Sociological Theory II

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The Symbol Theory II

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Literature:

- Elias, Norbert. 1991. *The Symbol Theory*. London: Sage
  - Elias 1991:65-147

Part 5.1

- The relations among language, reason, and knowledge are often under-communicated or disregarded
  - Thinking in silence without overt speaking has to be learned
  - In most cases thinking in groups (speaking) prevails
  - Thinking, reason, mind, rationality, reflexion, intellect are considered human universals and thus different from language and knowledge
    - Kant saw reason as a structure prior to experience
    - Levi-Strauss saw mind as a structure prior to knowledge
- There is a danger of attributing to language, mind, and knowledge á priori properties which in fact are due to their common social functions as means of communication and orientation

Part 5.2

- The structure of languages reflects clearly the existence of human beings in society, not the nature of human beings
  - Such as the need to express clearly in socially standardised symbols the nature and relations of the sender and receiver of messages as well as the body of the message
- Thinking denotes the human capacity to put through their paces symbols anticipating a sequence of possible future actions without performing any actions.
- Humans without a language would also be humans without knowledge and reason
- Languages are learned as totalities, in particular the first
- In one sense a mother-tongue will pre-empt an individual's thinking

Comment: One may speculate that Elias combines and expands on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about the structure of a language and the way of thinking, and Chomsky's theory of a universal grammar emphasising the social origin of the universals

Part 5.3

- Symbols for things that do not exist and events that do not occur, fantasies, and the ability to communicate about them are uniquely human
- This is indispensable for the survival of humanity
- The ability to determine the degree of reality congruence of a fantasy is a key development but there is no clear divide between fantasy and reality congruent knowledge
- Some symbols may have a genetic foundation, but no adequate conceptualization of such symbols will be possible if one represents biogenetic and sociogenetic symbols as antipodes
- True beliefs in what we know is indispensable for action. Humanity could not have survived a full awareness of what they did not know, of the extent of their not-knowing
- Thus fantasy knowledge, myth and magic, while often misleading them, also had a high survival value for them

Part 5.4

- In a society in which knowledge, like water, is easily accessible and relatively cheap, one may find it difficult to realize to the full, the extent of the human dependence on knowledge for their survival
- The need to know is an aspect of the genetic constitution of humans
- Fantasy is the twin brother of reason
- Communicating transfers huge chunks of information from person to person, perhaps from generation to generation, without necessarily affecting individual behaviour
- Every language poses limits to what can be communicated
- The rationality-irrationality divide is problematic. Reality congruent opinions may have to go through a series of assumptions with the character of fantasies. Reality congruence of symbols must be seen as a process from innovative idea (fantasy) to empirical testing (reality). Case: the symbol theory opens new questions about relations of language, thought and knowledge, about speaking and thinking
- The ascendancy of reality-congruent knowledge over fantasy, and the growth of the fund of reality congruent knowledge, is itself an interesting historical process

Part 5.5

- Production of fantasies is a basic human characteristic. Enactment of collective fantasies is the mainstay of culture and a basic and urgent human need
- Controlling the social world require planning, experimental manipulation of symbols of alternative actions sequences. In this language and thought are inseparable
- Thinking in groups (discussing) is probably more common than the solitary idealised non-verbal thinking assumed by some (that perhaps does not exist) as the hallmark distinguishing humans
- Separating thinking and reason as innate to human nature while language is learned, is a view that needs to be overcome
- Laws of logic are also seen as given by nature (not by language) proving that mind is a human universal unlike language

Part 5.6

- The separation of language from ideas about mind, reason, and rationality is a serious obstacle to further insights
- To start an inquiry here one might start with the hunting band: what did they do when they were thinking?
- The emancipation of human action from the here and now situation by the use of symbols is a decisive event in the ascendancy of humans to control their environment

Part 6.1

- Language, thought, knowledge
  - "It is one of the oddities of mainstream theories of knowledge, of traditional epistemology, that most of them has little to say about the transmission of knowledge from person to person and almost nothing to about structural characteristics of knowledge which makes interpersonal and thus intergenerational transmission of knowledge possible." (p. 83)
  - These theories are assuming independent and isolated individuals
  - Knowledge is seen as science, typically physics. Pre-scientific knowledge is disregarded
- Language is one of the missing links between nature and society or culture. It is based on biological faculties for
  - Production of socially standardised sound patterns
  - Hearing of socially standardised sound patterns
  - Storing of socially standardised sound patterns in memory
- The socially standardised sound patterns have meaning. Even wild disagreements among members of a language group presupposes a basic shared understanding of the meanings of the socially standardised sound patterns

Part 6.2

- Humans compared to animals are distinguished by
  - Changeability and adaptability of communicative behaviour
  - Creating meaningful sound patterns (new concepts)
  - Transmission of new knowledge
- Growth potential of human knowledge depends on this, not on changes in genetic structure
- Understanding human evolution requires attention to process of long duration such as evolution of language and growth in the stock of knowledge
  - This also means attention to species-specific pre-language communication such as body-language, laughter, smile, etc) and how these are selected for in the evolution of the species
  - Smiling may have moved from a pre-cortical to cortical control and may have now become linked to various linguistic cues

Part 6.3

- Theories of human evolution are often extrapolated to predict a superhuman species some time in the future
- With the ascendancy of humans the evolutionary automatic is in need of rethinking
  - As is Hegel's synthesis of the development of ideas
  - And Comte's model of the sequence of stages in the development of knowledge
- Some say this shows attempts at synthesis of long term process are bound to fail
- But long term development of knowledge require thinking about long term processes such as development of language and how knowledge has accumulated in a language across generations
- Language may be a key survival tool for humans compared to competing species

Part 6.4

- Characteristics of languages suggest humans are evolved to live in groups. A life that includes interpersonal and inter-group struggles and their management
- Biological characteristics, the natural growth of human individuals, and the social learning of language intertwine in complex ways. It becomes difficult to see nature and culture as polar opposites
- Little is know of this development of language, but it is unique for humans compared to other animals:
  - The means of communication among animals is relatively undifferentiated
  - Human communication has a relatively high precision of information communicated
  - Human verbal communication is more flexible and adaptable to new situations

Part 6.5

- Communications are coded in a language developed over time in a particular community
- The language is handed over to new generations enabling the young to become fully human
- Without language humans cannot develop adequate means of orientation and self-regulation
- Languages enable humans to accumulate knowledge over many generations. Butt not anything could have been learned at any time as Descartes, Kant, Popper etc tend to assume. New knowledge feeds on established
- Will language block access to new knowledge?
- Symbols do not have imitative or pictorial functions, but representational and are meaningful and meaning is inherently a collective characteristic

Part 6.6

- Everything that can be articulately experienced or communicated can be located in the language of the community
- The nameless occurrence is frightening
- Language may also contain common fallacies
  - Reality-congruence and reality misrepresentation
  - Fantasies abound
- Events have mode of existence and a mode of representation. Language, symbols represent the events. Objects exist independent of their representation
- Concepts may evolve from fantasy oriented to more and more reality congruence
- The cognitive functions of humans evolved in continuous contact with objects to be recognized. So did the symbols and categories used in communication about the non-human world

Part 6.7

- A language has a degree of independence from any one individual that speaks it but it is totally dependent on a group speaking it
- It is a beginningless process with changing phases but no absolute breaks
  - Sometime communication shifted from largely genetically fixated signals to largely learned symbols
  - The process of change was now socially driven not genetically, by development of symbols and their reality congruence affecting the survival of groups rather than individuals
  - Genetic evolution did not stop is slow and now swamped by the speed of the group dynamic of symbols development
  - This has given humans power to control change in most eco-system
  - How did humans come to this position?
  - **Comment(eb)**: It is a new kind of evolutionary ecology of languages. Elias calls it development.

Part 6.8

- A key to the ascendancy of humans over other species is the ability to transmit knowledge across generations and the continuous growth of reality congruence of that knowledge
  - Neither genetic evolution nor symbol driven development imply unidirectional and inevitable progress
  - The symbol theory **does imply** a kind of path dependence. Some problems have to be solved first before others are solvable
  - Processes of greater reality congruence of concepts show this
- Human languages show a greater detachment, object-centredness than animal communication imposing a certain common structure on all languages. This is missed if the evolutionary process of language communication is disregarded
- Enhanced variability, flexibility, and capacity for extension are other distinguishing characteristics

Part 6.9

- One innovative bio-technical characteristic of languages is their elasticity, their almost infinite adaptability in the light of new experiences.
- This may be an indispensable pre-condition for scientific and technical innovations
- From speaking sound-patterns, to writing, to silent manipulation of them in thinking. The symbols seems to retain the same pattern. But there are forms of thinking shading over into manipulation of non-verbal images and not easily translated into speech. Are languages different in this?
- Human society is able to develop new forms without any changes in the human species
- During the last centuries change seems to be occurring at an exponential rate

Part 6.10

- Learning by imitation occurs among animals and among humans but is increasingly of less significance among humans, besides, there are serious limitations on the kind of knowledge that may be transmitted without the help of symbols
- The change from a mythical to a scientific image of nature demonstrates one direction of development for sound symbols. It leads to a growing reality congruence
  - Case: the sun from god to atomic furnace
  - Case: medieval bestiaries compared to modern books about animals (unicorns and other mythical creatures are now left out)

Part 7.1

- Theories of knowledge: emphasis shifting from fantasy to reality-congruence by looking at knowledge as existing in a worldly context, in time and space
- The ontological status of knowledge, its place in the world, and thus the relationship between knowledge, those who know, and that which is known remains unclear
  - Truth and validity are concepts unsuitable to this process view. Reality congruence is better
  - Scientific work is also best seen as a process lowering the fantasy content of concepts
- A main problem of knowledge and cognition is the relation between knowledge and it object
  - Case: the stigma attached to the concept of reality used in discussions of knowledge.
- What is knowledge: the symbol theory says knowledge is any communication between persons and it bears no ontological similarity to its objects (except if it becomes its own object), it only has more or less reality congruence

Part 7.2

- Descartes considered the question of whether the world as we know it was an illusion. This is a strange quarrel.
- Humanity could not survive if not the knowledge obtained by observing the world in which they lived.
- But make no mistake. It is humanity that learns, not individuals. Individuals contribute on the margin by adding new knowledge in a path dependent process and transmitting it by language
- All language communication transmits knowledge
  - Language/ knowledge is seen as an actualisation of a biological potential. It is a process linking nature and culture
  - Whether and how far do components of language, standardised as symbols, correspond to that which they are intended to symbolize. This shifts the focus from the individual knower to the group and from the stationary frame of reference to the process of creating reality congruence
  - Accumulation of knowledge confers survival benefits on the group and travels easily to other groups

Part 7.3

- There is tradition for disregarding the long process of knowledge growth in theoretical discussions
- Scientific inquiry represented a breakthrough in the quest for reality congruent knowledge but it was building on a long development of writing, reading and transmission of knowledge by means of symbols
- In theories of knowledge this is difficult to account for. Maybe because of the assumption of individualism in acquisition of knowledge
- Path dependence in development of knowledge must be recognized
- Our ways of thinking and perceiving the world around us is channelled by the socially standardised language we have made our means of communication
- To understand consciousness we must shed the conception of humans as containers of thoughts well separated from the outrside world
- Consciousness builds on knowledge. It representes the condition where stored sound symbols an be mobilized at will

Part 7.4

- The correspondence between symbols and facts cannot be determined. It is an unanswerable question
- The question assumes a static and finite world that can be known in its entirety to a person
- Hegel's and Comte's attempts at synthesis were premature, but had impacts on e.g. Marx, Durkheim, but later scholars returned to the individualism of Descartes and Kant. Their reputation has blocked later efforts at synthesising a theory of knowledge development
- Individual dependence on received knowledge is elastic but never absent
- The developmental path of the fund of knowledge seen as a group characteristic is needed to understand the individual innovations.
- We need process models of knowledge development

Part 8.1

- Communication by means of a language played a key role in the emergence of a distinctly human way of life
- Naming all things in the heavens and on the earth was an exceptional asset conferring survival value
- Languages contain classificatory schemes, categories, models of relationships between events (real or thought to be real), and possible explanations of events
- As classifications and categories appear unfitting they may under certain circumstances be changed or replaced by new symbols
- Humans live in a 5-dimensional world: position in space, time, and in the symbolical world of a speaker of a language
- A spoken language impacts the speakers' image of the world in which they live (see also Mary Douglas)
- How does this relate to the natural a priori of transcendental philosophers?

Part 8.2

- Reason or logic may be seen as natural a priori phenomena interposing themselves between the owner of a mind and the world the subject seeks to learn about
- Seeing the glittering garland of words interposing themselves between subject and object of knowledge might be seen as a social parallel to this
- That is not the case even though language as a factor of cognition may both lead and mislead due to its development over generations
- Language must be seen as a beginningless process, learned as part of a biologically conditioned individual development within a language group
- The process by which we acquire language may be concealed by the unspoken assumptions within the language. Children learn to talk, we say. We do not focus on the language they learn

Part 8.3

- The assumption of a congenital defect, which eternally casts doubt on the human capacity to recognize the world as it is, is inherently improbable. The rise of the human species to dominate the world says otherwise
- It is odd that philosophers find a hearing for a doctrine suggesting a congenital defect of the human means of orientation
- In fact, orientation by means of intergenerational accumulated and expanded knowledge is probably the best, the most efficient of the various techniques of orientation with which living creatures have been endowed by the blind evolutionary processes of nature

Part 9.1

- The world
  - Is independent of but includes ourselves
  - Is mediated for our understanding by a web of human made symbolic representations acquired through social learning
  - The representation my become more or less reality congruent
- Languages are quite unlike that which they symbolically represent
- They constitute a layer of the human world which is unique
- All the symbols imply relationships
  - Connecting the user and the various aspects of the world
  - Contextualising various objects through symbols
- Every language is an heirloom produced by countless generations
  - The power individuals have to alter a language is limited
  - The fortune of the group determine the fortune of their language

Part 9.2

- The language-knowledge complex
  - Those who know (the subjects)
  - That which they know (their knowledge)
  - That of which something is known (the objects)
- Its ontological status is open in current debates
- Here language, knowledge, and thought are seen as aspects of the same phenomenon
  - The possibility for soundless manipulation of sound patterns does not alter this
  - Communication transmits knowledge by means of language and translation of knowledge from one language to another does not alter this
- Theories of knowledge focusing on science after 1500 are failures. We need theories encompassing all kinds in an evolutionary time perspective. Including
  - Fantasy knowledge as well as reality congruent knowledge
  - Humans can regulate their behaviour based on fantasy knowledge

Part 9.3

- In our past: “Myth closed the gaps of their realistic knowledge. It protected them from the horror of having to know how much they did not know.” (p. 133)
- Today reality congruent knowledge plays a dominant part, but fantasy has not gone away
- A theory of knowledge focusing on the knowledge function of sound symbols requires humanity as its frame of development and the development of humanity as its dynamic
  - Shifts in to more or less reality congruence is then possible and facts show the knowledge of nature has moved towards more reality congruence
  - This indicates why the concept “reality congruence” is better than “truth”
  - The interpersonal aspect of knowledge is brough into focus

Part 9.4

- Science methods had a breakthrough about AD1500-1600 but it would have been impossible and incomprehensible without the antecedent advances in antiquity and in the Middle Ages
- Using humanity as a whole makes the growth of reality congruent knowledge obvious. Maybe because of its survival value
- Four stages can be suggested
  - 1. First phase of priest-dominated knowledge (c. late fourth millennium – sixth century BC)
  - 2. First phase of secular knowledge (c. sixth century BC – fourth century AD)
  - 3. Second phase of priest-dominated knowledge (c. fourth century AD – fifteenth century AD)
  - 4. Second phase of secular knowledge (c. fifteenth century AD —)
- A key event was the development of writing during the fourth millennium BC
- Shifts from secular to priest dominated development did not throw out previous knowledge developments but there were shifts in emphasis on reality congruence
- Development of knowledge is closely linked to development of states (Sumer, Egypt, Babylon)
- A key development in period 3 (second priest period) was the reliance on the authority of a book

Part 9.5

- Why was it possible in the Sumero-European tradition for secular groups to break the priest-controlled knowledge process twice and create a dominating knowledge tradition of their own?
- Two aspects of the symbol theory:
  - Various survival units as kin group/ lineage, tribe, or nation-state is here replaced by continental groups of states and ultimately humanity
    - Comparing humans to animals brings out language as means of communication and the fund of knowledge as means of orientation as our most distinguishing feature
  - The theory extends the field of vision into the past
    - This includes the development of planned discoveries of reality congruent knowledge
    - Hypothesis: first a phase of audible communication then this is augmented by visible symbols (writing). The first phase is intertwined with biological changes, the second is a social development with major impact on the intergenerational transmission of knowledge

Part 9.6

- Two key questions are: how did humanity come into being? and what are its distinguishing characteristics compared with its more animalic forebears? (p. 144)
  - Orientation with a social fund of knowledge and ability to act on learned knowledge are most important
  - Usually it is mentioned things like upright gait, bifocal vision, reason, mind, intellect, rationality
  - These all point to the self-reliant individual. Differences at group level are more important. Unlike animals human societies can change dramatically without changing its genetic makeup
  - Human biology has prepared us to live in groups, in society. To understand this we need to understand aspects of evolution
- And the future of humankind?
  - We are just at the takeoff in accumulation of knowledge and communication! There is a future of some 4000 million years to contemplate