

Reading, Writing, and Theory

By Robert A. Stebbins

Today, 38 years after receiving my doctorate in sociology from the University of Minnesota, I describe myself, in general, as a qualitative-exploratory researcher and, in particular, as a specialist in French Canada, the sociology of leisure, and the sociology of deviance. Looking back on my Minnesota origins, nothing I can see there would have led me or anyone else to predict a scholarly career composed of these elements.

In the early 1960s, when I was a graduate student, the Minnesota Department seemed bent on doing its best to live up to that University's reputation as world home of "dustbowl empiricism." This methodological orientation, highly quantitative and predictive as it was, was nevertheless quite primitive by today's standards. But certainly no one spoke of qualitative or exploratory research, although Glaser and Strauss (1967: 15-18) had observed about the same time that the qualitative distinction had become ever more current between the late 1930s and the early 1950s when quantification and measurement were coming into their own

As for my interest in French Canada, the Minnesota Department can hardly be blamed for failing to nurture an attraction to this specialty, but I, as an individual, might be blamed for failing to follow immediately the lead of Gregory P. Stone in pursuing a career in the sociology of leisure. I read Stone's studies on sport and leisure participation, but at the time, was more taken with his ideas in symbolic interactionism. Indeed, I wrote for many years in this area, and for me, Stone numbered among its most important contemporary thinkers. I am sure, too, that a departmental spirit favorable to this perspective aided my future endeavors in it. For along with Stone, Professors Arnold Rose, Reuben Hill, and Don Martindale sometimes framed their work in symbolic interactionist terms. This symbolic interactionist influence clearly helped steer me toward my long-time interest in identity, commitment, role careers and deviant behavior as well

as toward shorter-term interests in such ideas as role distance, definition of the situation, and the interpersonal relationship. Although I do not usually identify myself these days as a symbolic interactionist, strains of SI still routinely find their way into my writings.

But, among Minnesota faculty of the day, it is Don Martindale to whom I owe my greatest intellectual debt. The two most enduring orientations that have seen me through my career to this point and that will continue their influence well into the future are a love for writing and a love for theory. Martindale – my supervisor – clearly adored both, and at least for me, his passion for them was infectious. I am convinced I would have published much less that I have had I not observed how writing scholarly material inspired him and how well written that material was.

Martindale's other intellectual love – that of theory – took what I think most people would qualify as an unexpected turn. Don read, sometimes translated, and invariably waxed eloquent over classical sociological thought and related ideas in history and philosophy. I, too, found this stuff exciting, and for many years taught theory at the graduate level. From him I learned to value ideas -- broad concepts and propositions -- and to always view sociology and social life from their special perspective. Never, however, have I identified myself as a theorist in this classical sense, though I think Martindale fancied himself as such. I have always been a mere teacher in this area of social science.

Rather, the theoretical peg on which I hang my scholarly hat is that of inductive theorist, or grounded theoretician. As just mentioned I learned during my Minnesota days to value broad concepts and propositions. But subsequent circumstances too complicated to recount here drew me to qualitative-exploratory work, where I learned how to create theory (concepts and propositions) from directly observed data. Sure that theory is nowhere nearly as abstract as that on which I cut my teeth at Minnesota while participating in Martindale's seminars. But it is theory, nonetheless, and to formulate it optimally, requires an ability to think abstractly and see new ideas, both processes significantly enhanced by an ability to write. Moreover, to make a

career doing this requires a high and an enduring passion for ideas and writing, very much like the level of passion for these two evinced in the early 1960s by my supervisor.

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