Teaching "Distinctions" to Undergraduates in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences

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The analysis presented here is a continuation of the author's research and teaching activities directed toward a better understanding of critical thinking processes among undergraduate students in the philosophy of the social sciences. Over a span of ten or more years, what I have been basically concerned with is the use of overlapping intellectual domains (e.g., sociology, philosophy of social science, and cognitive psychology) as a means of identifying both issues and pedagogical strategies that instructors in the human sciences may find useful in enhancing their own teaching and stimulating the creative problem-solving side of their student's intellectual development. To this end, I place these comments within the tradition of Mills (1959) and Parsons (1968). The first reflects the belief, as always given in *Mills,* that good teaching and research are a function of the creativity of the social scientist; the second, Parsons, in his meticulous attention to the concepts of sociology, but also as having a deep understanding of how these concepts interact with, for instance, epistemological concerns from philosophy, historical analysis as a means of tracing the origins of sociological thought (e.g., Weber, Durkheim and Marx), and the centrality of economics in grasping the motivations of actors in both micro and macro contexts.

The irony of juxtaposing (and accepting) *Mills* and Parsons simultaneously is of course recognized; however, it is meant to underscore the point that plausible eclecticism may be a desirable attitude to foster in ourselves and our students. Additionally, the analysis importantly reflects - as types of intervening conceptual variables between *Mills* and Parsons - the works of Berger and Luckmann (1967) and the latter works of Coleman (1990). Coleman's most recent work on the need to fully conceptualize the logical and language-based origins of social theory (e.g., "norms") reflects my own emphasis on the need to critically analyze the logical and semantic structures of human science concepts as a part of the philosophy of the social sciences. This concern dovetails very closely with Berger and Luckmann's classic work in the sociology of knowledge of how the cognitive-conceptual-language link is the source of our "constructions of social reality." The view presented here is that the use of certain pedagogical strategies and techniques - that are rather atypical but nonetheless creative in their approach - will demonstrate how, indeed, critical thinking about the nature of our concepts (i.e., "language") can give us a more insightful view of the close connection between language and (our) social reality(ies).[1] What follows is an attempt to demonstrate how a term from the domain of analytic philosophy can be expanded to include concerns central to the teaching of the human sciences.

FIRST-ORDER DISTINCTION

The analysis begins with trying to understand the seemingly innocuous term "distinction," itself. It is one of those "nuts and bolts" terms (Elster,1989) **that one often encounters in the** human sciences but to which one seldom pays any real explicit attention. However, from the point of view here, and following Berger and Luckmann, it is suggested that a full analysis of the term may lead us to unexpected discoveries in how we construct our common and theoretical sense about social reality. What I will attempt to do is demonstrate how the analysis of this term can produce many other "distinctions", and how this realm of conceptual analysis (Wilson, 1987) has some unanticipated parallels with such traditional methodological topics within the philosophy of social science as hypothesis formulation and hypothesis testing, as well as social explanation.

This approach has been utilized in my own teaching with, I would argue, good results in terms of enhanced and perceptive critical thinking - especially with undergraduate students.

What then, to begin, is a "distinction?" As always, one can refer to a lexical definition (e.g., Webster's II, 1984: 390): "Something is distinct if it is sharply distinguished or set apart from other things." As I point out to students - often to their complete surprise - dictionary definitions (as well as the "official" social science ones in textbook glossaries) seldom give us good information about the world - and, of course, they are not necessarily meant to; producing another surprise. In teaching, I counter the dictionary definition with a beginning one of my own; acknowledging it may have shortcomings, but at least may be somewhat clearer. Thus, "a distinction is a relevant comparison or contrast of one term with another in order to show that the original term cannot be fully understood without such a comparison." The idea at this stage is to show students that the language of (in this case) the social sciences may be more complex than it initially appears. Put somewhat differently, I want to show that standard textbook definitions are at best beginning attempts to see social life and social action in a new way; at worst they obfuscate the very meaning of what they are attempting to clarify.

The idea of a "distinction" is an attempt to begin to raise the social science consciousness a notch more. This process, however, is more difficult than it appears. The difficulty lies in having students produce a relevant distinction - a comparison or contrast that is neither trivial nor tautological. Thus, analyzing, for instance, the term "status" by trying to draw the distinction of "no status" would not be relevant, and using the distinction of "position" would be tautological, and also non-relevant.

I have found the idea (Wilson, 1987: 30-31) of a "related case" to be useful in trying to grasp the idea of a distinction. Generally, a related case is one in which the concept being analyzed cannot be fully or clearly understood unless a related term is applied. Discovering even one (there can be more) related case is often difficult for students, although there is the constraint that it must be applicable to the topic under discussion. Moreover, the difficulty for students of finding a related case is exacerbated by confusing it with what Wilson calls a "model case" (the typical "generic" or "paradigm" case). Reverting to Wilson's usage, a model case is one in which the clearest-cut example (usually obtained by specifying necessary and/or sufficient conditions) of the concept is put forth. For example, a necessary condition (and hence a part of a model case) for "social status" would be some type of system of sorting and rank-ordering individuals in a society (perhaps it is sufficient also). But a related case, and hence a "distinction" on this view, is to find a non-obvious concept that is not part of a model case but nevertheless constitutes an important dimension of attempting to understand the implicit complexity of the concept as it forms a portion of our social constructions.

Using "social status" above, related-case concepts may include "equity", "justice", "equality" and so on. To use the first one, a relevant distinction for "social status" is one which recognizes the related case of "equity" or "fairness." That is, social status-as-fairness deepens (hopefully) our understanding of not only why societies sort out their members, but also the "justice" in so doing. To give another example of a distinction: In discussing the issue of providing for equality of educational opportunity in modern societies, a distinction can be made between "equality" and "equity." Making the distinction opens up a large array of deeper questions that students can think about, e.g., a value-oriented one of whether it is (ever) better to treat persons "equally" rather than "equitably." If so, under what circumstances? Does our society provide for this, and so on? One last example, offered by Wilson (pp. 96-111), but slightly modified here, is the nature of "punishing" individuals. (Wilson states it as, "Ought punishment be retributive?"). Seen in the context of a criminology course, for instance, the related case of "deserving" could be explored. That is, a relevant distinction is made between "punishment" and "deserving" punishment.

Pedagogically, I ask students something like, "O.K. given your definition (or knowledge of, or explanation) of X, what might be some other ideas or concepts you could compare or contrast it with - and why?" I am trying to get students to make what I call a First-Order Distinction; one in which a non-readily recognizable contrast or comparison is discovered. Thus, a distinction is made between the primary concept and the related one. The two concepts constituting the overall distinction are not, however, synonymous - the related concept brings out an essential but not anticipated aspect of the primary one.

SECOND-ORDER DISTINCTION

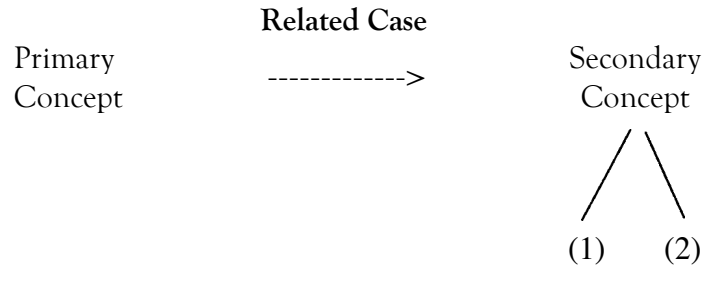
After introducing the basic idea of a relevant distinction, I then make the issue a little more complicated. In doing so, the idea is, once again, to give students a better understanding of the language-concept-social reality link. To do this, I introduce the idea of **Second-Order Distinction**. **This** distinction may or may not imply a first-order distinction. I shall give an example of each. In the first case, let us say a class is discussing the topic of "discrimination" and a first-order distinction is required. A student suggests that a relevant distinction might be the related-case of "prejudice." Now, the idea of a second-order distinction is to take the first distinction and to suggest two or more aspects that are (again) non-obvious but significant in gaining a deeper understanding of both the primary and secondary concepts. A further on might be "intentional" and "non-intentional." Thus, if prejudice is (possibly) involved in discrimination, can it be that a person is prejudiced both intentionally and non-intentionally? A second-order distinction dramatically expands the conceptual/critical thinking field of play. Students are now required to think through these new possibilities. An example where a first-order distinction is not used is to introduce the concept of discrimination and then list its various types, e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, etc. Of course, the distinction can be made more interesting if we include such additional concepts as "ability" or handicapping condition(s).

Generally, going from a first-order to a second-order distinction is somewhat more "powerful" in getting students to think through a topic. But this may not always be the case. For example, the sub-classification of discrimination "types" may itself yield a first-order distinction. Thus, discrimination for race and ethnicity may be better understood by the related-case of "ascription", while gender and ability may be distinguished by the related-case of "genetically based" and handicapping condition(s) by a "mixed ascription-genetic" distinction. These in turn may lead to further first or second order distinctions.

It is also possible, of course, to describe a **Third-Order Distinction**. Here one attempts to make a further (second-order) distinction between or among the initial second-order distinction(s). In our original discrimination - prejudice: intentional, non-intentional distinction, the idea would be to make further (hopefully relevant) distinctions for the intentional, non intentional categories. However, a further distinction (in this case) may be difficult to formulate. One possibility might be something (roughly) like "early socialization patterns" classified as "tolerant" or "intolerant." So, perhaps, a person brought up in an environment of intolerance will be more inclined to intentionally be prejudicial and favor some type of discriminatory practices. I have found that third-order distinctions are difficult for students to formulate; however, the attempt is sometimes justified in terms of stimulating further "higher order" critical thinking and also in recognizing there are at times conceptual dead-ends. Figure 1 illustrates these ideas.

FIGURE 1

Basic Schema for First- and Second-Order Distinctions



One further variation on the theme of making distinctions may be worth mentioning before I go on to the issue of cross-categorical distinctions. I call this strategy the Linking Principle. This technique requires somewhat higher-order conceptualization skills and it generally works better with upper-level students. In this scenario, two or more concepts are used to generate first and second-order distinctions and then these are linked together to provide possibilities for more complex interpretations. For example, let's return to the

phrase providing for equality of educational opportunity. As previously mentioned, a first-order distinction for "equality" yielded the related case of "equity." Now let's assume a second-order distinction for equity is "realized" and "not realized." This seems to be a reasonable distinction because there may be situations in which a "fair" treatment condition does or does not come about. Continuing along the same lines, the term "opportunity" seems to be connected with the related case of "probability." That is, when we speak of an opportunity there is some chance (or probability) that we may or may not attain it. The second-order distinction for probability may be conceptualized as perhaps "high" and "low". These categories have a common sense or intuitive appeal and therefore need no further explanation. Now the linking principle is defined as follows: where two or more second-order distinctions are made, or one second-order and some combination of third-order distinctions, display the distinctions (i.e., "link" them) to show their various possible combinations. The purpose of the "links" is to develop a plausible "chain" of interpretation which illustrates how the distinctions play into a fuller and more complex analysis associated with a given construction of social reality. The interesting outcome of the linking principle is that it forms conceptual parallels with such social science methodological issues as hypothesis testing and cross-tabular analysis. I take up this discussion in the following section.

CROSS-CATEGORICAL DISTINCTION

The linking principle produces, in turn, another type of distinction which can be labeled as the Cross-Categorical Distinction. The uniqueness of making distinctions in this way is that it permits a finer-grained interpretation of the issue under consideration. In other words, we have several simultaneous comparisons that can be examined within and between domains of meaning. Furthermore, in a broad conceptual sense, we are also stating a series of "hypotheses" which take the form: what is the relationship between any two distinctions or their categories? Continuing the analogy, we then "test" these "hypotheses" by (a) applying the necessary and sufficient distinction, and (b) by assessing the consistency and plausibility for a deeper interpretation of the issue under analysis. It should be noted that there are a variety of cross-categorizations possible for a given series of distinctions and assessing the overall logic of their patterns is yet another variation of the linking principle. In Figure 2, we look at the example discussed so far.

FIGURE 2

Equality of Educational Opportunity "Equity"

Opportunity ("Probability')		Realized	Not Realized Opportunity
	High	(a)	(b)
	Low	(c)	(d)

Beginning with cell (a), a person's or group's interpretation of equitable treatment will tend to be realized the higher the probability of being given an opportunity; or, alternatively, the higher the proportion finding themselves in a desirable (and possibly formerly restricted) opportunity structure. Of course, the opposite interpretation is possible for cell (d). We may also notice for (a) that a plausible interpretation would be that a high probability of accessing opportunity structures is a necessary condition for believing that one is being treated equitably. It is not a sufficient condition since access to opportunity structures may still be perceived as not realizing equity; or, alternatively, other means (e.g., legislation vs. an expanding economy) may be the basis for equity. From a conceptual point of view, then, the "hypothesis" of high opportunity and realized equity is given some "support" because a plausible case can be made for a necessary condition case; "no support" would be that neither a necessary nor sufficient condition holds. The same reasoning could be applied to cell (d). The perceptive reader may have noticed that I introduced the term "perception" when considering equity. This would be yet another distinction that could be brought into the discussion, i.e., is the "realization" of

being treated equitably a matter of perception or fact - and, if for instance, the latter, does one (then) resort to "numbers" as a "realization" of the equity condition? In doing this type of analysis, I have found that after awhile students begin to generate additional distinctions, and not in the sense of making "finer distinctions" but rather "equally relevant" (other) ones.

Returning to Figure 2, for cell (b) it would seem that if there is a high probability for access to the opportunity structure, it would not be the case that some condition of equity is not being met; here "High" would be sufficient to suggest that some definition of equity is being met. Reasoning in this way cell (a) then becomes a case for both necessary and sufficient conditions applying. Other types of analyses are also possible and I have found them to be useful in stimulating critical thinking. For example, referring to Figure 2, I ask students to "read down the columns" so that cells (a) and (c) and (b) and (d) can be compared. In comparing (a) and (c), we can ask if there could be cases where some definition of equity may be realized under high and low abilities of access to an opportunity structure. is, of course, conceptually analogous to looking for "variation" between categories of variables. Moreover, the analogy may be extended by looking separately across rows and down columns, in which case one "holds constant" the other categories. For instance, I ask students if there may be examples of realized and not realized **equity** without reference to the opportunity dimension.

Generally, I have found the utility of the conceptual cross-classification display to especially he in having students think through specific examples (i.e., real world examples) of what would happen "within" each cell, although these conceptual cross-categorizations can become even more complex. In figure two, we could add another distinction such as "ability" and differentiate it into "high" and "low". Doing this, we now have the conceptual equivalent of a "three variable" cross tabulation. The general question for critical analysis would be something like: Given the dimensions of equity and opportunity we have been discussing, what would happen (i.e., to the larger picture of providing for equality of educational opportunity) if we now claimed that "ability" is important to the process of schooling in this society? I have found that most undergraduate students can handle (with practice) the two-distinction case well, while the three-distinction one becomes difficult for both undergraduate and graduate students, especially if the roper ground work in conceptual analysis has not been laid.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to provide a general framework and rationale for the importance of making and using distinctions in teaching basic courses in the philosophy of the social sciences. Being able to make relevant distinctions is a means of enhancing critical or higher-order thinking in students. More importantly, within the context of trying to foster the social scientific imagination, it provides an important example of the importance of language and culture in the construction of (our) social realities.

In attempting to develop these skills in students, the one consistent result I have found is that all of them become increasingly sensitized to the complexity of social structures and social action. Distinction-making can be applied to any topic in the social sciences, raising the level of consciousness about these topics and issues in unique and often surprising ways. For example, my in-class analysis of the issue of equality of educational opportunity has increasingly developed into discussions of gender equity and the "acceptability" of segregation by gender, or in some cases (within schools) by race or ethnicity. Distinction-making both generates related topics and provides ways of analyzing them. Thus, class discussions about gender equity have generated distinctions such as: (1) discrimination vs. separation (e.g., separating males and females in certain religious traditions), (2) prejudice vs. discrimination, (3) intentional vs. unintentional, (4) discriminatory but equitable, and so on.

The process of distinction-making, contrary to what it may appear to be, is not a random, haphazard, or an "uncontrolled chain reaction." Indeed, with practice, it becomes a type of conceptual "controlled chain reaction." The process is divergent and expanding but it is anchored within the basic question being addressed (e.g., "Is discrimination ever justified?") and the first relevant distinction that is made. Using a few other analogies, distinction-making is like the chaining process that is represented in the field of organic chemistry, or the "chains" of DNA molecules, or the "trees" of zoological classifications, or morphological classifications in linguistics. Relevant distinctions lead to other relevant distinctions and the metaphorical chain-of-reasoning

can become complex and elaborate. As in zoological classifications, there are some distinctions that produce dead ends, or "extinctions", or apply only in limited and specific contexts (e.g., "environments"). But, of course, that is the very point of this type of analysis; namely, to display or illustrate the complex links that make up this type of "conceptual social structure."[2] Along these lines, I have also found that if students working in small groups are asked to produce "distinction-maps" or "distinction displays" for a given topic or issue, the results are interesting analogues of their own individual and collective "cognitive maps" [see Lakoff (1987) for some interesting parallels].

Thus, Berger and Luckmann's (1967) very conception of how social reality is "constructed" is beautifully illustrated by viewing how students construct their own "distinction maps." Moreover, the social construction of reality then can be further (and at times dramatically) illustrated when these distinction-maps are compared with one another. Students can obtain a concrete illustration in how their perceptions of social reality are both similar and different from their classmates. Lastly, attempts at "synthesizing" diverse (but not completely diverse) distinction-maps can once more give students special insights into the complexity of the language-social reality link. I offer these suggestions as means of developing an alternative view of the social scientific imagination that may be considered as a "working hypothesis" for further testing by instructors in the human sciences. I believe the sharing of such results would be quite interesting within and between disciplinary areas.[3]

NOTES

1.An interesting parallel that someone may wish to pursue is to examine Coleman's work on the conceptual foundations of social theory with Wittgenstein's (1953) philosophical analyses of such concepts as "rules" and "games". The overlapping of conceptual analysis from analytic philosophy and conceptual analysis from sociology can be seen in Wright (1996) and Pleasants (1996).

2.Another variety of this process may be found in the development of the society-culture personality model of Fredericks.

3.Some topics that we have found to be useful for the types of analysis presented here are the following: (a) To what extent are teachers responsible for their students?; and (b) Are institutions more than a collection of individuals?

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