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# That's Interesting!: Towards a Phenomenology of Sociology and a Sociology of Phenomenology

by Murray Davis

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[This is a synopsis of those portions of Davis's article relevant to this lecture. The article was originally published in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1971 vol.1, pp.309-344 -- many thanks to Chris Stewart of the University of South Australia for solving the mystery of the original reference, which I had been unable to locate.]

Davis sets up his paper by stating: "It has long been thought that a theorist is considered great because his theories are true, but this is false. A theorist is considered great, not because his theories are true, but because they are interesting."

He suggests that it would thus be interesting to ascertain what exactly it is that makes a theory "interesting." He sets out to compare "interesting" theories to "non-interesting" ones. Davis takes a theory to be interesting if it has been given 'wide circulation.'" (e.g., is cited in textbooks, taught in courses).

In general terms, he finds that, "A new theory will be noticed only when it denies an old truth, proverb, platitude, maxim, adage, saying, commonplace, etc.)"

He adds, "All *interesting* theories, at least all *interesting* social theories, then, constitute an attack on the taken-for-granted world of their audience. ... If it does not challenge but merely confirms one of their taken-for-granted beliefs, [the audience] will respond to it by rejecting its value while affirming its truth."

"An interesting proposition was always the negation of an accepted one."

The difference between "seeming" and "being."

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## The Index of the Interesting

(Longer version, with examples; For points only, see below)

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### A - The Characterization of a single phenomenon

#### (i) Organization

- a. what seems to be a disorganized (unstructured) phenomenon is in reality an organized (structured) phenomenon.

e.g., typical of younger developing disciplines. Embodied in Comte's assertion that "social phenomena in themselves, which were considered at the time he wrote to be unstructured (unlike natural phenomena) do in fact possess a coherent structure which can be grasped by science." Also

in research areas like Le Bon's *The Crowd* -- taking a collection of individuals and recognizing them as something different in the context of the whole.

- b. what seems to be an organized (structured) phenomenon is in reality a disorganized (unstructured) phenomenon [or organized/structured in a different way.]

e.g., typical of stagnating discipline looking for rejuvenation; rather like a new shuffling of the cards -- disaggregating and restructuring the units of the discipline. Embodied in things like Garfinkel's attack of sociology's methods, or Gouldner's attack on sociology's policies.

## (ii) Composition

- a. What seem to be assorted heterogeneous phenomena are in reality composed of a single element.

e.g., Freud's assertion that seemingly diverse things like slips of the tongue, jokes, dreams, neuroses, and adult behaviour are all manifestations of the same instinctual drives; or people like Marx, Foucault, McLuhan, who bring it all down to economics, power, or communication.

- b. What seems to be a single phenomenon is in reality composed of assorted heterogeneous elements.

e.g., any categorization scheme, like the one that Davis is offering here

## (iii) Abstraction

- a. What seems like an individual phenomenon is in reality a holistic phenomenon. (sociologizing)

e.g., Durkheim's assertion that suicide was not an individual phenomenon, but a culturally determined one.

- b. What seems like a holistic phenomenon is in reality an individual phenomenon. (psychologizing)

e.g., Freud's assertion that war was not a social phenomenon but a psychological phenomenon.

## (iv) Generalization

- a. What seems to be a local phenomenon is in reality a general phenomenon.

e.g., any time a researcher who looks at one group, research site, or phenomenon shows or claims that the findings have broader generalizability (e.g., in Davis's article, he examines what defines an 'interesting' theory in the social sciences, but suggests that the same dynamics probably operate in the natural sciences as well.

- b. What seems to be a general phenomenon is in reality a local phenomenon.

e.g., Malinowski's anthropological research which indicated

the Oedipal complex and its resolution -- which had been taken as a universal -- was in fact not common to all societies.

### (v) Stabilization

- a. What seems to be a stable and unchanging phenomenon is in reality an unstable and changing phenomenon.

e.g., Marx saying that the economic organization of a society, which was thought highly stable, was in fact subject to radical change in short periods of time.

- b. What seems to be an unstable and changing phenomenon is in reality a stable and unchanging phenomenon.

e.g., Simmel's view that conflict could go on forever.

### (vi) Function

- a. What seems to be a phenomenon that functions ineffectively as a means for the attainment of an end is in reality a phenomenon that function effectively.

e.g., Merton's assertion that the political machine, which was thought at the time to be an inefficient means of achieving community goals, was in actuality quite efficient.

- b. What seems to be a phenomenon that functions effectively as the means for the attainment the attainment of an end is in reality a phenomenon that functions ineffectively.

e.g., Jails make people criminals, mental hospitals create mental illness.

### (vii) Evaluation

- a. What seems to be a bad phenomenon is in reality a good phenomenon.

e.g., RDLaing saying that schizophrenia was actually a good thing.

- b. What seems to be a good phenomenon is in reality a bad phenomenon.

e.g., Goffman saying that asylums were like concentration camps.

## B - The Relations Among Multiple Phenomena

### (viii) Co-relation

- a. What seem to be unrelated (independent) phenomena are in reality correlated (interdependent) phenomena.

e.g., The relation between cigarette smoking and various physical illnesses.

- b. What seem to be related (interdependent) phenomena are in reality uncorrelated (independent) phenomena.

e.g., No relation between marijuana smoking and illness.

### (ix) Co-existence

- a. What seem to be phenomena which can exist together are in reality phenomena which cannot exist together.

e.g., de Rougement's assertion that love and marriage are incompatible.

- b. What seem to be phenomena which cannot exist together are in reality phenomena which can exist together.

e.g., Freud's discussion of ambivalence in which he talks about the coexistence of love and hate.

### (x) Co-variation

- a. What seems to be a positive co-variation between phenomena is in reality a negative co-variation between phenomena.

e.g., Caplovitz's observation in *The Poor Pay More* that expenditures for many goods and services, which were assumed to decrease at lower income levels, in fact increased at lower income levels.

- b. What seems to be a negative co-variation between phenomena is in reality a positive co-variation between phenomena.

e.g., de Toqueville's assertion that, while people assumed that the likelihood of revolution went down when living standards went up, in fact the likelihood went up.

### (xi) Opposition

- a. What seem to be similar (nearly identical) phenomena are in reality opposite phenomena.

e.g., McLuhan's distinction between radio and TV as hot and cold media.

- b. What seem to be opposite phenomena are in reality similar (nearly identical) phenomena.

e.g., Hoffer's view in the *True Believer* that those who joined far left and far right movements were similar in their motivations.

### (xii) Causation

- a. What seems to be the independent phenomenon (variable) in a causal relation is in reality the dependent phenomenon (variable).

e.g., Becker's view in *Outsiders* that it was not people's weird behaviour that caused them to be labelled deviant, but

the label of deviant that cause their weird behaviour. Other examples are "The Supreme Court was on trial in *Delgaamukkw*", or "Schools disrupt childhood."

(b) What seems to be the dependent phenomenon (variable) in a causal relation is in reality the independent phenomenon (variable).

e.g., Weber's view that it was not the case that the economy of a country determined the religion of a country, but that the religion of the country was determined by the economy.

In terms of the representation of "interesting" ideas, Davis suggests there is a "standard form" that authors/theorists/researchers follow:

"The 'standard form' of the books and articles in which the research is presented is the following:

1. The author articulates the taken-for-granted assumptions of his imagined audience by reviewing the literature of the particular sub-tradition in question ('It has long been thought...'),
2. he adduces one or more propositions which deny what has been traditionally assumed ('But this is false...'),
3. he spends the body of the work 'proving' by various methodological devices that the old routinely assumed propositions are wrong while the new ones he asserted are right ('We have seen instead that...'),
4. in conclusion, he suggests the practical consequences of these new propositions for his imagined audience's on-going social research, specifically how they ought to deflect it onto new paths ('Further investigation is necessary to...')."

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