

# **Radical Empiricism in Practice: Some Ways to Make Pragmatic Sociology**

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James' radical empiricism has not been directly adopted in European sociology, but rather is embedded in proper sociological concepts of various natures and scopes. Three of them are particularly important: first, comprehensive Weberian sociology emphasizing the need to give the meaning of actions a central place; second, Schutzian phenomenology, which places experience, and in particular the temporal structure of actions, at the heart of its sociological program; and third, ethnomethodology, which emphasizes the processual dimension of ordinary activities, requiring social skills that are shared among members of a given society.

Here, I will not discuss the relationships between these currents and their links to pragmatist philosophy, whether they implement it in sociology or they exceed it (Emirbayer & Maynard, 2011). Instead, in this paper, I will examine the implications of James' assumptions, especially his vision of the relationship between truth and experience, and how it is tested empirically by sociologists. To do so, I develop three parts: first, I will describe the three axioms which, for me, make up the common ground of pragmatic sociology.<sup>1</sup> Then, I will detail three practical problems that they generate and the varied answers to which they give rise. Finally, I will conclude by addressing the purposes of these sociological works, in terms of the diversity of intended audiences.

## **1. The Three Axioms of Pragmatic Sociology**

We can identify three essential elements from James' radical empiricism that are shared by different pragmatic sociologies. We consider these elements as axioms that precede any empirical work that they partly influence by focusing on the issues of experience and meaning.

1 / "Everything is practice." As shown in many papers in this colloquium, the "practice turn," whether originated from James, Dewey and Pierce, irrigated a number of social sciences and led to the adoption of methods for reporting practices. Above and beyond ethnographic forms, there are also various documentary methods to account for reading, writing and calculation practices. Indeed, against all dualism, intellectual operations are no longer seen as mere symbolic manipulations but as practical frameworks requiring hardware and language exchanges, hence the significant development of the study of science in action (Latour, 1987) and conversational analysis (Sacks, 1995).

2 / "Everything is a process." The importance given to verification by James, the need for validation rather than the existence of essential or intrinsic properties has resulted in the choice of direct inquiries to observe these types of operation and, more generally, viewed ascriptions (simply linguistic or more complex ones) as processes. Although this seems very close to the first axiom, it

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<sup>1</sup> I do not discuss the relationship between pragmatics and pragmatist philosophy, their common rejection of certain formalisms and their insistence on action contexts, see Kreplak & Lavergne (2008).

differs because it primarily affects the study of practices upstream and downstream, that is to say in the definition of issues to consider and in the reports produced by sociologists. To take a trivial example, rather than considering things as goods, we will examine the various assemblies that enable their commodification or de-commodification, a basic theme in the revival of economic sociology (Appadurai, 1988).

3 / "Actors know better." The status of knowledge for James, and in particular his distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and "knowledge about," has the effect of removing any transcendental status from the position of sociologist as an observer. All his knowledge comes from actors who, through their accumulated experience, know far more than the observer about what they say, write, evaluate, and feel. Especially in its ethnomethodological versions, the work of the sociologist is to be able to account for such knowledge and practices (Garfinkel, 1967).

These shared axioms are obviously subject to various hermeneutics, the first of which can be seen in the example of Alexandra Bidet's paper (2012). If they constitute a common ground, they accordingly generate distinct practices. In the remainder of my talk, I would like to emphasize these differences by highlighting the practical problems faced by pragmatic sociologists when attempting to implement these three axioms.

## **2. Problems and Limitations of Sociological Pragmatism**

Armed with the three axioms described above, how can sociologists develop a pragmatic program? Among the many practical issues they must resolve, I shall address three that heavily influence the ongoing processes of inquiry.

### **2.1. *Who and What to Follow?***

A very famous slogan was developed in the sociology of science as a follow-up to ethnomethodology: to work as a sociologist, it is enough to "just follow the actors," adding nothing to what they do, say and feel, in accordance to the third axiom. But who are these actors and how can we follow them?

From an empirical point of view, "just follow the actors" quickly ends in aporia, and unless you can reconstruct extreme forms of Benthamite Panopticons, it is impossible to keep up with that theoretical program. A first fallback strategy is to focus on an actor or a particular type of actor and to follow the actor or type of actor more closely. In this case, complex relationships are forged between sociologists and the actor in question, which draws more on a sense of attachment than "following" (Callon, 1999). This attachment is reflected in versions where, rather than follow an "actor" in the traditional sense, it is a scientific pronouncement, a technical device, a legal norm or anything else interesting actors, and, provisionally, a sociologist, clearly revealing the relational nature of pragmatic sociology (Hennion, 2012). Alternatively to this tracking without spatial and temporal limits, and within the logic of ethnographic observation, specific locations can be selected: they generally include all workplaces, even warships (Hutchins, 1993), and especially scientific laboratories.

James' continuous and seamless experience, however, can not be fully put into practice: in each case, pragmatic sociologists have to cut out portions of the reality which they will investigate. The closure of locations studied is not complete, and one must see or ignore interactions with the outside world; a technical device rarely has a well-defined genesis and endpoint, especially if uses are considered; and even on location, the focus of observation is delicate: should you follow an operator's hands or his eyes (Chateauraynaud, 1997)? These choices are not arbitrary but are the result of a cross between researchers' interests and issues and the actors' own inclinations;

clarifying and making explicit the interaction between them is part of a reflexive practice. One way to do this is to use the third axiom to study surveillance techniques developed by actors, whether they be systems for monitoring, marking, identifying and/or tracing devices that distinguish, in a seamless experience, what is relevant and what is not.

## ***2.2. Studying Competence and Incompetence***

Sociological pragmatism is often reduced to a mere relativism or perspectivism, its first bias being the emphasis on actors' skills (Boltanski, 1990) rather than structural constraints weighing on them and limiting the possession or exercise of these skills. Taking this criticism into account does not require one to adopt a structural model, but to think as much about incompetence, dispossession and confusion as one has thought about skills. Certainly, James' pragmatism, like Dewey's, insists on disorders that arise as opportunities to activate investigation, verification and validation processes. But these disorders are a fleeting moment, creating a process that leads to the resolution of the problem(s). In this way, sociologists have accounted for a multitude of achievements, resolutions, inventions and transformations, but have more difficulty capturing other types of phenomena.

We can distinguish three factors causing this asymmetry. First, stories of failures (for themselves) often need to be closer when they occurred: one must unearth archives that nobody consulted or be involved with actors while they fail. Second, the discovery of incompetence requires direct or indirect possession of extensive expertise. Third, some strategic variations performed by certain actors (pharmaceutical or chemical companies to name a few) or even ordinary situations of oblivion or miscommunication call for access to scenes or arenas usually hidden from observers (whether for industrial secrecy or individual privacy).

The mitigation of these factors usually happens through a standard method based on the third axiom: actors produce controversies, affairs and trials that show these failures (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), and alerts and crises uncover forgotten or hidden processes (Chateauraynaud & Tornay, 1999). But this requires a minimum visibility of disorders, produced by these material and discursive practices publicizing them. Alternatively, the intensive attachment to certain actors seeking to build causes can also produce accounts of these phenomena. However, another path from non-pragmatic works, notably in environmental history, seems promising: it is to consider invisibility, disorders, error as voluntary processes and, following the second axiom, inquire about the making of invisibility and doubt (Markowitz & Rosner, 2002) since the visibilization and clarification have been extensively studied.

## ***2.3. Studying Generality and Singularity***

The respect of the first two axioms would, as a logical consequence, reduce the scope of sociological results. As everything is processes and practices, there would be no way to stabilize descriptions and interpretations beyond precisely followed actors, and others would be able to choose paths that differ from those to which the sociologist had access. Indexicality being necessary, Garfinkel advised avoiding general descriptors in favor of those reporting specifically on what was observed.

It seems to me that at least three different strategies have been taken to avoid the slope which would lead any sociological production to a pure in situ monograph, a partial archive only valid for itself. The first is to implement the third axiom in terms of actors observed: generalization is a regular operation that actors perform (Cefaï, TBP). They are the ones that produce commensurability, temporal continuity, categories that transcend a given situation (i.e. are applicable to other

situations). Symmetrically, they produce singularity ("it looks like nothing I know") and rupture (from "until now" to the creation of new categories). Sociology and the history of statistics (Desrosières, 1993, Porter, 1996) have notably implemented this particular type of approach.

The second strategy involves the implementation of the third axiom from the point of view of the sociologist: by multiplying different observations either by the development of a combinatorial ethnography (Dodier & Baszanger, 1997), or by implementing the saturation principle derived from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Armed with enough cases, and loaded with actors and situations, a pragmatic sociologist can describe possibilities rather than identifying regularities, leaving the enrichment of already developed models and stories to others.

The third strategy is more radical because it entails implementing the third axiom in terms of the sociologist's readers/listeners: if his/her accounts interest them, then they must contain truths in the James' sense (they have "cash value"), and their results are generalized. It must be stressed here that this third approach is at the heart of scientific credit theories (Latour & Woolgar, 1979), including absolutely non-pragmatic scientometric versions.

### **3. Which Audiences for Pragmatic Sociology?**

This last point requires us to examine one final question: pragmatic sociology audiences. In a Dewey's vision of audiences, one may wonder about the consequences of these practices and the sociological experiences that they generate. Again, the answers are far from uniform and we can distinguish at least three different audiences.

#### ***3.1. The Sociologist Himself/Herself***

From the experiential standpoint, pragmatic inquiries first modify sociologists themselves. Not only did he or she produce knowledge through induction, but also and in particular he or she truly learned in contact with actors, whether willingly or unwillingly (Favret-Saada, 1977). This is typically the case in workplace ethnography when they are able to practice ordinary or extraordinary tasks (Dodier, 1995), mastering bodily techniques.

But experience may exceed the mere possession of shared competences and achieve a particular level of expertise, articulating a deep understanding of the practices studied and sociological skills. One of the most striking examples is probably that of David Sudnow, an ethnomethodologist who in trying to grasp ways of improvising at the piano and eventually producing the method of learning the instrument most commonly used worldwide today.

#### ***3.2. Followed Actors***

The issue of restitution to actors takes a specific turn in the case of pragmatic sociology as it is less a moral or contractual reciprocation than a verification process. This can, of course, consist of a verification of the correctness of collected material (rereading of an interview), the validation of a description put on paper, or even the production of acceptable narratives for many actors, including in situations of conflict. In a successful version of ethnomethodology, the account of accounts receives the agreement of every stakeholder, even regaining the classical virtues of critical clarification.

Especially in the configuration of pragmatism in which the following of a particular actor or cause is central, this clarification can then take the form of equipment, or even a conceived co-construction, either by building new language categories, making visible some public practice or relating practices that were not previously shared (Pellizzoni, 2012).

### 3.3. Colleagues

The professional practices of pragmatic sociologists are not fundamentally different from those of their colleagues, they publish articles and books, and are expected to produce knowledge the first audience for which is their peers. In this context, the seamless experience necessarily mutilated by their inquiry undergoes a second transformation in order to transmit narratives and interpretations to people or institutions that have virtually no direct knowledge of the practices described. Far from being a minor transformation, this completes James' cycle, from direct sensible knowledge to knowledge known by others.

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