John Dewey's Concept Of Social Science As Social Inquiry

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It is common knowledge that many scholars believe social relationships are so open-ended that experimental closure is next to impossible to obtain. Human beings are simply more responsive to their environments than are objects in the physical sciences, which, consequently, means the behaviors of human beings are far less predictable than are the behaviors of physical objects. As a result, the social sciences cannot rely as heavily on the experimental method or the scientific method as it is sometimes called for a way of knowing truth. Some argue, since the social sciences cannot use the reliable decisive test situations of the experimental method, the social sciences must be relegated to being primarily explanatory rather than predictive.[1]

John Dewey agrees that currently social scientists cannot predict with anywhere near the accuracy as their counterparts can do in the physical sciences. But for Dewey, "The question is not whether the subject matter of human relations is or can ever become a science in the sense in which physics is now a science, but whether it is such as to permit of the development of methods which, as far as they go, satisfy the logical conditions that have to be satisfied in other branches of inquiry."[2] He argues further that social science does, in fact, satisfy the logical conditions that have to be satisfied in other branches of inquiry. To explain why he believes that, it becomes necessary at this point to examine his concept of social science and then to examine his concept of inquiry in social science.

Perhaps the best way to begin an analysis of Dewey's concept of "social science" is to explain what he did not mean by that term. He did not mean a group of academic disciplines such as anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, and sociology. Knowledge amassed in those social disciplines, he says, ". . . is still treated as so much merely theoretic knowledge amassed in by specialists, and at most communicated by them in books and articles to the general public."[3] His comment is not meant to be critical but only a statement of reality. He defined "social science" much differently.

Dewey meant by the term "social science" the scientific method applied to social problems. He thought such an approach to social problems would give us some real measure of control over our own destiny.[4] He said it best in an article entitled, "Social Science and Social Control," when he wrote the following:

> "What I am saying is that if we want something to which the name "social science" may be given, there is only one way to go about it, namely, by entering upon the path of social planning and control. Observing, collecting, recording and filing tomes of social phenomena without deliberately trying to do something to bring about a desired state of society into existence only encourages a conflict of opinion and dogma in their interpretation."[5]

Having said that, Dewey must then chart a course in inquiry that will achieve what he said above, namely, whether the method of science applied to social problems can indeed "satisfy the logical conditions that have to be satisfied in other branches of inquiry."

Dewey thought inquiry into both social and physical science are much the same process, although he suggests social inquiry has three particular elements that need emphasis. It must be stressed, however, that he does not mean to imply that each of the three is different from the process of physical inquiry, only that each needs particular emphasis in social inquiry. On the surface such a statement may seem a matter of emphasis; in reality, it sets Dewey off from other social scientists who use the scientific method more as their counterparts do in the physical sciences. While this seemingly subtle but extremely important emphasis needs analysis, there is no time to do it here. I turn, instead, to the first element that Dewey said needs emphasis in social inquiry.

The first element Dewey said needed emphasis in social inquiry is that all thinking, and, therefore, all inquiry, begins with a genuine problem, a problem that has emerged from some particular troublesome, frustrating, problematic situation in life. He writes:

> "In social inquiry, genuine problems are set only by actual situations which are themselves conflicting and confused. Social conflicts and confusions exist in fact before problems for inquiry exist. The latter are intellectualizations in inquiry of these "practical" troubles and difficulties."[6]

Dewey's concept of social science as a method of inquiry is at the

center of his pragmatic philosophy. He believes the purpose of philosophy ought to be to improve the social life of the community, whether that community is the school, the local business community, a civic organization, the state, or whatever "public" on which one might wish to focus. From time to time troublesome, problematic, frustrating situations emerge within these "publics" and life just demands their resolution. It is in this setting where genuine social problems arise and it is in this setting where they must be resolved. An example will help explain what he means.

As this is being written, several cities throughout the United States are experiencing an alarming rise in criminal activity, a social problem that needs attention. Suppose for the purposes of this example we focus on only one "public," a section or community of one city known as Briarwood. The Briarwood community police department has reported to the press that over the past year there has been an increasing amount of illegal drug activity and an accompanying rise in the homicide rate. The community has become fearful and wants something done about the situation. Out of this troublesome, frustrating, problematic situation comes the problem to be resolved. Once the problem is stated, the next step in its resolution is the second element that Dewey says needs emphasis in social inquiry.

The second element needing emphasis in social inquiry is that ideas, hypotheses, plans of action that guide and direct the search for factual evidence must be identified. This sounds very much like what he would say about inquiry in the physical sciences. There is, however, a difference between the two. Dewey writes:

> "The difference between physical and social inquiry does not reside in the presence or absence of an end-in-view, formulated in terms of possible consequences. It consists in the respective subject-matters of the purposes. This difference makes a great practical difference in the conduct of inquiry: a difference in the kind of cooperations to be performed in instituting the subject-matters that in their interactions will resolve a situation. In the case of social inquiry, associated activities are directly involved in the operations to be performed; these associated activities enter into the idea of any proposed solution . . . In physical matters, the inquirer may reach the outcome in his laboratory or observatory. Utilization of the conclusions of others is indispensable,

> and others must be able to attain similar conclusions by use of materials and methods similar to those employed by the individual investigator . . . in physical inquiry the conditioning social factors are relatively indirect, while in solution of social problems they are directly involved. Any hypothesis as to a social end must include as part of itself the idea or organized association among those who are to execute the operations it formulates and directs."[7]

Dewey clearly points out that social problems, like problems in the physical sciences, can best be resolved by using the scientific method. The hypothesis to resolve the problem, however, has a bit different emphasis in social problems since it must include as a part of itself all of those people involved in the problem itself. That is to say, we want the consequences of the problem resolution to be what we as a group agree they should be. Therefore, the hypothesis must include as a part of itself all of those involved in the process of resolving the problem. Let's return to the example of crime in the Briarwood community.

Residents of the community demand an end to illegal drug use and they want an end to the accompanying homicide rate. The local government meets to hear community demands. Residents suggest propositions, hypotheses, plans of action, including adding more police to the local force and stepping up the number of police raids on known drug houses. Other suggestions include developing community drug rehabilitation programs and including drug education programs in the local schools. As many propositions as can be thought of to resolve the problem are considered by the local government, and, finally, a logical plan is put into action that includes police, teachers, ministers, attorneys and judges, medical personnel, as well as residents in local neighborhoods who become a part of a "watch" program for protection of children. Some propositions, on the other hand, may have been rejected such as propositions for armed vigilante raids against drug pushers. The residents have agreed instead that the police and courts should deal with the criminal element. In this example, the community has come together to use the method of science to resolve a "public" problem.

In this fashion, then, social inquiry is social science. The residents have identified a plan of action, sometimes called a hypothesis, a proposition, a theory, to be put into practice to bring about the "practical" consequences they want to occur. This brings us to Dewey's suggestion for a third element in social inquiry that needs emphasis.

The third major element in social inquiry that needs special attention is

that conceptual structures must be developed and used to resolve the problem at hand.[8] For Dewey, conceptual structures are standards of knowledge that identify and explain some particular concept. They are not absolute, but, rather, as a result of new knowledge learned through continued inquiry, are continually developing. From these continually maturing concepts come ideas as propositions which, ultimately, lay to rest any given problem under study. For example, if historians would study the concept "Revolution" and not study just individual revolutions in and of themselves such as the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Nazi Revolution, the Soviet Revolution, the Iranian Revolution, they could develop the conceptual structure of "revolution." By doing so, we would know much better than we know now what kinds of events are involved in revolutions. As a result, by analyzing the events occurring in any given present in some particular nation in terms of the conceptual standard "revolution," we might predict with much more accuracy than we can now whether that nation is on the verge of revolution.[9]

The same principle is at work in any given concept. If we had better defined concepts of a social nature we could employ them to resolve the social problem of the Briarwood community in the example above. Unfortunately, social scientists have not done that nearly as well as their counterparts in the natural sciences, and, subsequently, we do not have the conceptual structures or "laws" which we can use with a high degree of probability to resolve social problems with the predictable consequences we desire.

According to Dewey, however, as we identify concepts more precisely in the social sciences, and, as we learn more and more about those concepts, our ability to predict consequences in social affairs, in turn, will continue to be more and more accurate. The natural sciences have constructed many conceptual standards that permit propositions to be formed that can act as predictive statements, generalizations, or "laws" that guide and direct inquiry that will lead to solving of some particular problem. There is no reason the social sciences cannot take a similar approach. The social sciences need to move in this direction if, as Dewey said above, they are to develop the ". . . methods which, as far as they go, satisfy the logical conditions that have to be satisfied in other branches of inquiry."[10]

Dewey gives the term "law" a specific definition. He suggests scientific laws are not measurers of truth, they are used as tools or instruments which the inquirer can employ to eliminate temporal gaps in a causal

relationship. Thus, rather than each individual case being determined by some law, each "individually observed case becomes the measure of knowledge."

He goes on to say:

> "Laws are intellectual instrumentalities by which that individual object is instituted and its meaning determined. This change involves a reversal of the theory which has dominated thought since the Newtonian system obtained full sway. According to the latter, the aim of science is to ascertain laws; individual cases are known only as they are reduced to instances of laws . . . In technical statement, laws on the new basis are formulae for the prediction of probability of an observable occurrence. They are designations of relations sufficiently stable to allow phenomenon is individual — within limits of specified probability, not a probability of error, but of probability of actual occurrence."[12]

For John Dewey, then, the functional value of scientific laws is partially recognized when it is said that they are the means of prediction. However, it is not enough for laws to be a means of prediction, the predictions must be accurate. Further, the prediction does not become "a warranted proposition until the required operations are performed and are found to have as their consequence the observed material whose occurrence has been predicted."[13] It must be made as clear as possible here, however, that he is not referring to fixed laws of nature waiting "out there" to be discovered that will, once known, produce accurate predictions. Neither is he looking to replace "deterministic laws" with "probabilistic laws" that smack of a similar closed world. Dewey's reference to "laws" are really references to generalizations used as "intellectual instruments" that, once made, will work for a while in a given domain. The length of time they "work" cannot be forecasted here. One can only say here that they "work" until they are found to be inaccurate, and, therefore, need to be replaced by more accurate "laws."

For John Dewey, the above three elements needing emphasis in social science, when taken together, mark the difference between inquiry in social and natural sciences. As he said, the question is not whether the subject matter of social science can ever become a science in which physics is a science but whether social science can satisfy the logical conditions of inquiry that have to be satisfied in other branches of inquiry. Certainly he seems to think it can or else his hope for the continually

developing, humanistic, just society that he described in such places as *Ethics*,[14] *Theory of the Moral Life*,[15] and *A Comnon Faith*[16] would not be possible.

Summary and Conclusion. Dewey meant by the term "social science" the scientific method applied to resolving troublesome, frustrating, problematic social problems of any given "public." He thought such an approach to social problems would give us some real measure of control over our own destiny, both individual and collective. He also thought social inquiry was very little different from physical inquiry but that there were three elements of social inquiry needing special emphasis. Dewey does not mean to imply that each of the three is different from the process of physical inquiry, only that each needs particular emphasis in social inquiry. This statement, however, is more than a mere matter of emphasis. In reality, it sets Dewey's model off from some other research models in social science, particularly the mathematical or statistical experimental design models. This problem, though, needs to be the focus of another study.

NOTES

[1]R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979): 24-25.

[2]John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1938): 487.

[3]John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1935, 1963): 45-46.

[4]John Dewey, "A New Social Science," reprinted in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Vol. 11, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988): 89-91.

[5]John Dewey, "Social Science and Social Control," reprinted in *John Dewey, The Later Works, Vol. 6, 1931-1932*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: The Southern Illinois University Press, 1989): 67-68.

[6]Dewey, *Logic*, 498-499.

[7]Ibid., 502-503.

[8]Ibid., 503.

[9]George C. Stone, "John Dewey's Principle of Causation," *Social Science* 49, (1974): 208.

[10]Dewey, *Logic*, 487.

[11]John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, (New York: Milton, Balch, 1929): 205-206.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Dewey, *Logic*, 456.

[14]John Dewey and James Tufts, *Ethics*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1908): 201-424.

[15]John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life*, (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1908). This book is a reprint of Part II of Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*.

[16]John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).