When we ask for an explanation, what we want is the answer to a why question: Why are there so many weeds growing in your garden? Why did the French Revolution occur? Why do African Americans have lower intergenerational mobility rates than whites? Why does Haley’s Comet return every 76 years? Why did you order the steak? The key point is that explanations are answers to such questions: “an explanation is not the same as a proposition, or an argument, or a list of propositions; it is an answer. (Analogously, a son is not the same as a man, even if all sons are men, and every man is a son).”

As an answer to a question, an explanation does something that may seem strange when stated as a goal of science but is, in fact, second nature to us as actors in the world: it narrowly focuses attention and communicates information. In other words, given a phenomenon in the world, an explanation throws away almost all of the qualities of the phenomenon and related phenomena, almost all of the chains of causality that sit behind it, and almost all of the patterns/mechanisms/schemas of which it is a part or a manifestation of. The question of how we focus our attention in this way, and select aspects of the world to retain inside our narrow beam of focus, is the essence of any account of explanation.

In the pragmatist view, when we explain in sociology, we are not departing radically from the more mundane explanatory questions-and-answers of everyday life, but rather developing a more disciplined, cultivated, and effective capacity to judge when and how a why-question is well-defined, to know whether an answer on offer is both true and a good answer, and finally, to understand the relationship between a good explanatory answer and previously possessed knowledge at the time of the utterance. Thus, examining how we construct answerable why-questions and how we decide what good answers are is one way of examining the pragmatics of sociological knowledge.
The fundamental aspect of why questions about which philosophers agree is that both good questions and good answers are good relative to context and purpose. “Why did you order the steak?” has very different meaning, and admits very different answers, that are evaluated differently, when asked…

- by one friend of another friend when both have been vegetarians for 20 years;
- by one colleague of another when the asker is new to the restaurant and the reply comes from someone who is a regular;
- by a spouse who is encouraging his or her partner to lose weight;

In the latter case, the evaluation of a “good” answer may be a point of controversy indeed— in the movie Enough Said, James Gandolfini’s character explains that he used to eat just to anger his ex-wife.

The question is how far thinking in these terms can get us when we replace everyday action with the extended format of debate that takes place within the communities of inquiry in sociology. My hope is that at a minimum this allows a fresh view of some classic issues in sociology; more radically, I will suggest that it connects to the collective pragmatics (intellectual and institutional) of organizing sociological research.

1. The elements of well-defined why-questions

Formally, a why-question contains three elements: a topic (which, despite its odd name, is loosely equivalent to what philosophers call the “explanandum” and Merton might call a well-established—and well-written-up—phenomenon), a set of foils, and finally some relevance criteria. These components of why questions are the subject of much dispute and language-game-play in analytic philosophy. Most of that work is fascinating, but of minimal use to a working sociologist. Here I introduce the terms as scaffolding for thinking about sociological inferences and arguments.

Topic: A question presupposes that its topic must be true. A topic, however, can vary wildly in its level of generality or its scope. There are no ex ante restrictions concerning topics; they merely have describe phenomena in the world. So, we can easily imagine a why question about a very particular topic in response to which we answer with extremely general statements, and vice versa. Circumstances may be such that
when you ask why there was a fire in the lab you will get an answer having to do with the physical properties of some of the materials being used (presumably you are not a chemist and you ask a chemist, among other things). On the other hand, circumstances may be such that you ask a question about the modern world concerning the structure of states and the lives of billions of people living under them, and the answer features prominently the battle of Waterloo.

Foils: Well-defined why questions have powerful rather than clauses. We want to know: why did Obama, rather than Clinton, win the Democratic nomination in 2008? We are already, perhaps, satisfied with our extant answers to the question of why Obama rather than Kucinich, took the nomination. And we already know why only one person can win the Democratic nomination for president. Note, however, that why questions with the same topic but different foils can (rather obviously) have different answers. The issue can be taken further: it could be that the answer to the “Why Obama rather than Clinton” question points to a different kind or type of thing in the world than does the answer to the “Why Obama rather than Kucinich” question, and we may want to make scholarly hay out of the difference.

In a certain sense, the foils of a why-question represent a rather obvious aspect of thinking about explanations—what could be more clear than asking why unemployment is at 5% rather than 8%, as it was before? But, however much this accords with our basic intuition that explanations both everyday and sociological are comparative, it nonetheless raises some tricky issues. In particular, foils are false, which means we are in the land of counterfactuals—we are asking why employment is at 5% now, rather than at 8% now.

So, note first that in this account of explanation, what is really being explained is the entire contrast class, made up of the topic and (a finite number of) foils, rather than the merely the topic itself. When we explain, we direct our account at the important differences between the members of the set \{t, f_1, f_2, \ldots f_n\} as we understand them. In his treatise on why questions and the pragmatics of explanation, Alan Garfinkel hammers away at this point for many pages. Our foremost concern in explanation is: “our need to have a
limited negation, a determinate sense of what will count as the consequent’s ‘not’ happening. Lacking such a determinate sense of alternatives, one has difficulty seeing how we could give explanations at all; they would have to be so all encompassing as to be impossible.***

This is the pragmatist response to the empiricist or “Humean” model of causality (made famous by David Lewis\(^5\)) that I think it is important for sociology to absorb. The initial philosophy of counterfactual causation led to endless regression: no protozoa, no French Revolution. In other words, we have a concrete particular in front of us, and then behind it “events” and a series of absurdities. (If only I had skipped breakfast, I would not have gotten into that car accident—never mind that I was going 110 mph). The pragmatics of why questions is an attempt to build a response to this problem and the problems that seem to inevitably arise when we try to fix it.\(^6\) For, when we reach for explanation, we in fact engage in a set of communicative actions with others designed precisely to limit and contain this infinity of possibilities. We do this by determining, among ourselves as actors-in-the-world, what should “count” as a phenomenon or event and which negations of the event are the really important ones to contrast with the topic. The flurry of communication in sociological research concerning the elaboration and use of concepts, the establishment of phenomena, and the framing of research questions and results is, I propose our struggle to limit and refine why questions.

**Relevance criteria**

As we develop the contrasts we care about en route to a well defined why-question, we tend to also develop a sense about what will qualify as a relevant answer, but the two issues are not exactly the same. Even when we agree on a good contrast, we still argue about the criteria by which we will judge an answer to the question that differentiates the topic from the foils to be better or worse. To see this, consider the following fantastical but useful scenario.

A group of historical sociologists comes together, and, stunningly, decides that they know what counts as the French Revolution (if certain key events had occurred 1788 instead of 1789, leading to a
slightly different trajectory, that would count; 1750, not so much; much angry debate about The Directorate is finally resolved on day 19 of the conference...). Furthermore, they decide that a good why-question about the French Revolution—not the only one, but a good one—can have as its foils “revolution in England but not in France in the 1780s,” and “revolution in Prussia but not in France in the 1780s.” In other words, they ask “Why was there a revolution in France rather than in England or Prussia in the 1780s?” Having significantly exhausted themselves, said sociologists return from a two week vacation to try to answer said question. During those two weeks, however, a wise and industrious comparative scholar has calculated the ration of wine to beer consumption in the 30 years leading up to 1789 in France, England, and Prussia. Thus as part II of the conference begins, he stands up and announces that he has discovered that this ratio varies between but not very much within, the countries. And thus he says “I have differentiated topic from foils, so there is your explanation!” What is wrong with his answer?

It is not a relevant fact, we would say. Or, feeling generous, we say, “we need a lot more convincing that this tells us something relevant.” What do we mean by this? I think we mean, in this case at least, that it is not at all clear that this ratio denotes a part of the causal history whereby the difference between topic and foils was precipitated. We need convincing that this is useful, that it explains something about grain prices, etc. Thus, having spent years determining the appropriate contrast we still have work to do. What makes for a relevant answer?

Philosophical dispute on relevance criteria is intense, and immediately invokes matters entirely unsettled in sociology: the relationship between causality and prediction, whether explanations need to be understandable to the actors who are being explained, and our desire to explain in terms that allow certain kinds of future action or intervention on the phenomenon at hand. These are important questions, worthy of their own paper, but I would note here that they are all responses to the impossibility of providing a “neutral” rendering of the infinity of causes behind a given concrete event, class of events, or well-established phenomenon. And, as the example perhaps already indicates, it would appear that a great deal
of theoretical work in sociology is, in fact, dedicated not only to constructing the object of inquiry, but specifying the appropriate, small set of why questions that need answers. Pragmatism suggests that the way in which we do this theory-work is related to our own concerns as actors in the world, looking towards future action.

2. Three theses on why-questions in sociology

Let us pick some classic studies in sociology and turn them into why questions. This will not by itself resolve any issues, but it will perhaps make the ensuing discussion more concrete. Note how much these questions vary, both in terms of their empirical scope, and in their tendency to use abstract language.

Consider the following:

--Why were there revolutions in France, Russia, and China, rather than in England, Prussia, and Japan?
--Why do African Americans have lower, rather than equal or almost equal, educational outcomes than whites in the 21st century USA?
--Why did American imperial power decline, rather than rise or maintain itself, in the second half of the twentieth century?
--Why did Gary, Indiana address its environmental problems later than, rather than at the approximately the same time as, Eastern Chicago?
--Why is labor in the global apparel industry overwhelmingly female, rather than gender-mixed, or overwhelmingly male?
--Why do capitalists pay workers at a rate less than the value they add to a product through their labor, rather than equal to that value?

Thesis 1: Many why-questions in sociology derive at least one of their foils from normative theory

The most obvious example here is Karl Marx, whose why question concerning the renumeration of labor is central to sociology’s history. The issue here is not (or not only) the presupposition or background knowledge of the labor theory of value. It is rather the following: if one’s why question is “why does the
industrial proletariat make barely a living wage rather than being fairly renumerated for their labor?” one is
directed towards the structure of capitalism itself and thus towards a causal theory of its overthrow; this is a
contrast derived from a socialist ideal. However, if one’s why question is “why does the industrial proletariat
make barely a living wage rather than enough to potentially send their children to college?” then one is
directed towards the dynamics of a labor market and towards union density; this is a contrast derived from a
liberal ideal, with a very different answer, both in terms of the causal history of the topic, and the actions to
be taken in the future.

My hypothesis is that this is an important way to think about normativity in social research more
generally. We might note that sociological studies of inequality are an area in which why questions tend to
have normative foils; Both the use of equality as a baseline contrast, and also the use of the notion of
decreasing inequality as a contrast, appear to be derived first from normative theory, even if, eventually, one or
the other can be mapped on to some previous, current or future moment in the American welfare state,
given the outcome of interest. Andrew Abbott makes a related argument, both about the concept of
individual life outcomes, and about inequality as a central sociological concept. The latter, he argues, often
effectively means “injustice” in sociological explanations, with the result that when sociologists write about
inequality, they are making a normative or political judgment. But—and this is the key point—Abbott does
not argue that this **disables** sociological explanation. Rather, it means that explanatory projects tend to have
certain assumptions about injustice encoded into the setup of their questions-and-answers: “the familiar
problems of linearity, addititivity and generality are thus not only practical issues about the measurement of
injustice, but also normative questions.”

**Thesis 2:** In single-case studies in sociology theoretical interpretation of the case itself is used to develop the contrast class.

What does it mean to “apply theory” to a case? There is much debate about this issue, especially in
sociological ethnography. One thing that has been missed in these debates is how common it is that, in
intensive case studies, contrasts are deployed as an interpretive rendering of ‘how things could have gone,’
or as a way to describe ‘expectations of the investigator that were upset by the evidence.’ For single-case studies, these contrasts form part of implicit or explicit why questions—e.g. why working-class kids get working-class jobs, why certain people devote all of their spare energy to engaging opera, etc.¹⁴ That is, theory helps develop not only the interpretation of the topic, but also the development of the contrast class into a clear and distinct object of explanation. How does this work? At least sometimes, it appears to develop via the use of theoretical language, fused with some but not all aspects of the case, to create an effective contrast.

In his retrospective account of his own work on art worlds, Howard Becker makes a version of this argument, though the role of theory is somewhat obscured, because it is also an argument about comparison. He explains that he picked up the abstract rendering, by Rolande Moulins, of the “black box” of art worlds as places where aesthetic value and economic value were indistinguishable to the actors involved. He then used this account—based itself in a case study of a specific art world (classical paintings in Paris), but abstracted into a theory of value in art markets—and used it to interpret New York, thus enabling the development of a theoretical imaginary from which New York diverged, and then offering concepts to explain the divergence. In case study research of many kinds, the art or “craft” of inquiry often appears to be the non-obvious choices involved in creating these running counterfactuals of the type “if theory X were operative here…” To construct such a world, one must “keep” certain details of the case intact, while distorting others via theoretical imagination. Case studies may also combine normatively and analytically derived counterfactuals.¹⁵

Thesis 3: The distinction between “why” and “how” is not ontological, but sociologists often act as if it is.

The difference between how and why often appears in the introduction to sociological texts as a matter of almost metaphysical import, distinguishing how sociologists think about the world to the point of incommensurability. For example, in the introduction to Genders in Production, Leslie Salzinger argues that the question “why is factory labor in the global south feminized?” is fundamentally different from the question
of “how is factory labor feminized, in different regions of Mexico?” In her text, this indicates an epistemic alienation from the “explanatory” questions of feminist political economy, and their replacement with more “interpretive” methods and discursive theories of gender.

But it is not clear that the divide is really this wide. Salzinger’s study could be thought of as a series of why questions along these lines:

Given that there is a gendered element to the global labor market for factory work…

-- why is it feminized in manner A in region X, rather than manner B in region X?

--why is it feminized manner B in region Y, rather than manner A in region Y?

--why is it relatively degendered in region Z, rather than feminized in manner A or in manner B?

The answers to these why questions in her study point to process, meaning, and interpretation, and, in particular, to the gendered imaginaries of certain factory managers in Mexico as the key links in the history of the phenomena she studies (that is, the different ways in which work is gendered on the factory floor).

To claim allegiance to “how” questions signals, in many sociological communities of inquiry, a dedication to a theory of process, and appreciation of meaning, and perhaps a preference for ethnographic methods. But these signals are not really supported by a vast and paradigmatic shift away from “why questions.” In the long run, in fact, we might begin to see the meaningful difference between “how” and “why” in sociological inquiry to simply be a relative distinction between different levels of why question that have been hashed out sufficiently in a community of inquiry. A blunt, undefined why question is transformed into a series of more precise ones, to which there will be competing answers and, if we are doing our jobs, tremendous fights about which answers the evidence supports. The unrefined why question might, in this case, be: Why is apparel production in the global south feminized? Some theoretical and historical work on this issue then generated a cluster of questions with clear contrasts and certain presuppositions, some of which might be: Given that sewing and apparel work have been feminized for most of the modern era, why is this work taking place in the global south rather than the global north after about
1970? Why, in certain areas, is this trend manifested in a certain performance of femininity on the factory floor, rather than another one? Why, in certain areas, is sewing work *not* feminized rather than being so? And so on.

But note that, to point in response to one or more these questions to the discursive construals of gender, or to price pressures and household economies, or to processes of identity formation, is to attempt to pick out from the world a key element of an infinite causal net, no matter how narrowly defined phenomenon being asked about is. It is, furthermore, to propose that the counterfactuals that obtain in thinking about *that* factor (factory managers with a different imagination of gender relations…), are the important ones to think about for answering said set of why questions. As Van Fraassen explains, “the selection of the salient causal factor is not simply a matter of pointing to the most interesting one, not like the selection of a tourist attraction; it is a matter of competing counterfactuals.”

4. The parsimony of why questions versus the parsimony of research programs

Thinking about sociological knowledge production as the work of (1) turning blunt why questions into refined and well-defined ones, (2) delivering sustainable answers to said questions, and (3) debating and developing our capacity to judge what a good answer is, has, I think, some surprising consequences. It suggests that we could reconstruct the history of subfields as the development and refinement of a set of well-defined why questions about a shifting set of phenomena in the world and their explanation, in the sense of “explanation” that I have outlined here. But in many subfields (themselves variously defined), the reigning self-conception is one of paradigms or research programs. And this means that, even if we could reconstruct sociological communication as the refinement of, and judgment about, why questions, sociologists *think* they are separated by paradigms or research programs. This surely has intellectual and institutional effects on the organization of research. What are these effects, and why do they obtain?

The foremost effect is a specific kind of ignorance: walled off by different theoretical and epistemic vocabularies, we do not know which explanations are actually exclusive of each other, and which are
complementary. To know this, we would have to hash out a why question and agree on its negation, and then examine which explanations actually exclude each other in their rendering of causal history of the topic, and for which reasons. We can find examples of this—for example, in the empirics of the demise of (most of) the Marxist explanation of the French Revolution. ¹⁷

Working in this manner requires the admission that sometimes the scope of why questions will be very narrow, because the sustainable generality of a well-defined phenomena and its limited negation in a why-question varies empirically (is there an empirical class of things called “revolutions” whose negations we can pull together coherently? Maybe. “17th and 18th century political revolutions”? Probably). It also involves confronting the sources of our foils, including normative ones.

A difficult agenda, but the alternative is worse. My hypothesis is that the division of sociology into research programs, defined by a “hard core” of theoretical axioms and an auxiliary belt of supportive hypothesis and concepts, substitutes the image of science for the problems of human science. And the cause of this is that research programs provide a ready-made reduction of the set of things in the world that are available to answer any why question. It is not difficult to make research programs or paradigms “progressive” rather than “degenerative” in human science, because historical change and the sheer variety of human experience and social arrangement provides a wealth of empirical phenomena that can be comprehended anew through a certain “lens” or “perspective.” And so, in this way of imagining and organizing sociological research, parsimony emerges as a property of a research program itself, which offers, via specific theoretical language, a consistently narrow set of answers to an extremely wide variety of why questions.

We would do well to recall that Imre Lakatos’ primary example of why defending a research program’s hard core was a good idea was the Prout hypothesis that the atomic weights of different elements would be whole numbers. ¹⁸ Lakatos argued that standing by this purist mathematical ontology of the building blocks of the universe (for 100 years!) was its own kind of rationality, and thus the basis for a
research program. Today in sociology, we do in fact have a debate about whether sociological explanation can really be secured by fundamental ontology. But sociologists may not be aware of how the language of research program is, in fact, built on precisely this image of long-term ontological success. It seems like a bad bet to divide up into teams, keep going as we are, and then wait until 2115 to see if rational choice theory or Marxism was, in the end, correct. In contrast, a vision of sociological science inflicted by pragmatism would put less faith in the ontology of research programs and more energy into the articulation of well-defined why-questions, and eventually, an answer to some of them.

1 The author thanks Jennifer Bair, Paul Lichterman, Daniel Hirschman, and Christopher Muller for comments on this
3 This section of the paper draws extensively on two key texts, Bas Van Fraassen’s *The Scientific Image* (Oxford University Press), and Alan Garfinkel’s *Forms of Explanation* (Yale University Press), both published in 1981, and the secondary literature that has emerged in their wake. For a full bibliography email isaac.reed@colorado.edu.
6 For an account of these problems, see John Levi Martin, *The Explanation of Social Action*, University of Chicago Press pp. 37-60.
7 Mark Risjord, in *Woodcutters and Witchcraft*, posits academic disciplines themselves as setting many relevance criteria; but this seems to underestimate both variance within disciplines and the dispute about them, and in particular, the nonconformity of empirical research to the explanatory project implicitly embodied in the 19th century division of scholarly labor that became the disciplines. See Wallerstein, et. al., *Open the Social Sciences.*
8 For the conflation of causality with prediction, see Duncan Watts, “Common Sense and Sociological Explanations,” *American Journal of Sociology*, September 2014. For arguments about how explanations should contain the understanding sof actors, or be made in terms recognizable to actors, even if they do not match actors own accounts of themselves, see Martin, *The Explanation of Social Action*, 321-350 and Isaac Ariail Reed, *Interpretation and Social Knowledge*, University of Chicago Press, 2011, 123-162.
10 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Passeron,*The Craft of Inquiry*.
12 Andrew Abbott, *Processual Sociology*, Forthcoming with University of Chicago Press, especially Chapters 6 and 8. The quotations come from chapter 8, “Inequality as Process.” Abbott discussed the normative foundations of social research—and in my view, the basis for many of our contrastive questions—at a more general level in the 37th Annual Marc Bloch Lecture, a draft text of which is available at http://home.uchicago.edu/aabbott/booksandpapers.html
15 Howard Becker, *What about Mozart? What about Murder? Reasoning from Cases*, University of Chicago, 2014. It strikes me as significant that this account is connected, in Becker’s book, to his approval of the use of “imaginary cases,” and to his more
generalized discussion of the use of idealized theoretical models in sociology. Becker actually characterizes comparison generally in these terms—a comparative case provides a lead in to a subtle counterfactual imaginary for the case under analysis: “and now we can look at earlier research and begin to identify some variants of the same phenomenon: some people and activities that resemble, sort of, though not point for point, the [compared] situation.” (17) Becker insists that the sociologists working in the manner he describes are interested in “all the variation the world shows them” (15). It is hard to know how to interpret this statement, since being interested in an infinity of things seems impossible. But one possible interpretation is that, via a triangulation of theory and crafty comparison, this infinity becomes a rendered case and its limited negation, which is to say, a case and its sociologically determined counterfactuals.


17 An extended debate on the class composition of revolutionaries and their relationship, both discursive and demographic, to urban and rural populations, knocked down some, but not all, of the Marxist explanation of the French Revolution. The key here was a subtlety concerning data that fell well outside the old Kuhnian saw of the supposed theory-dependence of observation. We like to look back on this and think of paradigms at war, but instead key why questions were hashed out (why the abolition of Feudal rights rather than their partial maintenance in 1789?) and, in answer to them, the competing specific renderings of the causal history of the National Assembly assessed; the role of certain species of capital in the lives of the representatives was found wanting.
