

recipient of the Fellowship of Southern Writers Poetry Award. Henry Taylor's most recent book is *The Flying Change*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1986. He is a professor of English at American University.

THE ACADEMY



Sociology and Common Sense by Steven Goldberg

The "Common-Sense Sociology Test" made its first appearance in the mid-1960's. The test is now a familiar fixture in introductory sociology courses and textbooks, but in the beginning its exciting novelty instantly captured the hearts and minds of graduate students and young professors facing their first lecture halls—lecture halls filled with a student skepticism that is now only a memory. It is not difficult to see why the test was so popular a teaching device.

The purpose of the test is to demonstrate to the introductory student the misconceptions that allegedly derive from everyday observation and common sense, misconceptions that can be corrected only by an infusion of sociological knowledge. What more could one ask for when encountering students whose naïveté cannot preclude their believing that "sociology is just common sense"?

By forcing the student to realize the fallibility of his intuitions and observa-

tions of social life, the test is meant to make the student realize that he has found sociology just in time to enable him to avoid a life of misconception. Its pedagogical virtues are so obvious that no one seems to have noticed what everyone should have noticed immediately. The test does not merely fail to make its point, but succeeds in demonstrating that precisely the opposite point is true: the beliefs of the student, based on his observations and common sense, are basically correct.

The actual effect of nearly every question and answer is to engender a feeling on the part of the student that he has been given no reason to doubt his long-held belief or the intuition and observation on which it is based. The student feels (or *should* feel) that the wording of the questions and answers claimed correct by the test rests on statements that are dubious, misleading, or outright false; at best, the answers only *seem* to refute the important beliefs held by the student, but, in fact, refute unimportant beliefs that the student does not hold.

In other words, to the extent that this test represents what sociology does, it indicates that sociology is worse than a restatement of common sense; it is a denial of common sense. Fortunately, sociology at its best is much more able than this, as we shall see.

The problem is not that this is a poor test that fails where a good test would succeed. The problem is much deeper: the test is based on the false premise that the sociologist's primary contribution is an observational eye far keener than that of the average person. I would suggest that, save for those sociologists gifted with the novelist's eye (who can be counted on the one finger deserved by Erving Goffman), sociologists only rarely make observations not made with far greater frequency, and with as much accuracy and subtlety, by other people. The "average person" has a far greater observational ability than he is usually credited with, and any test that attempts to demonstrate an inadequacy in the average person's observational powers is doomed to either direct failure (students answer the questions correctly) or failure that only *seems* to succeed by using misleading wording and giving incorrect answers (the test examined here).

While his observation of group behavioral realities is astonishingly accurate, the "average person's" *explanation* of the behavior he observes is often woefully contradictory and inaccurate.

A clear example of this is the stereotype. As observations stereotypes are nearly always accurate (remembering, of course, that a stereotype is a *statistical* claim about observed group behavior, not a description of any given individual). It is the average person's *explanation* of the behavior he observes that is so often hopelessly inadequate. It is by providing correct explanations of accurate observations (*i.e.*, explaining why the members of the group tend to exhibit the characteristics or behavior that is observed), not by pretending that the observations are inaccurate, that we sociologists can justify our existence.

The variety of human behavior, the limits our physiology sets on social possibility, the social structure that serves to organize human interaction and provide a template for culture, and the culture that binds and separates human beings—these all justify the study of social reality. This is self-evident from the fact that there is a social reality, and that it can no more be understood atomistically than can the nature of the "team" be understood by studying only individual players.

It is not the observation but rather the discovery of the causal connections explaining that which is observed, that is worthy of calling upon the genius of a Vico or a Weber or a Durkheim. It is only through such explanations that we are justified in denying the widely held view that "sociology is just common sense."

The Common-Sense Sociological Test follows. The entire test and the complete questions ("Q") and answers ("A") are given; however, the order of the questions has been altered to obviate repetition in the "comments" I have added. According to the test, all questions are "true/false" and the correct answer to every question is "false."

Q. Revolutions are more likely to occur when conditions are very bad than when previously bad conditions are rapidly improving?

A. Revolutions are actually more

likely to occur when conditions have been bad but are rapidly improving. When conditions are bad and stay bad, people take their misfortune for granted, but when conditions suddenly improve people develop higher aspirations and become easily frustrated.

Comment: This is an excellent question. It is precisely the sort of question that the test promises but fails to deliver throughout: it attacks a belief that really is held by the student (the worse the conditions, the more likely is revolution), surprises him with the correct answer, and prepares him for a valuable sociological finding (rising expectations outpace improvement in condition). It is not coincidental, however, that this question and misconception have to do with a correlation (improvement and revolution) much further removed from the student's daily observation than are the subjects of most of the other questions. The more abstract the correlation in question, the more likely that the student holds an incorrect belief.

Q. Lower-class youths are more likely to commit crimes than middle-class youths?

A. Lower-class youths are not more likely than middle-class youths to commit crimes. Middle-class youths are at least as likely to engage in delinquent acts, but they are less likely to be arrested, and therefore do not show up as frequently in the court statistics.

Comment: To most beginning students, as to the general population, "crime" means "violent crime" or, at most, "violent crime and major white-collar crime." The student is hardly going to be knocked off his chair by the

fact that for every mugging by a member of the lower class there is a marijuana joint smoked by a high-school student. In other words, this question could achieve its goal of surprising the student (and giving a correct answer) only by showing that middle- and lower-class youths commit equally serious crimes at equal rates. And, of course, it cannot show this because it is not true.

Q. The best way to get an accurate assessment of public opinion is to poll as many people as possible?

A. The number of people involved in a public opinion poll is largely irrelevant. What matters is that the sample should be fully representative of the population whose opinion is wanted. A properly chosen sample of two or three thousand Americans can give a highly accurate test of national opinion; a poorly chosen sample of three million, or even 30 million, could be hopelessly off target.

Comment: This answer is true only in the sense that it would be correct to say that a football player's size is unimportant to his ability because large, but uncoordinated, people are less likely to make the National Football League than are superb athletes of average size. Clearly, when we say that size is important to football ability we mean that, other things being equal, size is important.

Likewise, when we say that a large sample is better than a small sample, we mean "when members of the samples are equally representative." And, in saying this, we are correct; in this sense—the only sense in which the claim makes any sense—the larger the

sample, the better.

Q. People who are regular Christian churchgoers are less likely to be prejudiced against other races than people who do not attend church?

A. Regular churchgoers are generally not less prejudiced than nonchurchgoers; in fact, they tend to be more prejudiced.

Comment: This question and answer seem to address the question of the effect of religion (or at least of churchgoing) on prejudice, a question of monumental scientific, moral, and political importance.

The question and answer actually given simply reflect the fact that Protestant churchgoers tend (statistically speaking, as always) to come from groups tending, for reasons having nothing to do with Christianity or churchgoing, to be more prejudiced (rural Southern Fundamentalists, as opposed to urban nonbelievers, for example). This no more demonstrates that churchgoing increases prejudice than the fact that Japanese churchgoers are shorter than Canadian nonchurchgoers demonstrates that going to church makes you short.

The important question that the answer seems to address but does not is the effect on prejudice of churchgoing when all other variables are held steady. In other words, one does not want to compare churchgoers from Birmingham with nonchurchgoers from New York, but churchgoers from Birmingham with nonchurchgoers (matched for race, income, class, residential area, and the like) from Birmingham (or churchgoers from New York with nonchurchgoers from New York). It is the answer to *this* question that is likely to demonstrate whether churchgoing has the effect of increasing prejudice, decreasing it, or leaving it unaffected.

Q. The number of federal government employees has grown sharply over the past two decades?

A. The number of federal civilian officials has remained almost constant for twenty years, although the number of state and local-government officials has risen significantly.

Comment: The intuition of the student (and the rest of us) is that bureaucracy has burgeoned. That this intuition derives from our experience with state and local bureaucracies, and

LIBERAL ARTS

PLAY BALL

According to a new "ex-gay" effort called Evergreen, sports is the way out of homosexuality. As reported in the summer newsletter of Evangelicals Concerned, Evergreen recently sponsored a two-day conference in Salt Lake City entitled "You Don't Have to be Gay." Evergreen director Alan Seegmiller said that in addition to teaching basketball and softball to those who want to become "ex-gay," some have found it helpful to seek training in automobile mechanics."

does not accurately reflect the federal situation, is interesting, but, at best, only mildly surprising. It is the state and local bureaucracies with which people have the most daily experience, experience that leads them to correctly believe that bureaucracy in general has increased significantly.

Q. Exposure to pornography makes people more likely to commit sex crimes?

A. Studies of sex offenders show that they are less likely than non-offenders to have been exposed to pornography. Far from encouraging sex crime, pornography seems to provide some people with an alternative outlet.

Comment: The answer does not address, much less refute, the question. It addresses the issue of the relative exposure to pornography of offenders and non-offenders. The issue described in the question—the issue of the causal role of pornography—is this: do offenders who read pornography commit a greater number (or the same number or fewer) crimes than do offenders who do not read pornography (or who read less pornography)? That the non-offender, who perhaps lacks a necessary condition that must complement pornography if one is to become an offender, reads as much pornography as the offender (or even more) is irrelevant. One would not deny that curry makes an ulcer worse simply because curry will not give an ulcer to one who lacks the other necessary conditions for the development of an ulcer.

Q. One thing that is found in every society is romantic love?

A. Romantic love may seem a part of “human nature” to us, but in many societies it is unknown and in many others it is regarded as ridiculous or tragic.

Comment: The issue raised in the question is whether there are societies in which romantic love is unknown (not whether there are societies in which it is negatively sanctioned). That some societies ridicule romantic love or see it as tragic demonstrates that these societies *do* recognize romantic love.

That many societies do not institutionalize romantic love (seeing it as a threat to social stability) is a point that is true, important, and probably unknown by most students. However, the test question is not concerned with

societies that recognize romantic love and negatively sanction it, but with alleged societies that are so successful at socializing their members that romantic love never rears its head.

I have spent the past decade and a half studying cross-cultural regularities, and like many others I have come to strongly distrust claims of the absence in a society of an emotionally rooted behavior that is found in every other society. Such claims are almost invariably made on the basis of secondhand references. When one looks to the ethnographies of societies said to lack a certain kind of behavior (in those cases where the sources are given), the description of those societies makes it clear that the behavior is not absent. On a very few occasions, a specialized ethnography concentrating on an entirely different subject will give no evidence of the behavior in question. However, when the behavior is negatively sanctioned (and therefore not exhibited openly), when the subject of the ethnography is, say, irrigation methods, and the behavior in question is romantic love—and when we know that this behavior can be observed in virtually all other of the world’s societies, it is dubious to conclude that absence of a mention of the behavior in the ethnography is strong evidence that members of the society do not exhibit the behavior.

Q. On average, high-income people in the United States pay a greater proportion of their income in taxes than low-income people?

A. High-income people pay roughly the same proportion of their income as low-income people do. The reasons are that the rich can use many tax loopholes and that sales and other indirect taxes take a relatively larger percentage of poor people’s income.

Comment: There are two problems with this answer, even if we accept that it is empirically correct. First, if my students are representative, and I suspect they are, then most students do not only not register surprise at the answer, but in fact are surprised that the rich don’t pay a *smaller* percentage of their incomes because they can buy lawyers who can find loopholes and because the system favors the rich. Second, even if the students did believe that the rich pay a higher percentage, their belief would

be a function of their equating “taxes” with income taxes, not the sales and indirect taxes required to make this question “work.”

Q. Husbands are more likely to kill their wives in family fights than wives are to kill their husbands?

A. Husbands and wives are equally likely to kill one another; although husbands are usually stronger, wives are more likely to resort to lethal weapons.

Comment: This certainly is a surprising “fact,” one that will surprise students as much as will the “fact” that there are more Chinese in New Jersey than there are in China. These two “facts,” however, have about equal truth content. According to a recent FBI Uniform Crime Report, husbands kill their wives about three times as often as wives kill their husbands.

Q. The amount of money spent on a school’s equipment and facilities has a strong effect on the academic success of its pupils?

A. The amount of money spent on a school’s facilities seems to have little influence on pupil achievement. Performance is primarily related to family and social class background.

Comment: One might question whether the student is all that surprised by the answer. The cynic might have doubts whether the research on which the answer is based possessed the methodological sophistication and rigor necessary for disentangling the factors of income, social class, and the tendency of schools with high-income students to both spend more money and achieve academic success. Nonetheless, it takes only the slightest generosity to give this question a passing grade.

Q. A substantial portion of people on welfare could work if they really wanted to?

A. Less than 2 percent of people on welfare are adult males who have been out of work for several months. Nearly all are children, old people, handicapped people, or mothers who are obliged to stay at home to look after their families and have no other source of income.

Comment: If we ignore possible quibbles about precise percentages, this answer is correct in its claim that most people on welfare are in the groups listed. For some students, the question

probably accomplishes the test's goal of surprising them with a correct answer. However, at least as many (in my experience) are aware that a relatively small percentage of welfare recipients are malingerers or cheaters. In fairness it should be said that this may not have been true when the question was originally written and, if we again wish to be generous, we might give this question a passing grade.

Q. The income gap between blacks and whites has narrowed in recent years?

A. Despite civil rights and other legislation, the income gap between blacks and whites has actually widened in recent years; black workers are generally less skilled than white workers and less-skilled workers suffer more in times of depression.

Comment: While the flaw here is somewhat less deep than that in the next question (to which it is similar), the belief that seems to be under attack is not the belief that this answer challenges. The strong belief of the student is that a black and a white in the *same position* earn more nearly equal incomes than they did formerly. This belief is correct. That blacks are the first to be laid off in times of "depression" (by which I assume is meant recession; there has not been a depression in fifty years) is a point worth making, but hardly one that will surprise any student who is sentient.

Q. The income gap between male and female workers has narrowed in recent years?

A. The income gap between male and female workers has widened rather than narrowed; women hold few high-paying positions and the average working white woman earns less than the average working black man.

Comment: This is the test's quintessential question. It elicits the "incorrect" answer from — and therefore surprises — the student by introducing a construct ("income gap") with which the student is unfamiliar. It thereby seems to capture and refute the strong belief on which the student bases his "incorrect" answer. However, the strong belief is that, after twenty years of the women's movement, a man and a woman occupying the same position (and having equal credentials) receive more-nearly-equal incomes than they did formerly. This belief is entirely

correct. In other words, to the student, the term "income gap" refers to a man and a woman in the same position. The fact that the "income gap" referred to by the question — the average incomes of all full-time male and female workers — has increased does not challenge any deeply-held belief of the student and is not likely to surprise him. It is particularly unlikely to surprise him when he realizes that the "income gap" referred to in the question has increased as a result of the same forces that have led to a decrease in the difference in incomes of a man and a woman in the same position: women have joined the work force in large numbers and, since one joining the work force earns an entry-level income, these new female workers bring down the average income of working women and increase the "income gap" between the sexes.

Q. Human beings have a natural instinct to mate with the opposite sex?

A. Human beings do not have an instinct to mate with the opposite sex. Our sexual preferences are entirely learned; in fact, if an instinct is defined as an inherited complex behavior pattern, human beings do not have any instincts at all.

Comment: This answer commits three errors in two sentences: 1) While the causation of heterosexuality and homosexuality is far from understood, it has for a decade become increasingly apparent that there is a physiological component that interacts with environmental factors to generate sexual direction. I know of no researcher who any longer holds that the causation of sexual direction is entirely environmental. 2) Even if one rejects this and goes so far as to see the issue as entirely undecided, the question is a poor one, for the student feels — correctly — that his answer is as likely to be correct as is that of the test. 3) As is so common in sociology, there is an attempt to instill in the student's mind a rejection of the possibility that physiological factors play an important role in determining human behavior. The first-day student is hardly likely to know that, if "instinct" is defined as requiring "complex behavior patterns," there are still physiologically rooted tendencies and predispositions other than "instincts" that clearly affect human behavior (*i.e.*, a predisposition is clearly involved in

sexual arousal, even though this predisposes one to actions whose specific characteristics are socially determined).

A severe critic might add a fourth error: it is questionable whether the term "learned" means much at this level of interaction of physiology and environment; just as the term "causation" tends to lose its meaning, or, at the very least, its fertility, at the quantum level, so does "learning" lose its meaning at deep levels.

Q. For religious reasons, most American Catholics oppose birth control and are less likely than Protestants to enter interfaith marriages or to be divorced.

A. More than 80 percent of American Catholics favor birth control; Catholics are more likely than Protestants to enter interfaith marriages and Catholics have a higher divorce rate than Protestants.

Comment: A scratch single, a long fly out, and a strikeout on three called change-ups.

It is unclear from the Roper poll on birth control whether the 80 percent figure refers to Catholic approval of birth control for everyone or just for non-Catholics. More important, it is likely that the beginning student equates "favors" with "uses," and it is only Catholic usage that would surprise the student. (It is axiomatic in sociology that actual behavior often fails to reflect stated opinion.) Nonetheless, it is probable that most beginning students underrate Catholic use of birth control.

There is somewhat less than meets the eye in the fact that a Catholic is more likely to enter an interfaith marriage than a Protestant. Most Catholic interfaith marriages are to Protestants and most Protestant interfaith marriages are to Catholics. Since there are twice as many American Protestants as Catholics, it is hardly surprising that a higher percentage of Catholics intermarry (*i.e.*, that a Catholic is "more likely" to intermarry).

The "fact" about Catholics having a higher divorce rate than Protestants is as astonishing as it is untrue. Protestants have a much higher divorce rate.

Steven Goldberg is the chairman of the sociology department at City College, City University of New York.

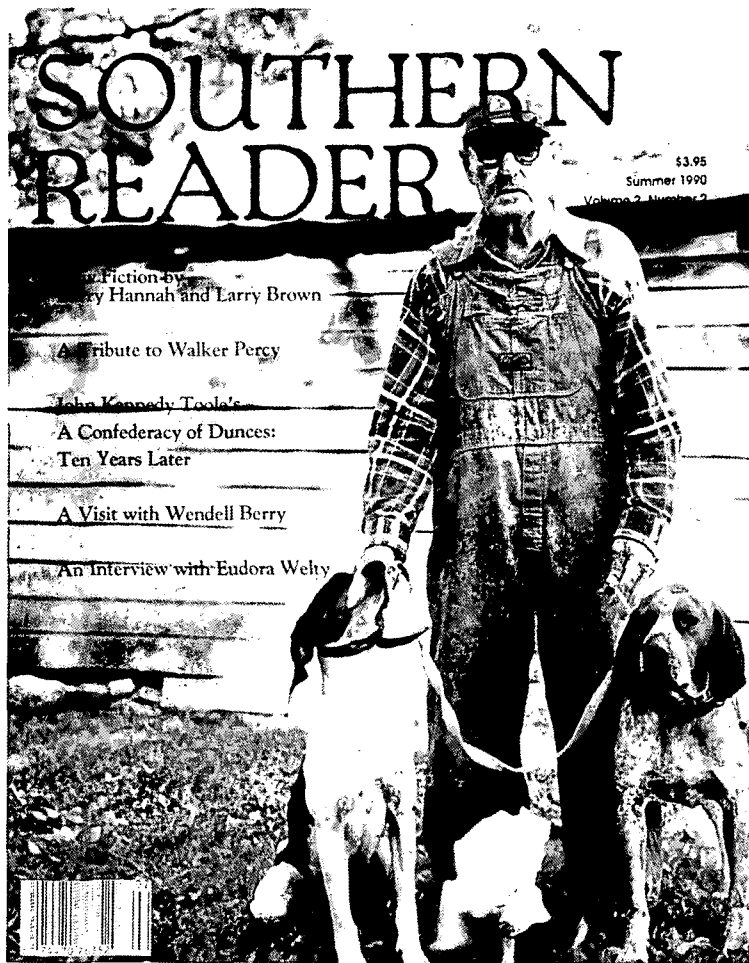
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