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THE SOCIOLOGY OF PERCEPTION*

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Among the possible divisions of the sociology of knowledge is the sociological study of perception. I say "possible" because I want to present here some methodological considerations bearing precisely on its possibility. The possibility of the sociology of knowledge in general requires, of course, first, the existence of some relationship or other between social fact and the cultural fact which is to be interpreted and, second, the discoverability of the relationship. Assuming, however, the possibility of the sociology of knowledge in general, I still find it necessary to consider the possibility of sociology of perception in particular. For, in this putative division of the sociology of knowledge, a problem arises which, in other divisions, either does not ordinarily arise at all in so far as they deal with circumstances occurring in the past or does not arise with the same acuteness in so far as they deal with circumstances occurring in the present: namely, the determination of the cultural fact, since, in this division, it is a mental fact and one of a peculiar sort.[1] More precisely why the problem does not arise elsewhere either at all or with the same acuteness, we shall see in due time; as yet, we must limit the discussion to perception alone. And, in the interest of simplicity, we must limit it also, as far as we can, to the study of present perception, for, as a study of past, rather than present, circumstances, the sociology of knowledge involves problems of method from which its contemporary aspect, pursued as a contemporary and not as an historical study, is free. Since, moreover, if perception is determinable at all, it is determinable with far greater surety for the present than for the past, the sociological student of perception would be well advised to neglect the perception beyond his experimental access and to deal largely, and perhaps virtually altogether, with perception that occurs during his very investigation.

But the notion of perception requires some comment, for there are at least two relevant meanings. Dollard (3, p. 37) intends one sense, which

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[1]Some such considerations as those we shall adduce might prove relevant to any, and not merely to a sociological, study of perception, but this wider generality we cannot undertake to establish here.

he refers to, variously, as social or psychological, when he remarks, for instance, that "the middle-class researcher could easily make the mistake of assuming that all Negroes are disciplined middle-class persons like himself, undoubtedly an immortal error in northern perception of the Negro," or that "only acute crisis in a group, such as the defeat of the southern armies, forces a re-canvass of the situation and the gradual stylization of new social perception." But the same writer, I think, though his purport seems not wholly clear, may also intend another sense when he remarks elsewhere (2, p. 277) on "the difficulties which arise in connection with a theory of perception when no account is taken of the fact that a culture is itself a systematic guide to perception for its members, and can be defined as a stereotyped manner of perceiving," and adds that "the idea of a kind of brute sensory perception might seem of very little interest when compared with the study of perception as a function of group experience." The obscurity consists in the problem whether, to "brute sensory perception," Dollard means to contrast social or psychological perception "as a function of group experience," sense perception as such a function, or both. If he means the first, he should not have referred to theory of perception, since this phrase ordinarily signifies theory of sense perception. If he means the second, then—as, of course, under the first alternative—he should clearly have stated so. But I suspect that, failing to distinguish between the two, he actually means both; and no harm will result provided it is realized that two different forms of apprehension are involved here. For the one form, when not "perception" simply, "sense perception" is the usual and unexceptionable term. For the other form, "psychological perception" seems inappropriate because the perception of sense is also psychological; and "social perception," because the apprehension in question is essentially one of meaning, the adjective "social" referring only either to certain conditions under which the perception occurs or to one of the several classes into which meaning may be divided. And some sense perceptions, too, I suppose, could be called social perceptions on one more or less tenuous ground or another—perceptions approximately shared, say, or perceptions whose object or whose instrumentality depends in some manner on society.[2] So I suggest

[2] As Egon Brunswik (1) uses the term: "The situation peculiar to social perception as compared with simple 'physical'-object perception is that not only the subjects, but also the objects in the experimental setup are persons." Actually, however, the "social perceptions" treated by Brunswik seem to be guesses about the personality traits of persons whose photographs the experimenter presents to his subjects. I doubt that I should regard such guesses or "snap judgments" (*ibid*, p. 25) as instances even of meaning perception. Brunswik also, in a schema of approaches to experiment, contrasts perception of thing constancies as "intuitive

distinguishing between the two forms of apprehension, if one wishes to name them both "perception," by the terms "sense perception" and "meaning perception" But for the sake of simplicity, again, I shall concentrate on the former and ignore any special questions that might arise in connection with the latter.

In order to bring the problem concretely before us, I shall cite what seems a plausible and typical example of the sort of material an investigator might study And such an example I find in a discovery Malinowski (5, p. 204) made among the Trobriand Islanders The example, it will be noted, is one, not of meaning perception, but of sense perception.

> In a matrilineal society, such as the Trobriands, where all maternal relatives are considered to be of the "same body," and the father to be a "stranger," we should have no doubt in anticipating that facial and bodily similarity would be traced in the mother's family alone The contrary is the case, however, and this is affirmed with extreme social emphasis Not only is it a household dogma, so to speak, that a child never resembles its mother, or any of its brothers and sisters, or any of its maternal kinsmen, but it is extremely bad form and a great offense to hint at any such similarity. To resemble one's father, on the other hand, is the natural, right, and proper thing for a man or woman to do

Now, even if I were able to, I should not here undertake a sociological study of this condition, for the present problem turns rather about the nature of the condition. And Malinowski himself does not make such a study. However, the plausibility of the material requires some suggestion of that in the society with which the condition might have something to do. This vague phrase I use so as also to avoid here any discussion of, or implication about, the nature of the correlations established in the sociology of knowledge. It will suffice to point out the following circumstances. First, concerning the denial of matrilineal resemblances: The supreme taboo of the Trobriander (5, p. 519) is "the prohibition of any erotic or even of any tender dealings between brother and sister"; the most insulting comparison of features in the maternal line (5, p. 487) is, in speaking to a man, "Thy face thy sister's." And the taboo diminishes in stringency (5, pp. 522-528) roughly with the degree of remoteness of the female—and the insult, I infer, in intensity roughly (5, p. 487) with the degree of remoteness of the person—

orientation among physical objects" with social perception as "intuitive orientation in social environment" (*ibid.*, p 28). Presumably he takes the experimental definition above to coincide with this, that we might call his real, definition, but it is certainly arguable that snap judgments in an experimental setup are not equivalent to intuitive orientations in a social environment other than that of an experiment.

from the sisterhood relationship.[3] Moreover, unpleasant experiences must often arise on the maternal side, since a maternal uncle exercises authority (5, p. 7) over a man, and a man contributes to the support of his maternal female relatives (5, p. 121). Second, then, concerning the affirmation of patrilineal resemblances (5, p. 6): With the father (that is, in the sociological sense) one associates love and protection. And here Malinowski (5, p. 208) himself suggests a relationship. "Thus we see," he says, "that an artificial physical link between father and child has been introduced, and that on one important point it has overshadowed the matrilineal bond. For physical resemblance is a very strong emotional tie between two people. . . ."[4] And these circumstances, I think, and I suspect they are typical of the sort of circumstances one would initially find, make the assumption at least plausible that the alleged perceptual condition should have correlates among the social relationships within which it occurs.

Or, if we turn from the social aspect to the perceptual, our present example again seems plausible or as plausible as any; for, with reference to the perceptual, likewise, the example is typical That is, the investigator possesses certain statements and certain behavior from which he must infer to, and only in this way can he reach, the relevant perceptions, and such is always the situation except when the investigator studies his own perceptions. Hence, if it is sociology of perception he claims to pursue, he must show beyond a reasonable doubt that the condition he investigates is indeed perception, expressed in the assertions and by the behavior, rather than a complex of behavior patterns and symbolic expressions which lacks a justification in actual perception And this requirement we shall now consider in reference to the example.

The Trobrianders (5, p. 206) themselves, it is clear, are making assertions about perception. When they "stoutly deny that similarity can exist between matrilineal kinsmen," they certainly mean at the very least that a similarity is not perceived; for, if a similarity does not exist, certainly, they would suppose, it cannot be perceived. Also, when they affirm a similarity between child and father, they certainly mean at the very least that some similarity is perceived; for, if a similarity does exist, certainly, they would suppose, it is both perceivable and, under the

[3]The comparison of male with male Malinowski does not work out with the same care as the comparison of male with female, and the comparison of female with female he does not work out at all

[4]When one inquires "why it is that people resemble their father, who is a stranger and has nothing to do with the formation of their body, they have a stereotyped answer: 'It coagulates the face of the child; for always he lies with her, they sit together'" (5, p. 207)

perceptually necessary conditions, perceived At all events, to deny the Trobrianders these suppositions would be to attribute to them an implausible and improbable degree of epistemological sophistication Now, Dollard (2, p. 116) remarks that "it would be interesting to know in the comparative study of cultures how vigorously people cling to their actual perceptions despite the overpowering force of the structured theory of the culture." And it would indeed But our problem, I think, is somewhat more subtle and difficult. Recognizing the effective force of the theory of the culture, recognizing, in the present example, that the Trobriand Islanders claimed to perceive what Malinowski did not perceive and not to perceive what he did perceive, we must ask, not how vigorously they clung to their actual perceptions, but, rather, what their actual perceptions were. For, if their actual perceptions were the same as those of the ethnologist, we know already that, so far as he could ascertain, they did not "cling" to them. Were such perceptions, however, even there to have been clung to? Not according to the Trobrianders But the real problem is precisely this. Can we trust their assertions? If we can, and the instance is typical, then sociology of perception is so far forth possible. Or must we believe the contrary to their assertions? If we must, and the instance is typical, then sociology of perception is impossible unless, and to the extent to which, it might be pursued by the use of introspection Or is the case, rather, that one type of assertion can be accepted, while the other must be rejected? If so, then sociology of perception, while possible, is possible only in a limited measure, only, that is, in the positive or, as may be, only in the negative instance Or perhaps, in the end, the answer will not prove as clear-cut as the above alternatives. But we must see

Let us consider first the positive instance, in which non-existent resemblances were declared to exist And the question is this: Granted that the resemblances in the paternal line did not exist in the perception of the disinterested observer, did they, nevertheless, exist in the perception, as distinguished from the expressed belief, of the interested observer?

But here I should pause, I imagine, to recognize that the taking of the ethnologist's perceptions as the criterion for the reality or unreality of resemblances will be criticized It will be said, I suppose, that the ethnologist himself was "interested" in the situation (as indeed, in an evident sense, he was) and that, therefore, we can lay for him no more claim to the title of disinterested observer than we can for his subjects If the objection proceeds from the assumption that there is no such thing as disinterestedness and that what seems to each man is to each man or that what seems

in each culture is in each culture, with no hope, ever, of applying any criterion to the seeming, then the issue lies far deeper than the present discussion and cannot be treated here. I might note, however, that the impossibility in principle of a disinterested observer would make all social science impossible and that there would be no reason, in consequence, to discuss any division of it or any (of course pseudo-) problem which arises in it. And, in any event, our problem here is the problem what really does, perceptually, seem to a man. Or, if the objection refers only to the particular observer in the particular case, then it signifies nothing for us, since the particular case does not matter; we could just as well suppose the case to be hypothetical, provided only that one grants the possibility in principle of a disinterested observer. Or, if the objection rests merely on the fact that the ethnologist is interested as a scientist is interested, then it is trifling and in fact silly. Perhaps a technical consideration would be prosaic in a matter of high argument, but I might point out that the physical anthropologist should be the man most qualified of all to detect resemblances and dissimilarities, and I presume that Malinowski was not altogether ignorant of the physical branch of his discipline. Finally, I think the remarks to follow should themselves justify in considerable measure our reliance on the ethnologist's report of his own perceptions as the criterion.

Well, then, it might seem that nothing could possibly bear on the question whether the interested observer does perceive nonexistent resemblances. I suspect, however, that something does. For, in commenting on the asserted resemblances of any child to its father, Malinowski (5, p. 206) asserts that, "where it is really found, even to a small degree, constant attention is drawn to it as to a thing which is nice, good and right." In other words, he implies a ground for distinguishing between the genuine and the merely alleged perception of resemblance, and the ground consists in the differential behavior of the interested observer; where there is no resemblance, the Trobriander will assert it as a matter of dogma—and, no doubt, of sincere belief—but will not ordinarily, unless challenged, dwell on it; while, where there is a resemblance, the Trobriander will ordinarily take constant advantage of the evident fact. And I do not see how one could well explain this difference in behavior except by some difference in the perceptions of the interested, which would correspond to the difference in the perceptions of the disinterested, observer. For, unless the Trobriander were, however vaguely, aware of a difference in the situations perceived, he would have no stimuli to the different responses he has made to the two different situations. But, if, as we must therefore assume, this difference does exist in the actual

perceptions of the interested observer, then we cannot speak here of sociology of perception but only of sociology, say, of expressed belief. In order to claim legitimately that he is pursuing sociology of perception, the student would have to establish beyond reasonable doubt that there exists no differential behavior pointing to a difference in perception. And to do this, be it noted, he cannot rely on the account of someone who is not concerned with, and perhaps not even aware of, his peculiar problem, it is mere good fortune that Malinowski provided us with the unemphasized clue we have worked from. So I infer that sociology of perception in the positive instance can be pursued, if at all, only by a student in the field or the laboratory, for he alone has the opportunity to eliminate, by the most thorough investigation, the chance of a differential behavior.

Now, second, let us consider the negative instance, in which existent resemblances were denied to exist. And the question is this. Granted that the resemblances in the maternal line did exist in the perception of the disinterested observer, did they, nonetheless, *not* exist in the perception, as distinguished from the expressed belief, of the interested observer? This question seems rather more difficult than the first. If we answered by analogy with the above discussion, we should have to say that the Trobriander, in spite of his beliefs, really does perceive the resemblances, where they exist, between matrilineal kinsmen and that the perception, again, would be indicated by differential behavior. Unfortunately, however, Malinowski gives no hint that the Trobrianders behave differently when the resemblance really does not exist from the way they behave when it does exist. On the contrary, everything recorded of their behavior is compatible with the hypothesis that they actually do not perceive real matrilineal resemblances. Although they claimed, for example, that each of the five favorite sons of To'uluwa by Kadamwasila was "exactly like" his father, they repudiated indignantly the heresy "that this similarity to the father implied similarity to each other" (5, p. 207). Such contraventions are also compatible, of course, with the hypothesis that actually the Trobrianders can and do perceive matrilineal resemblances but refuse to admit, probably even to themselves, that they do. But I suspect that these contraventions deserve more initial credit than the contrary assertions in the positive instance (to neglect the differential behavior we noted earlier). For, despite the occasional occurrence of hallucinations and the more common but still occasional projection into perception of what one expects or desires or fears to perceive, far more common, so common indeed as to be ordinary, is the failure to perceive what one either has no interest in perceiving or firmly desires not

to perceive. But this consideration is by no means so decisive as to require one, forthwith, to concede the legitimacy of sociology of perception in the negative instance. Here, too, analogously, one cannot rely on the absence of observations of differential behavior in the accounts of others. And sociology of perception in the negative instance, too, then, can be pursued only, if at all, by the investigator in the field or the laboratory.

Of meaning perception, I think it should be unnecessary to give any further instances than the two briefly quoted from Dollard. I need only point out that, for meaning perception, the methodological problem includes the problem that arises for sense perception—how, namely, to be sure that the subject does apprehend the meaning he claims to apprehend, rather than merely express the claim on grounds of convention or, more probably, of conventional conviction.

Since I have adverted to the possibility, perhaps I should say a brief word, before going on, about the pursuit of sociology of perception by, or through, trained introspectors. I am afraid that we cannot take this suggestion very seriously. The perceptions of the trained introspector are not perceptions that the sociologist would take much interest in. They would certainly not furnish him with much material. The process of self-conscious observation would probably put out of play the sociological factors—or, more neutrally, eliminate any sociological relevance—except for what might inhere in the introspective situation itself. And all the objections to the introspective method in general would apply here as elsewhere.

I must now return to a matter postponed from the beginning, where I said that the problem of the determination of the cultural fact either does not arise, or does not arise with the same acuteness, in other divisions of the sociology of knowledge. In so far as the problem does not arise at all, that is partly because the sociology of knowledge deals to a large extent with "overt" rather than "covert" culture. This statement will seem strange, I know, since Linton (4, p. 38), classes knowledge, attitudes, and values together as the covert aspects of a culture, in contrast to kinetic behavior and the products of industry, which constitute the overt aspect. But actually, I suggest, the "knowledge" of the sociology of knowledge is, to a large extent, rather a product of industry than a psychic state—a product primarily, to be sure, of mental than of physical industry. That is to say, the sociologist of knowledge as historical scholar (and even contemporary fact may be treated by historical methods) deals with symbolic expressions, objectively recorded, and hence immediately accessible to him, and what he correlates sociologically are these recorded and thus overt expressions. Or,

in so far as he does not correlate the recorded expressions, he correlates no more than his understanding thereof or an ideal-typical construct therefrom; so that the case is in no way altered. Even yet, the problem does not arise. For the understanding or construct is in his mind, not (though the former might occasionally chance to be) in the minds of those who originally expressed the symbols; and he therefore, as historical sociologist of knowledge, controls the subject-matter as one does not control it when one pursues sociology of perception conceived as a contemporary investigation. Save within his own mind, which is immediately accessible to him, there is, in other words, no mental fact, no covert culture, to be determined. And whether it is worthwhile to correlate his own ideas with the social circumstances of someone else or in what sense, indeed, the sociological correlates themselves actually are such circumstances—here we have quite other questions, which cannot be treated now.

The case may somewhat alter when the sociologist of knowledge falls to interpreting the belief, attitude, or value which the expression expresses. Then he does treat the covert aspects of culture. But I think that the problem of determining a present mental fact arises acutely, nevertheless, only with perception; for it does not seem methodologically of peculiar difficulty to determine beliefs, attitudes, and values, provided that they exist in the present (although, of course, the sort of evidence deliberately sought out in the present occasionally does happen to prove available for the past). While we cannot take an expression on these states of mind as self-authenticated, it can be, in principle, easily verified by behavior. If the subject behaves as he would not have behaved, so far as we can determine, did he not really possess the belief, attitude, or value in question, then we justifiably attribute that state of mind to him as his own. Malinowski again provides us with an illuminating example. Did the Trobrianders, he wondered, really believe their denial of physiological paternity? Then genuine convictions should appear, he felt sure, in their treatment of the most cherished members of the household, the domestic pigs (5, p. 190):

> The village pig is considered a great delicacy, while the flesh of the bush-pig is one of the strongest taboos to people of rank in Kiriwina, the transgression of which they hold in genuine horror and disgust. Yet they allow the female domestic pigs to wander on the outskirts of the village and in the bush, where they can pair freely with male bush-pigs. On the other hand, they castrate all the male pigs in the village in order to improve their condition. Thus, naturally, all the progeny are in reality descended from wild bush sires. Yet the natives have not the slightest inkling of this fact.

Again, the Trobrianders likewise allow their valued European sows to mate with native boars of the bush, though they could easily mate them with European boars (5, p. 191). Their attitude toward their own children gives further evidence (5, p. 193):

> One of my informants told me that after over a year's absence he returned to find a newly born child at home. He volunteered this statement as an illustration and final proof of the truth that sexual intercourse has nothing to do with conception. And it must be remembered that no native would ever discuss any subject in which the slightest suspicion of his wife's fidelity could be involved.

Can one very well doubt, in the face of such evidence, that the denial of physiological paternity represents, not a mere convention, but a real conviction? I think not. Nor was the evidence methodologically difficult to obtain.

It might seem that the determination of a perception is precisely analogous to the determination of a belief, attitude, or value, and that the same behavioral test would serve in the one case as in the other. Unfortunately, however, this is not so. For the same behavioral test would reveal, not necessarily that the subject has a certain perception, but only that he has a conviction about—or attitude concerning or set toward—the perception. It might be argued that one could devise tests which would establish in complex instances, either of sense perception or of meaning perception, a fact of perception rather than a fact of conviction or attitude or set. However, it would be of no avail to indicate such and such a method of determining perceptions if the perceptions thereby determinable were perceptions which could not, whether in principle or in fact, be correlated sociologically with scientific profit.

But there is this consolation: that, even if the would-be sociologist of perception is not, as he hopes, investigating perception, he may still not have wasted his efforts. On the contrary, if the supposed present perception is not an actual perception, his efforts still produce results as valid as they would have produced if their object had actually been perception. For the correlations would apply, in any event, perhaps to the more easily ascertainable mental states or, if not to covert culture at all, at least to something else which is undeniably real—to that from which one erroneously inferred to the covert state, namely, to the overt cultural manifestations of physical behavior and of symbolic, especially verbal, expression.

In answer to the question whether we can trust the assertions of interested observers about their perceptions, I say, then, that we cannot. If,

therefore, we have nothing more than their own reports to go on, the sociological study of present perception fails, at the very beginning, from the inability of the investigator to determine what the perceptions he proposes to investigate really are. And it is evident that this fact holds generally and not merely for the example we worked from. The possibility of so much as undertaking a sociological study of present perception rests, in consequence, on the development of adequate methods for the determining of the perceptions and on the successful applications of those methods. And it is not the armchair scholar, but the student in the laboratory or the field, to whom the task of actual investigation must fall.

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