History and Sociology:

Problems and Methods of Synthesis

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to resolve the difficulties inherent in combining the history and sociology disciplines.

The need for such resolution arises out of my proposed Interdisciplinary Master's Programme dealing with the history of Indian/non-Indian relations in The Pas, Manitoba from first contact until the present. A fundamental premise of this study is that in order to write a history of interethnic relations, one must use the anthropological perspective and the sociological theories on intergroup relations developed by social scientists in order to correctly interpret the historical data on the subject. Not being formally trained in either sociology or history, I had perhaps naively taken for granted that the conjunction of the two would not only be logical, but a relatively simple matter of combining complementary methodologies and theories.

However, in beginning a review of the secondary literature, it soon became apparent that sociological history (or if you will historical sociology) was nothing if not controversial. A large body of literature has built up around the problems involved in the cooperation of the two disciplines. Indeed, there is a corresponding body of literature dealing with the difficulties in combining anthropology and history. However, this paper will focus primarily on the relationship between history and sociology.

In short, therefore, before undertaking to study the interethnic relations in question, it became necessary to resolve (for my own purposes at least) the difficulties identified in the literature concerning the proposed interdisciplinary approach. Unfortunately, it is not the case that, as first assumed, the difficulties were merely the result of disciplinary chauvinism; of scholars attempting to enhance their own status or to protect their own "turf". There have been a number of
problem areas identified, some more critical than others, and some in fact invalid.

There is near unanimity in both disciplines that more cooperation between history and sociology is needed. Erikson (1970:331) among others would agree with historian E. H. Carr (1961:66) when he states:

...the more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both. Let the frontier between them be kept open for two way traffic.

Indeed, Cochran (1954:13), Hobshawm (1971:26) and Jones (1976:295) report that interdisciplinary cooperation continues growing apace. However, many others such as Zaret (1978:114), Sherif and Sherif, as well as Jones himself agree that, despite all the verbiage and tentative efforts at cooperation, boundaries remain as rigid as ever, traditional conceptions remain unchallenged, and little serious attention is paid to the potential for cooperation.

Indeed, much of the literature examining the possibilities of cooperation is taken up with criticisms of the disciplines' opposite number. In brief, historians regard sociology to be "ahistorical", even "anti-historical", for ignoring time perspective (Cochran 1954:24; Pitt 1972:vi) and historical data and methodology (Barnes 1961:239; Stern 1959:35). Even when historical analysis is attempted, sociologists are criticized for their naive and uncritical handling of the task (Stern 1959:34; Gottschalk 1969:266, 272-3; Lipset 1968:20). Sociology is also seen by historians as jargon-ridden (Aronson 1969:297, 299) and overly preoccupied with measurement and methodology to the detriment of necessary historical perspective (Hodges 1971:15). Sociologists' reliance on theory, models and generalizations is also distrusted by historians (Gottschalk 1969:274) because they ignore the unique cases of history and are seen as tending to force data to fit their hypotheses (Cochran 1954:27; Hofstadter 1968:12).

One criticism directly relevant to the purpose of the study in question is that of Conviser and Fararo (1973:158) who state:

Speaking critically but descriptively, we would say
that contemporary empirical sociology studies current historical processes without well-defined abstract models of the sociological processes embedded in the historical processes. The result is an inadequate rendering of the more concrete historical facts and an incoherence in the sociological analysis.

(The differences in levels of abstraction will be examined in more detail below).

On the other hand, historians also receive their share of censure from sociologists. In turn, they are criticized for ignoring advances in the concepts and methodology of sociology, relying instead merely on unscientific "common sense" judgements on the social processes and structures under consideration (Lipset 1968:22; Kroeber 1963:117; Bulmer 1974:145). The often-quoted criticism of E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1962:50) is simply that historians have not learned how to treat historical material sociologically (i.e. "scientifically"). Sociologists object to the historians' tendency to focus exclusively on the "unique" aspects of a situation while ignoring obvious and significant generalities (Schmerhorn 1970:94; Nisbet 1968:93). The lack of systematic rigour (i.e. "science") and a tendency toward impressionistic, and even conjectural, explanation in history is also disparaged (Halpern 1957:7; Schlesinger 1962:768). In general, the state of historical methodology is seen by sociologists as being "stagnant", and resulting in "qualitatively inferior findings" (Holloway 1963:155; Kroeber 1963:182).

Such charges and counter charges about perceived biases and scholarly isolation go on ad nauseum in the literature, however, those criticisms mentioned above seem to be the most salient. In the end analysis, as pointed out by Holloway (1963:155), both disciplines are open to criticism for their attempts at explanation relying exclusively on either present or antecedent factors. Both approaches are said to be lacking and even misleading. A complementary cooperation seems called for.

In the literature a great deal of emphasis is placed on the differences between history and sociology. Chirot (1976) outlines a number of these. One of the most often mentioned is the contrast between the aims of generalizing in sociology as opposed to particularizing in history (Cahnman and Baskoff 1964:3). Stress is placed on the "ideographic" nature of history as
contrasted with the "nomothetic" nature of sociology. Hofstadder (1956:367) explains that nomothetic science is involved in developing generalized laws concerning repeatable events, whereas ideographic science seeks to understand unique and non-recurring events.

On the other hand, many scholars such as Stinchcombe (1978:ix) maintain that this distinction is largely an illusory one. Cahnman and Baskoff (1964:4) assert that this is a spurious distinction arising out of a "misunderstanding, or distrust, of scientific procedures and objectives". They argue further that uniqueness of facts is a concept achieved largely through ignoring points of similarity among all facts. Uniqueness and generality are not characteristic elements of given facts, they are instead only analytical modes of dealing with facts. Lipset (1968:34) explains: "The fact, however, that a combination of circumstances occurs uniquely or rarely does not mean that its conditions cannot be presented in terms of general concepts or categories." Indeed, Carr (1961:62-66) and Cohn (1968:99) have identified a number of levels of generalizations within history itself. As Erikson (1970:333) points out, a regular pattern cannot be distinguished from the unique unless both are studied. Postan (1971:16-18) maintains that the concept of the non-repeatable character of historical occurrence is a myth. Evans-Pritchard (1961:4) states:

The truth of the matter is this: both sociological historians and social anthropologists are fully aware that any event has the characters of uniqueness and of generality, and that in an interpretation of it both have to be given consideration. If the specificity of the history is lost, the generalization about it becomes so general as to be useless... On the other hand, events lose much, if not all, of their meaning if they are not seen as having some degree of regularity and constancy, as belonging to a certain type of event, all instances of which have many features in common.

Zaret (1978:118) continues the argument.

As traditional historiography -- concerned with chronologies of events -- declines in relation to new analytical historiographics, disciplinary distinctions become increasingly superfluous. Analytic historiography obviates the ideographic/nomothetic cleavage between history and sociology.
A related difference between history and sociology is stated in terms of history's avoidance of theory (Lewis 1968:x). However, even historians such as Cochran et al. (1954:132, 139-40) maintain that theory and the use of working hypotheses in history are in fact unavoidable. The very ability to ask questions of historical data implies incipient hypotheses. Zaret (1978:118) maintains "...the rise of sociological history has implicitly undermined the separation of a-historical theory and atheoretical history". It therefore seems as if this long-held distinction is no longer operative, if it ever was.

As is pointed out by Erikson (1970) various other differences are also losing their force. However, other authors point to different types and amounts of data, differing means of access to this data (Hofstadter 1956:368-9; Erikson 1970:107), as well as different methodologies (Mead 1951:9; Evans-Pritchard 1961:17). Many authors such as Cahnman and Baskoff (1964:2) attempt to dissociate history from sociology on grounds that the latter "creates its own data" while the former does not (Wilson 1971:107). Nevertheless, Carr (1961:21) quotes Carl Becker as he states: "...the facts of history do not exist for any historian till he creates them." In actuality therefore, both disciplines "create their own data" whether it be through "historical sense" selective judgements or through social scientific sampling.

One significant difference between sociology and history lies in the types of abstractions employed by the two disciplines. Zaret (1978:118) makes the distinction between abstractions in historically grounded theory which are referred to as "determinate", as opposed to sociology's ideal abstractions about society which are "general" in nature. In concert with this categorization Burger (1977:167) cites Rickert's two principles of abstraction: 1) knowledge of general features of the world (sociological laws), and 2) knowledge of a few selected portions of the world in their concreteness (historical specificity). Burger also points out that any abstraction, whether it be historical or sociological, eliminates a part of reality. Logically then, assuming that in forming their abstractions history and sociology eliminate different parts of reality, we might conclude again that combining the two forms of abstraction would
result in a more complete conception of reality.

It seems clear, therefore, that, as Conviser and Fararo (1973:159) point out, it is not the processes of abstraction which are different; for both disciplines must abstract from concrete situations since reality has a much greater complexity than any discipline can accommodate; it is a matter of emphasis. The sociological process of abstraction focusses on the "potentially realizable" from the historical experience of concrete situations, while the historical process deals with the "realized" aspect of those situations (Conviser and Fararo 1973:160). Therefore, according to Conviser and Fararo (1973:163), in contrast to historical abstraction, sociological abstraction (i.e. laws, models, concepts etc.) can be studied apart from any concrete realizations (i.e. actual historical occurrences). Presumably this type of abstraction relates to Zaret's "general" abstractions which are generalizations about "realizable possibilities" in society, whereas his "determinate" abstractions are generalizations about historical "realized actualities".

Any confusion about the two types of abstractions can lead to what Conviser and Fararo (1973:164) term the "fallacy of misplaced generality". Care must be taken not to assume that sociological findings are generally applicable in the historical context since the theoretical process is not necessarily identical with historical realizations. This will be a critical consideration for the proposed study.

Such differences between the disciplines, however, seem to be offset to a large degree by the similarities identified. One important unifying factor is that of common origins. Zaret (1978:114) and Wilson (1971:101) make the point that the origins of academic sociology were very much tied up with the aims and viewpoint of history. Indeed, a number of scholars in both disciplines have successfully made a transfer. Max Weber and Neil Smelser come to mind.

At another fundamental level both history and sociology are entirely intellectual operations (Jones 1976:296) the objective of which is to analyse and explain human interaction (Cochran 1954:23, 87; Cahnman and Baskoff 1964:1-2). As well, both disciplines are attempting this explanation, an explana-
lies in extending the reach of both disciplines in terms of cooperation. Beyond this philosophical stance, the value of cooperation lies in the potential value of sociology and history to each other.

It is widely agreed, as Nisbet (1960:17) puts it, "...a paradox..." if the present can only be understood retrospectively, when it has become the past, the past can only be understood in light of the present.

The literature also places a great deal of importance on the potential value of sociology and history to each other, as Nisbet (1960:17) puts it, "...a paradox...".

In general, Stern (1959:33), Evans-Fritchard (1962:62), and Cochrane (1969:21) all stress one or more aspects of similarity over differences.

Knowledge of the present can be as important to an understanding of the past as that of the past to the present. Evans-Fritchard (1961:17) goes so far as to establish the following paradox: 'The difference is one or degree rather than one of kind.'

In the former (Pitt 1972:9; Gotschall 1969:268, 271; Kreber 1969:127), the difference is one of degree rather than one of kind.

Many authors now recognize that both sociology and history use generalizations, models, hypotheses, sociological concepts and theory, they are merely less obvious in the latter than in the former (Pitt 1972:9; Gotschall 1969:268, 271; Kreber 1969:127).

Contrary to some, but in agreement with Sherif and Sherif (1959:7) and Buimer (1974:144), Briggs (1967:94) maintains that both history and sociology deal with the same problems by using data, which in the end analysis, are all historical.

Cochran (1954:42) points out that historical research is concerned with social change, and therefore, spans the field of sociology, only seen in longitudinal time perspective.
available data, methodology and modes of analysis. Pitt (1972:10) notes an increasing use by historians of empirical materials collected by social scientists. Conversely, the use of historical data has extended the range of evidence available to social scientists (Cochran 1954:87).

Cooperation also produces mutual improvements in the standards of rigour in both disciplines. The scientific methods of sociology improve the organizational (Cochran 1954:107), quantitative (Wilson 1971:109) and logical standards of history (Carr 1961:85; Schlesinger 1962:768); while historians have provided sociologists with more rigorous methods of dealing with documents (Wolff 1959:34). In this light, the major importance of cooperation is in testing the validity of generalizations of each discipline (Gottschalk 1969:263, 267; Sherif and Sherif 1969:5, 13). The more data that can be brought to bear, the more analytical devices that can be used, to check each other's explanations, the better for the validity of both.

A general broadening of concepts such as social group, role and class for example, in use among historians is noted by Nisbet (1968:97), Zaret (1978:119) and Cahnman and Baskoff (1964:5). As Aronson (1969:301) indicates, sociological theory can suggest relations among historical phenomena that have hitherto gone unnoticed by historians. In turn, the concepts of historical causation are also bolstered by sociology (Cochran 1954:110).

Hofstadter (1956:363) asserts that social science helps the historian to join traditional narrative with analysis in a more effective way. He continues:

Perhaps the most important function which the social sciences can perform for the historian is that they provide means, in some cases, indispensable means, by which he can be brought into working relation with certain aspects of the modern intellectual climate. They bring to him a fresh store of ideas with which to disturb the excessively settled routines of his thought; but they also serve a catalytic function for him: they show him how he may adapt for his own purposes certain modern insights into human behaviour and character which he cannot, on his own, immediately and directly appropriate (Hofstadter 1956:363).

Scholars in both disciplines have a role to play in distilling for their opposite numbers the outcomes of research in their
own fields. Contrary to some historians who maintain for example that no secondary historical source can ever be accepted without extensive historiographic checks, Gottschalk (1969:273) allows that sociologists should not be criticized for using historians' own analyses of primary and original sources (although they tend to do so without sufficient skepticism). Scholars who work in both fields need not be expected to be experts in both. Although Cochran (1954:32) maintains that integrating history and sociology is an individual task, others recommend cooperative team efforts.

On sociology's part in particular, the concept of time depth is an important one for understanding the working of institutions and society (Lewis 1968:xviii; Chirot 1976:239).

If sociology and history are so similar, and if their cooperation is deemed so valuable by scholars in both fields, then what are the problems which seem to be preventing this synthesis? Shibutani and Kwan (1965:134) rather vaguely indicate that there are a number of unresolved difficulties. In terms directly relevant to the proposed study of interethnic relations, Schermerhorn (1970:195), in concurring with Lipset (1968:25) and Hodgen (1974:15), states:

While it is possible to draw broad distinctions between the two periods [modern vs historic], one cannot, in all confidence, assert that a paradigm with relevance to modern societies can apply to earlier ones that lack the structural characteristics that may have been taken for granted in setting up the initial scheme.

Hodgen (1974:24; 96) is critical of a pronounced superficiality in approach to cooperative ventures, claiming that neither discipline has come to grips with the differences between "descriptive historical" and "scientific" procedures.

Neither historians nor sociologists read or learn much about the other discipline in their training and, as a result, both are left to develop stereotyped misunderstandings about each other (Aronson 1969:294, 297; Thrupp 1957:11). Bulmer (1974:138) and Cochran (1956:349) indicate that mutual distrust, tradition and personalities (especially among British scholars) results in a lack of "intellectual dialogue" and communication. In turn, this prevents resolving the difficulties inherent in the semantics differences between the two disciplines (Francis 1976:2; Hofstadter
(1968:11). According to Erikson (1970:333-4), there are conflicting directions of analysis: sociology is geared to making lateral connections between variables while history deals with longitudinal continuities.

From all of the above, therefore, it seems obvious that interdisciplinary cooperation, the synthesis of history and sociology, is not such a simple matter. The foregoing has been a distillation of the differences and problems which seem to have militated against the effective cooperation of the two disciplines. What follows is an examination of solutions which have been suggested to improve the level and quality of interdisciplinary cooperation.

The first steps toward successful cooperation according to Sherif and Sherif (1969:15) and Aronson (1969:297) is to clearly define the relations between the two. Cahnman and Baskoff (1964:8) begin this task by identifying two major approaches to cooperation. First is the use of sociological concepts for describing historical situations and problems. In this approach for example, one important means supplied by sociology to describe historical actuality is content analysis (Cochran 1954:54). In general, historical interpretations can make reference to the role of pertinent sociological and cultural variables such as structure, stratification and demographics.

The second approach uses historical data for illustrating testing and strengthening the validity of sociological concepts and theories (Stinchcombe 1978:23; Aronson 1969:294-5). Indeed, Schermerhorn (1970:93) indicates that there is a strong case to be made for longitudinal analysis as an indispensable component of all sociological explanation.

These two strategies have several implications for methodology. As Francis (1976:2) and Schermerhorn (1970:195) assert, alternation between the two perspectives, that is a "dialectical" approach, is required. Mead (1951:11) indicates that it is critical that both disciplines experience each others' methods. Bulmer (1974:144) refers to the necessary "dialogue" (about problems, not facts) between sociological and historical interpretations. Dark (1957) has set out a number of possible methods for accomplishing this synthesis by using a balanced
synchronic and diachronic approach. It cannot be assumed that explanations focusing exclusively on antecedent factors (historical) or on present ones (sociological) can be sufficient (Nisbet 1968:98). In describing Durkheim's approach, Bellah (1964:89) states:

...although Durkheim stresses that only currently operative variables can be accepted as causes of social phenomena, he insists with equal vehemence that such variables can only be understood by a comparative analysis involving recourse to history. So in Durkheim's mature view there are not two alternative modes of explanation of sociological phenomena, one in terms of sociological function, the other in terms of the historic past. There is only one method of explanation, at once both sociological and historical.

It is apparent that to be successful, both disciplines must accept compromise in traditional approaches, methodologies and theory. Social scientists must be prepared to withstand historical exceptions to their generalizations and historians must understand in sociological terms the problems they are investigating (Gottschalk 1969:267). Historians may also have to abandon their normal narrative sequence in using social science's approaches. On the other hand, Bulmer (1974:144) and Lipset (1968:52) stress that sociologists cannot expect that historical sociology will be able to validate hypotheses with the rigour normally associated with the concept of "science."

One of the most sticky problems is the role of theory. However, Lipset (1968:51), in agreement with Cahnman and Baskoff (1964:5), asserts that there is not necessarily a clash between developing general social hypotheses and taking historical specificity into account. Indeed, Hodgen (1974:36) quotes philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum as he states: "...no historical event could be described, much less could it be in any sense explained, if it were wholly unique."

In general, both disciplines are urged to become more self-critical from the viewpoint of their opposite number (Evans-Pritchard 1962:50). Both disciplines must also look more closely at their respective biases and make these biases explicit (Erikson 1970:337; Pitt 1972:52). Interdisciplinary communication must be increased, training must include more about the other disciplines, and semantic difficulties must be
cleared up, if not by an unwieldy cross-disciplinary task force, then by the individual researcher (Cochran 1954:35; Aronson 1969:293). Francis (1976:5) goes so far as to suggest the need for a completely new language to deal with interdisciplinary concepts and terms.

What then are the implications for the study proposed at the outset of this paper? First and foremost it is necessary to clarify the relationship between history and sociology. This paper has made an attempt at this task. As systems of abstraction, history and sociology eliminate parts of reality. It is argued that the elements not eliminated by history and sociology respectively (uniqueness in the former, generality in the latter) are indeed complementary. Historical particularities of the Indian/non-Indian relations in The Pas will be used to test the theory of interethnic relations. The historical data will be used to test theories such as conflict vis-à-vis structural-functional explanations of intergroup relations.

As Schermerhorn and others have suggested the study will alternate between the historical and sociological perspectives using Dark's (1957) "cultural continuity" type of synthesis. Historical documentation will be checked against oral histories obtained by interviewing Indian and non-Indian informants about their perceptions of the relationship between the two groups. In other words, the main thrust of the study, besides outlining the historical development of interethnic relations in The Pas, will be to dialectically see how far (in Conviser and Fararo's terms) "concrete realizations" match the "potentially realizable" generalizations of the sociological abstractions on interethnic relations. Interpretation of the narrative flow of events will be interpreted in light of a sociological as well as historical explanation of causation. Of course, a terminological synthesis will be made at the outset.

In short, both approaches as identified in the literature will be employed. Historical data will be used to test the theories of ethnic relations and in turn these theoretical outlines will be used to organize and interpret the historical data. In the end analysis, it is argued that a simple increased awareness of the potential contributions of combining the two
perspectives, the potential for broadening the analysis and therefore making a more wholistic and complete explanation, must be the basis for synthesis.

In conclusion, it has be demonstrated by scholars such as Francis that a synthesis of history and sociology is possible and, indeed, a valuable exercise. If valid in this broad context, it should also be possible to demonstrate effective cooperation in the micro-context of The Pas. Although there are still many reservations, a strong case can be made for the fundamental similarity and compatability of history and sociology. Continued resistance to their fullest cooperation seems clearly to indicate the disciplinary chauvinism feared at the outset of this paper.

Nevertheless, it seems obvious that what is demanded is a flexibility and openness to new and different data, methods, concepts, and outlooks. Rigid boundaries and specious distinctions seriously narrow the scope of possibilities unnecessarily. Valuable insights are available to both disciplines from their opposite number. The only logical solution is to share them. This sharing, however, must take place in as rigorous and demanding atmosphere as possible to obviate the types of criticisms which have arisen over earlier naive efforts at cooperation. Sociologists and historians must broaden their understandings of each other if their mutual claims for taking in the whole of human experience are to be validated.

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