Diskussion

The Diffusion Structure of Common Knowledge: Comments on Haerkamp’s “Mead und das Problem des gemeinsamen Wissens” (ZfS 3, 1985)

Gary Alan Fine,
Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455 U. S. A.

Interactionists often have difficulty addressing the “moment” of creation. Such an image emphasizes the individual component of creativity, implicitly downplaying the socially negotiated establishment of knowledge. If meaning is jointly established, the concept of the “heroic” creator is inappropriate. For meaning to be generated – that is, at the point of origin of common knowledge – there needs to be a self and other(s). In this way the problem of the “origin of shared knowledge” differs from that of creativity. The origin of common knowledge relates to the structure and dynamics of information diffusion.

Haerkamp, in addressing this former problem (“Mead und das Problem des gemeinsamen Wissens”) overcomes some of the issues which effectively limited George Herbert Mead. Writing in a different age, consciously building on structuralist and microgenetic sociology, Haerkamp moves from the somewhat limited astructural focus that certain of Mead’s earlier sociological students looked into. In turn I wish to expand critically on some issues that Haerkamp raises, particularly in light of work on diffusion.

A familiar folk expression is that a proverb represents: “The wit of one; the wisdom of many.” This saying heeds a crucial interactionist principle. That is, while speech and personal acts are the products of a single actor, the production is not de novo; rather, it is grounded in collective symbols and shared perspectives. Further, this grounding recognizes that for knowledge to be “common” it must fit within the perspectives that others use to codify and comprehend their worlds.

The process of creation conflates with social process when we recognize that information is often generated in collective settings; “news” knowledge emerges from interaction. While some formal cultural products (e. g., poetry, calligraphy) may be produced away from others, most of those who create bon mots, rumors, puns, rules and other items do so in the presence of others. How often are jokes created when alone. Different genres of knowledge have different conditions of creation associated with them.

For many genres – particularly those in which the identity of the creator is important – one might wonder when, or, even if the knowledge ever becomes formalized sufficiently that we can say with certainty that this is what that knowledge is. Interactionist theory does not allow for the complete solidification of knowledge, and so the issue of what constitutes common knowledge remains somewhat problematic. This is true both because knowledge changes over time and because the “same” thing that one person knows might not be known in that form by others. This important issue is not touched upon by Haerkamp. The ever-shifting dynamic of “common” knowledge is crucial. Unlike material objects (which have a “substance” and a “meaning”) “knowledge” is all meaning. One should not push this point too far, however; there is sufficient consensus that we can regularly interact with each other. Meaning isn’t arbitrary and idiosyncratic, even though it should not be treated as an objective reality.

For knowledge to be spread others must be motivated to spread it. There are a number of reasons why an audience (the alter) is motivated to spread information: because of the content, the teller, the situation, or the audience. In the retelling, the original audience (the alter) has now become the actor (the self). In those circumstances in which a piece of knowledge is frequently spread (a proverb, for instance) the role of self and alter become, in fact, interchangeable. The alter has an adequate concept of what the self means, because in similar circumstances the alter has been the self. This mutuality of position (either because it actually happened or because the audience can put itself in the position of the teller) provides the basis of the shared quality of the knowledge.

It is an important truism that the content of the proposed knowledge is likely to influence the chan-
ces of it becoming shared. Haferkamp quite correctly suggests that novel or “unlikely” actions are most striking and notable, and, so can pass through the membrane separating the evanescent from that which becomes part of collective symbolism. On the other hand action that is not unusual but is particularly fitting (and thus likely to be frequently relevant) may become common knowledge.

Further, some of these content features are connected to the social perceptions of social order. Although interactionists do not typically emphasize the structural control of beliefs by the “larger society,” a meaningful interactionist theory must concede this. Macro-structures do not mystically force individuals to bend to their will. Rather, the process occurs through the images and interpretations that individuals have of these larger structures. To the extent that some fair measure of consensus exists in various parts of society, actors will share assumptions about the larger structures of society. If their images are alike, their willingness to accept items into their shared knowledge should be relatively similar. For example, those who accept the legitimacy of a totalitarian state will have a different propensity to accept gallows humor about the state than those who reject the state’s legitimacy. The filtering mechanism is the image of the state.

Content is not the only feature which affects the likelihood of acceptance of common knowledge. As Haferkamp insists, the nature of the power and status of the parties to the interaction constrains the likelihood of its diffusion. While Mead does not explicitly cover this (although by indirection I find he does in the “Society” section of Mind, Self & Society), the power and status of the actor and audience is crucial. This operates much as societal structure influences content. It is not the status or power per se that influences diffusion, but rather the images that particular actors and interacting social groups have of this power and status. Thus, high-status individuals are most likely to have their suggestions (their “knowledge”) adopted by others. To the extent that individuals are identified with classes, castes, ethnic groups, occupations, and ages that are perceived and defined to have different power and legitimacy, these macro-social issues will influence the dynamics of the acceptance of the knowledge. Expertise (and the images of it) also influence the legitimacy of this process. Here research on the interactionist construction of rumor is relevant. The definition of rumor suggests that this is information without secure standards of evidence, but what does this stricture mean. There are no firm lines that determine what constitutes secure standards of evidence. Does a policeman provide secure standards of evidence about a crime? Does the criminal judge, journalist, neighbor, or criminologist. The definition of what is rumor and what is “fact” depends very much on a complicated set of social judgments that is grounded in individual decisions about the world, but at the same time is based upon shared images that derive from interaction.

The situation, too, influences what becomes common knowledge. On some occasions interactants develop a spirit of community or camaraderie. Under such circumstances we expect that they will more likely pay attention to each other, and be more willing to accept the information which emerges. The others in such situations have been established as significant at least temporarily. The existence of strong (if evanescent) social ties contributes to a feeling of commonality, and an openness to common knowledge. Thus, some jokes are funnier (and hence more memorable) on some occasions. The joke is the same, the teller is the same, even the audience is the same, but the situation conveys different definitions, and this affects the structure and the likelihood of recall.

The final feature I wish to mention is the role of the audience (or alter) in affecting the growth of common knowledge. Some audiences are more “primed” or more ready than others. They have expectations of learning. This is obviously quite close to what I have just indicated about the role of situations, but here I refer to features of people, rather than settings: this category also connects with whom the actor is. After all, we are addressing relationships that are situated in particular meaningful contexts. These contexts are essentially comparative in that they are judged in regard to other contexts that the participants have experienced before. Actor, audience, setting, and content will together affect the likelihood of diffusion; that is, the acceptance of an item into the common core of knowledge.

All this suggests that Haferkamp is right in his goal to specify the unexplored theories of Mead on how shared meaning comes about. Needless to say, and thankfully, no theorist gets it all down or all right. This is a true for Mead, as it is for Haferkamp, and surely for myself as well. Together through constructing lines of theory we all develop a base of common knowledge, that is, in its particulars, profoundly sociological.