consideration of science per se.

Having indicated the generic features of science, Blumer confronts the problems faced by interpretive understanding when it is assessed in light of those features. This discussion occurs in his consideration of sympathetic introspection (1928: 37ff., 335–42). That notion, borrowed from C. H. Cooley though adapted by Blumer, refers to the self-identification of the observer with the observed (1928: 335). Since Blumer wished to avoid Cooley's subjectivism (cf. 1928: 336), he adapted the technique such that self-identification came to be conceived as placing action inside of an act (1928: 336). Still, the procedure held numerous methodological deficiencies, which Blumer did not hesitate to underscore (1928: 41, 341ff.).

Even with its admitted drawbacks, however, Blumer found sympathetic introspection to be indispensable to social inquiry, for only with that method could social phenomena be understood in their full significance (1928: 343). "The method of sympathetic introspection is . . . indeed necessary – whatever be its shortcomings" (1928: 344). Blumer thus firmly planted a tension between science and interpretation without posing any means by which it could be resolved.

He did proceed to clarify the tension. Given the necessity of sympathetic introspection – that is, the comprehension of particular phenomena in their uniqueness – the question arose whether the generalizations sought by science could be extracted from the study of individual cases. Blumer's conclusion was pessimistic (cf. 1928: 364); he noted several matters which seemed to preclude generalizing from single cases.

First, rendering the single case intelligible depends upon the judgment, purpose, and values of the investigator (1928: 352), with the consequence that the items interpreted do not appear to have the stability which is so essential to classification and comparison in the natural sciences (1928: 353). The success of natural scientific classification, Blumer tells us, depends upon the "presence of fixed characters in the objects or instances to be classified" (1928: 353). Second, the instances of interpretive attention are normally of a complex character (1928: 354), whereas a guiding

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principle in science is to shun complexity and “seek to secure as simple a situation as possible” (1928: 358). Social science, generally, had failed to develop appropriate simplification techniques (1928: 378–9), and hence faced a definite predicament in its quest for generalized knowledge:

It would seem that investigation which aimed at the isolation of ‘universals’ such as characterize natural science would have to rely solely upon the classification of the unique or complex. However dismal this may leave the picture with respect to the possibility of introducing a natural scientific technique in social psychology, it is at least worthwhile to realize that this is the situation (1928: 391).

Exacerbating this “dismal picture” was Blumer’s insistence upon the integral bond between theoretical orientation and research methods such that one implies the other. This feature, which I shall term *methodical holism*, constitutes (along with the unity of science theme) a basic structuring issue of Blumer’s dissertation. Blumer utilizes his distinction between the functional, the logical, and the technical aspects of science to characterize both the unity of science and methodical holism. In this regard, he wrote:

One should see that the common features of procedure in different sciences are constituted by the functional and logical elements – also that the distinguishing marks belong to the technical aspects (1928: 27).

Thus, holism was held to apply only to the technical facet of science, though here Blumer was quite emphatic as to its importance: “. . . *scientific procedure in a given field must employ techniques adaptable to its particular problems*” (1928: 27), which is to say that it must not allow its subject matter to be “squeezed to fit into an *a priori* conceived technique” (1928: 258).

Blumer wants to confine the bond between theory and method to the technical aspect of science while *simultaneously* employing as normative criteria the functional and logical requirements of science per se. What happens is that methodical holism is constantly threatening to burst its containment, to press the methodical claims which follow from a theoretical recognition of meaningful speech and action beyond what is allowed by Blumer’s conception of proper science. Although Blumer does not relent in assigning supremacy to the unity of science, he recognizes that such unity is more a hope than an actuality.

Science and action. In his first published paper, “Science without concepts” (1931), Blumer temporarily set aside his doubts about the scientific legitimacy of interpretation in order to pursue untroubled the unity of science theme. He addresses a certain ambivalence: on the one hand,

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a recognition of the inevitability of concepts in science, and, on the other, a suspicion that those very concepts lure scientists into metaphysics. Blumer seeks to determine what truth underlies this ambivalence by identifying both the proper uses and the abuses of concepts in science. He proceeds by examining their function, disclaiming any interest in their epistemological properties (1931: 517).

Pragmatist psychology provides Blumer's point of departure. According to that psychology, perception and conception operate in an ongoing interchange. Perception itself results from the interplay of an organism's activity and its environment (1931: 517). That is, perception is not merely the passive reception of a world "out there," but is rather the selectively sensitized attending to such an environment induced by the action-related dispositional states of the organism.

As long as action continues in a "smooth flow," perception is instrumentally sufficient. When action is interrupted, blocked, or otherwise frustrated, however, perception may become insufficient, and a conceptual process is motivated. Conception reorganizes perception, offers up new objects and new possibilities of action. A concept is a tool that, if successful, facilitates a restoration of activity through surmounting the problem which had previously blocked it.

Blumer provides an episode from the history of biology to demonstrate the applicability of pragmatist psychology for elucidating scientific inquiry (1931: 519–20). Anthrax had for centuries proved to be a recalcitrant problem. When scientists came to study it, their initial efforts were stymied; perception of the disease remained puzzling and problematic. They did recognize that in the blood of stricken cattle there were small, rod-like organisms called "vibriones," but the significance of these organisms was not grasped.

It remained for Pasteur to approach the problem with a new concept, that of the infinitely small. With this notion he was able to develop novel experiments, to demonstrate the significance of "vibriones," and eventually to provide a solution to the problem of anthrax which resulted in its effective control. This episode, says Blumer, illustrates how the concept arises in response to problems, how it reorganizes and guides perception, and how it liberates blocked action by opening up new directions for proceeding.

So far the concept has been considered as a functional component of acting. But concepts also have another aspect, namely, a content conceived. In schematic form, Blumer's position in regard to this second aspect appears to be the following: The perceptual world is one of particu-

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lars; although it always involves conception, the latter operates through particulars (1931: 520). The concept, by comparison, is an abstraction (1931: 520); it is a class term, a universal.

Semantically considered, at least some concepts have a referent which is not directly perceived (1931: 518); scientific notions such as mass, motion, electricity, atom, culture, gene, heredity, etc., are examples here. Not only do we presume the existence of the nonperceived referents of these concepts, but we also suppose the referents to have a nature or a certain character (1931: 519). This character is conveyed in the connotation of the concept (cf. 1931: 523), which arises in reflection (1931: 518) and can be elaborated deductively (1931: 529). The semantic connection of concept with percept lies in the requirement that at least some terms in a conceptual framework receive partial interpretation through incorporating predicates which name aspects of what is given to perception as a series of particulars. Thus, conception can be said to reorganize perception (1931: 527), introducing new configurations of meaning, through the semantic re-synthesis of observable and nonobservable predicates.

The concept has a verbal or symbolic character that permits it to become an item of social discourse; thus, its content can become common property (1931: 522). Scientific concepts, according to Blumer, always originate in the experience of an individual (1931: 522). By passing into common possession, they enable collective action, the concerted organization of scientific inquiry (1931: 522).

Blumer goes on to distinguish between the concepts of science and those of commonsense (1931: 522–5). Commonsense concepts remain mired in the particularism of sense experience; they are apprehended vaguely, by denotation. The concepts of science, by comparison, are studied and analyzed in regard to their connotation; as Blumer would put it, their abstraction is pushed (1931: 523). In that process, conception acts back upon perception to open up new domains of evidence, which in turn may require revision of the concept. Commonsense concepts, by contrast, tend to remain static, their meanings unchanged. Lastly, the concepts of science, unlike those of common sense, tend to be organized and linked together systematically in coherent frameworks.

Having considered the functions of concepts and distinguished between scientific and commonsense concepts, Blumer concludes his paper by identifying four ways in which concepts are abused in science (1931: 503–533). The first manner of abuse lies in removing concepts from the world of experience and constructing their meanings without the constraint of empirical testing. In this way, concepts become, Blumer argues, “mere