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On the problem of normative sociology

Posted by [Joseph Heath](#) on [June 16, 2015](#) | [education](#), [politics](#)

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Last week I did a post complaining about how journalists tend to use "correctness" to describe a complex group of behaviours that one car was trying to make the case that "classic" political correctness – such as the decline, but that there were other worrisome trends that continue to be discussed, by talking about another slightly pernicious habit, which things refer to as the problem of "normative sociology."

The whole "normative sociology" concept has its origins in a joke that *State and Utopia*, where he claimed, in an offhand way, that "*Normative sociology* causes of problems *ought to be*, greatly fascinates us all"(247). Despite the remark, the observation is an astute one. Often when we see a problem, it is almost irresistible temptation to study what we would *like* the cause of (rather than the actual cause), to the neglect of the actual causes. When this goes uncorrected, it leads to "politically correct" explanations for various social problems – where the actual cause is B, but where people, for one reason or another, think it is A. This can lead to a situation in which denying that A is the cause of B, so people affirm the connection primarily because they feel obliged to do so, rather than persuaded by any evidence.

Let me give just one example, to get the juices flowing. I routinely hear claims ascribed to "racism" — claims that far outstrip available evidence. So, for example, but there is a clear moral stigma associated with questioning the causal connection, since the question of what causes what should be a purely empirical matter, however, is likely to attract charges of seeking to "minimize racism" (just reading the previous two sentences, will already be thinking to themselves "I'm not seeking to minimize racism.") There also seems to be a sense that, like racism, it must also cause a lot of other bad things. But what is at work here is not how the moral order is organized, not one about the causal order. It's not that racism is extremely bad (intrinsically, as it were), or extremely common, and yet

I actually think this sort of confusion between the moral and the causal

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despite having a lot of sympathy for “qualitative” social science, I think these areas. Indeed, one of the major advantages of a quantitative approach is that it is pretty much impossible to get away with doing normative sociology.

Incidentally, “normative sociology” doesn’t necessarily have a left-wing bias. Conservatives do it as well (e.g. rising divorce rates must be due to the welfare system etc.) The left is often more keen on solving various social problems, and so they have a tendency to be strongly biased in their judgement. The latter case is particularly frustrating. If you attack some social problem by attacking its causal antecedents, then it is more likely that your connections are right – otherwise your intervention is going to prove useful and counterproductive.

This is something I had been thinking about a lot when writing about the things that Andrew and I tried to show in that book is how the left has been so keen on what caused consumerism, basically buying into Marx’s old idea of overproduction, then seeking to explain the various phenomena associated with capitalism (planned obsolescence, perpetual dissatisfaction, etc.) as an attempt to solve overproduction. Over time, an elaborate edifice was constructed on top of this which not only had never been tested empirically, but didn’t even make sense. People just really wanted to believe that capitalism had this built-in ‘cancer’ and an enormous amount of energy was being wasted by activists, trying to solve the relationship to the problem they were trying to solve – or in the case of the left, that were in fact exacerbating the problem.

Because of this, I was really struck by this passage in Robert Frank’s *Passions in the Marketplace* which he complains about precisely this tendency on the left:

Critics on the left see the market system through a much less realistic lens. In the marketplace, they see first a system in which the strong exploit the weak and the weak take unfair advantage of workers whose opportunities are limited. They also see the market system as promoting, indeed almost depending on, the consumption of goods that serve no social need. They see manipulative advertising, excessive spending of their incomes on gas guzzling cars with retractable roofs, and an environment that decays and children lack good books to read. The rewards in the market system are not in proportion to need or even to ability. People with different abilities often earn dramatically different incomes. There is almost no relation to the social value of the work that is done: a corporate client exploits tax loopholes and takes home several hundred million dollars while the person who struggles to teach our eight graders algebra makes a few thousand.

So far so familiar. Then it starts to get more interesting:

Most people, of course, are at neither extreme of the political spectrum. They presumably see the real truth about the market system as lying somewhere between the views offered by the extreme camps. In this chapter, I argue that the best interpretation is not to think of the marketplace as being some middle ground between these two extremes. The marketplace I portray here is neither the one put forth by its defenders as well as the catalogue of ills for which the left argues, however, that the left has in almost every instance offered a solution that will put market outcomes go awry. (162-3)

He concludes the chapter with a triumph of masterful understatement

Having identified real problems, but having ascribed them to social structure, he found it difficult to formulate policy remedies. (177)

I recall marvelling at how seldom I had heard this idea expressed: that when it comes to identifying problems, but then gets the explanations (explanations long after they have proven problematic), and so is practical.

I think that “normative sociology” has a lot to do with this. From casual observation (having spent hundreds of hours listening to people criticize various social major variants of normative sociology.

1. Wanting a policy lever. Many of our outstanding social problems occur in areas that are outside the immediate jurisdiction of the state (the private sphere (e.g. the gendered division of labour within the family) or of individual autonomy, (e.g. students dropping out of high school). A “policy lever” than can be pulled to solve the problem, because the state sometimes even the power) to intervene directly in these areas.

As a result, when people who would like to see these problems solved have an enormous temptation to believe that they are causally connected to social structure. The case in which I have seen this most often is that the state does overestimate the causal effects of inequality – because the distributive state does have the ability to control. So if “intractable social problem” “poverty of group B,” then that gives the state leverage over the intra-group always redistribute wealth to B.

To take a concrete example, one hears a lot these days about the “strong correlation between various health outcomes and SES (social status) – a surprisingly strong despite the relatively egalitarian distribution of health outcomes. This is an explicitly hybrid concept, designed to represent relative inequality of status. Of course, while the state can quite easily redistribute wealth, social status is not. The state’s ability to intervene, much less modify, these status hierarchies is perhaps indirectly, by redistributing wealth, but even then that often does not work. Transfers find themselves losing status precisely for being in receipt of them. So that the social health gradient is related to inequalities of status, then perhaps we should do about it. As a result, I can’t count the number of presentations on health inequalities talking about SES and then just subtly shift toward talking about wealth redistribution recommend some form of income redistribution.

2. Worrying about “blaming the victim.” The most common confusion about causal order occurs when people start thinking about responsibility. I think that if person X caused A to occur, then X is responsible for A. If we hold X responsible for A, they feel a powerful impulse to resist any suggestion that X might have caused A. This is, of course, a confusion, since whether X caused A is a question, which doesn’t really decide the question of responsibility. A person’s being challenged, after having made an entirely empirical claim about a social problem, by people saying “aren’t you just blaming the victim?” One might say that this is intruding where it does not belong. If we follow this line of reasoning, we would *like* the cause of problems to be, rather than what they actually

Just to explain this a bit: A causal relationship to an outcome is typically a necessary condition for an attribution of responsibility. That is because of the principle of causality: if I throw a beer bottle out my window, and it strikes a pedestrian below, I am responsible for the injury to this person. But that person also caused the injury, by deciding to walk at that precise moment. And who knows, many others may have caused the injury: the person who allowed me to go for the walk, or by selling me the beer, and so on. Thus causality is really a separate question from the question of causation. So it should be a separate question about what causes what that is completely separate from the question of responsibility. Perhaps a prelude to the latter conversation, but definitely concerns that should not be allowed to intrude into the former.

To pick just one obvious example of this, there is an enormous reluctance to pick up the issue of underdevelopment could be largely due to domestic conditions within a country. The need to treat this poverty as some kind of harm inflicted upon the poor is often the consequence of past harms (e.g. a “legacy of colonialism”) — not so much the mechanisms being posited seem all that persuasive, but rather that the poor are “the victim,” or treating the poor as somehow responsible for their condition.

3. Picking one side of a correlation. This is a more subtle one. Statistics often report a correlation between two things, but as we all know, correlation does not imply causation. If A and B are hand-in-hand with B, it could be that 1) A causes B, or 2) B causes A, or 3) A and B are reinforcing, or 4) there is some third thing, C, that causes both A and B. So it is difficult for statistical correlations to be reported as causal ones. (This is, for example, a common mistake in care reporting. Growing up, my mother was afraid to cook with aluminium because of studies reporting the presence of aluminium in the brains of Alzheimer’s patients. True, but there was no reason to think that exposure to aluminium was causing the disease. It was the disease caused the accumulation of aluminium, or that some other thing was causing both.) In any case, if sloppy thinking happens all the time, it’s not so difficult for people to pick one side of a correlation. Causes B to respond to evidence of correlation between the two as if A causes B.

The debate over the so-called “culture of poverty” provides some good examples of these tendencies. It has certainly not escaped anyone’s notice that poverty is associated with a large number of behaviour patterns that are, shall we say, self-undermining (e.g. teenage pregnancy, broken families, drug addiction, domestic violence, etc.) and that some people at this and says “see, no wonder they’re poor, it’s *because* of all the things they do.” The stereotypical liberal looks at it and says, “no wonder they’re making so much money, they’re so poor.” In many of these cases, some kind of mutual reinforcement can be seen, but the more common ideological response is to pick out one side of the correlation and focus on that.

(One can see as well in the liberal response the desire to have a political solution to “poverty” explanations is that no one has any idea how to change this. The fact that Christians moralize about it is going to change anything being not very likely. Money will be redistributed. And finally, there is an obvious desire to avoid “blaming the victim.” Positing a pernicious cultural trend is somehow seen as compatible with the idea that the actions of anonymous economic forces is not.)

4. Metaphysical views. I mentioned this above, but often there is a reluctance to pick up the issue of some action or episode requires that it have enormous consequences. The fact that anyone who denies the causal effects is in some way minimizing or c

(Now if everyone were a moral consequentialist, then this would all in action would be determined entirely by its effects, and so minimizing awfulness. But most people are not consequentialists.)

A good example of this in contemporary debates involves attitudes to think this is very bad. And yet, there is also a desire to believe that, if a lot of other bad things. (Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book tendency, as is Joseph Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality*.) There is also political unrest and revolutions are caused by poverty and inequality, evidence suggests that they are not (rising expectations are more important that inequality has these effects is liable to stand accused of seeking example, how Paul Krugman, in this [interesting comment](#) on Stiglitz, he is still condemning inequality).

Edit: Thanks for all the eyeballs, Alex. Two things: First, some social about this. Just to clarify — this has nothing to do with how actual so thing is just part of the joke: “Sociologists are people who study the c stereotype], so normative sociologists are people who study what the When I use the term, it’s primarily applied to people in philosophy and scientists. Second, for all those who are saying “he doesn’t provide a I can say is “dude, it’s a blog post.” If you’ve never seen anyone doin congratulations — you must attend better conferences than I do.

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Comments

On the problem of normative sociology — 20 Comments

John Forrest on [June 16, 2015 at 7:34 pm](#) said:

This post has a lot of interesting ideas, but I would like to suggest a fifth example quibbling with one statement in the post, namely:

“[P]eople on the left are often more keen on solving various social problems. I have no idea whether or not this is true in aggregate, but I’m pretty sure I have next-to-no interest in actually solving social problems. There is a significant number of people who basically just want to be part of an “outrage machine”, and nothing more.”

Here is why it matters: one thing we can learn from cognitive neuroscience is the feeling of righteous anger. So if you think that something is bad you do not get rid of that thing. You also have an interest in stoking your own outrage over something that is actually gratifying to you. If the problem was ever fixed, you would be less interested in stoking your outrage. There are many branches of sociology which are devoted to satisfying this kind of desire through outrage.

Purple Library Guy on [June 17, 2015 at 4:07 am](#) said:

Well, that's fine and all, but nonetheless there's a fairly clear dis- leftists want to solve social problems, whereas in theory at least problems the way they are, since they feel the status quo is the cases where right-wingers are not in fact in the conserving busi- solve any social problems other than perhaps the social problem making out best enough.

Roger on [June 19, 2015 at 9:30 pm](#) said:

I am not a conservative, but I would suggest you just views. I think it would be more fair to state that they w problem solving, rather than no emphasis on problem

Anonymous on [June 23, 2015 at 2:43 pm](#) said:

I agree with this response. If conservatives values cause poverty, then their moralizing represents an effort to redress the problem say that they are pursuing the wrong course of liberals as well, but to say conservatives seems to be your trying to stake a moral high ground to represent accurately the motives of conservatives

Sophia Murphy on [June 16, 2015 at 9:59 pm](#) said:

Maybe I am missing something obvious, but doesn't your point about spurious correlations undermine your claim for quantitative methods -" Indeed, one of the major problems to social science is that it makes it pretty much impossible to get a way with numbers. I think there is a great deal of normative sociology in the quantitative world done differently than it does through its qualitative cousin. Do you mean the misuse of statistics, comparing average literacy levels with average numeracy.

Joseph Heath on [June 16, 2015 at 11:30 pm](#) said:

Good point. I guess "impossible" is too strong. Harder perhaps. to what disconfirmation would look like.

John Forrest on [June 17, 2015 at 9:18 am](#) said:

I don't disagree that there is "a great deal of normative sociology" in quantitative research. It seems right to say that in a way those mistakes will be less wide. But I still think it's plausible that quantitative mistakes of this kind can be debunked.

The reason is that precisely because quantitative research requires people who conduct that research are more likely to have a strong commitment to those methodologies over-and-above their commitment to producing rigorous results on methodological grounds.

There is a recent example of this in political science. A widely-published study in opposition to gay marriage could be changed through brief conversations and debunked on methodological grounds. However, the researchers themselves were very pro-gay marriage (one is gay himself), so they were committed to those normative grounds. But they also have an over-riding commitment to those methodological grounds. I think that one concern with qualitative research is that it lacks that over-riding commitment; in fact, I'm pretty sure that some qualitative

precisely because those methods are associated with certain ne
So, for those reasons, I would still be more confident in the abili
own biases.

Sophia Murphy on [June 18, 2015 at 9:51 am](#) said:

Thanks for these replies. I would only say that I am b
training – at unpacking an argument than understand
am stronger ground arguing with the qualitative work.
experience, because those who are rooted in quantita
inclined to presume normative bias in any qualitative
important part of human knowledge, and create some
exist (I don't deny that a lot of what we are calling nor
ghetto).

Umberto Eco's *How to Write a Thesis* is a very engag
politically committed undergraduate to do scientific w
ideas like falsifiability – what kind of evidence would p
training, especially now it has become so technical, ir
methods that can lead to very blind analysis because
discouraged) from actually going to look at the place
studying. There is a lot of interesting soul-searching a
these issues. It may be that the data, number crunchin
their own lights, but utterly useless or misleading bec
for the study. We don't call that bias, but I would say i
different kind (the numbers don't lie – oh yes they do.
real harm. Structural adjustment programme, anyone

Steven Ryan on [June 18, 2015 at 9:47 pm](#) said:

Applied econometric research today is con
causality as well as understanding the mec
Y. Papers reporting simple correlations in c
in prestigious journals and are not taken se
field.

As John Forrest mentioned, quantitative re
integrity of their methodology and less abo
position. In fact, for many academic quantiti
contradicts theoretical predictions is more l
(e.g., Card and Krueger's paper on the effe
example: randomized evaluations of microi
right-wing policy) have found it to be ineffe
recent evaluations of programs that transfe
poor have shown that these programs (a tr
if ever there was one) have significant posi

I would argue that quantitative researchers
their prior beliefs in light of new evidence. ~
ideologically-motivated researchers who us
(you can see this in any report from the Fra
you are trained in quantitative methodologi
honest studies from the ideologically-motiv

Lastly, a distinction needs to be made betw
and something like macroeconomics, which
sophistication is not scientific per se — mo
solving complicated equations on compute

to calibrate the parameters in the computer Structural Adjustment Policies, then blame 1970s and 1980s, not quantitative research

Purple Library Guy on [June 17, 2015 at 4:52 am](#) said:

I find myself in the odd position of finding your general thesis very persuasive every time you give an example.

Take the “culture of poverty”—generally, that notion gets disconfirmed every job-creating phase of economic growth, unless we’re willing to believe that masses of people periodically changing what culture they participate in. So worrying about what direction causes are going, there.

I was nodding sagely to myself about the “no levers” thesis until you said that affect status, and how the poor would be stigmatized by receiving wealth that might have an impact on status hierarchies. Promoting unionization and, in general, higher wages and so forth flattens status hierarchies. Wealth redistribution that might flatten hierarchies. Easier access to education flattens status hierarchies. And what flattens status hierarchies. Stigmatized by receiving redistributed wealth, if you compare places with redistributed wealth (times) with less, it seems clear that the stigma from receiving redistributed wealth is not as bad as the stigma from simply being poorer due to not receiving it. Homeless people, for example, are more stigmatized than people living in subsidized co-op housing. The former would be a good example than the latter. Panhandlers, similarly, are stigmatized much more than people who don't have checks used to be. I can remember thirty, forty years ago we didn't have banks and the poor were less stigmatized. The “no levers” thesis is no doubt still true, but that bad it makes me wonder where the good examples are hiding.

And so on and so forth. In the “Metaphysical Views” section, OK, I buy that, but then you claim that, basically, all arguments that inequality has terrible consequences are wrong, without actually making an argument that the arguments are wrong. I found fairly compelling that indeed, high inequality has various consequences, but these arguments do not exist in a vacuum—to the contrary, they are part of a larger argument wing claims that high inequality actually has very good consequences, is false, and is necessary (and so we should all shut up and tug forelock). These right wing arguments argue. So people arguing the “inequality is bad for things” group of theses are being cowed into agreeing on the basis of morality; they know that there is a better way to best to debunk anti-inequality arguments. Between my own assessment of the conditions you define as allowing for this kind of thing, I'd want some of the magical thinking is at work in arguments for the ill effects of inequality before.

Indeed, it almost seems as if there's a meta-example at work of your thesis that you disagree with, which you WANT to be caused by the kind of wrongheadedness that will be more readily dismissable.

On a side note, you're awfully breezy about the causes of revolutions, as it seems to me that there are an awful lot of counterexamples to the notion that revolutions are caused by economic conditions. No doubt sometimes, perhaps even often, that's involved, but in instance, I don't think post-WWII China was in the midst of improvements in living standards. Vietnam-war-era Cambodia. Or Haiti, either in the Duvalier era or the origin of the revolution when the dictatorship got turfed or in the “que se vayan todos” political crisis.

Swiss Frank on [June 19, 2015 at 1:00 pm](#) said:

An excellent article and thoughtful comments.

> Take the “culture of poverty”—generally, that notion gets disconfirmed every job-creating phase of economic growth, unless we're willing to believe that masses of people periodically changing what culture they participate in. So worrying about what direction causes are going, there.

I'm not in sociology but as an engineer with an interest in public concept of a culture of poverty, qualified explicitly or implicitly as poverty, that is not disconfirmed with the economic cycle.

Instead you're talking about temporary, monetary poverty. A coll well but spending every paycheck and suddenly unemployed, n in no time at all, and yet has good prospects in a year or two or employment at median salary levels or better. In contrast, an illii with a teenage birth and/or a felony record, has no chance of la be in a position to aspire to gain and keep minimum wage work. avoid passing on their poverty to their offspring thanks to poor p health and nutrition; poor understanding of child-rearing such as infant, reading to the infant, or bringing up in a two-parent house

Purple Library Guy on [June 20, 2015 at 12:37 am](#) said:

Nonetheless, when there are jobs, people will become Detroit did not become quasi-disaster areas because poverty. It was because the car companies stopped h in half and nearly eliminate illiteracy in ten years becæ their culture of poverty, it was because government s programs.

My own city does not have beggars on the streets to was young because the culture changed (or at least, because we cut social programs, government housin, unemployment.

rive gauche on [June 17, 2015 at 8:28 am](#) said:

Normative philosophy = bad sociology. The critic of qualitative sociology b observation"; presents a complex analysis of cause in his bottle-throwing e variable explanation of revolutions; doesn't understand that SES is measu income of occupations, and thus has nothing to do with government transf structural and cultural explanations of urban poverty presented by 'liberal' Wilson. This is an effort worthy of Margaret Wente. There, that should get

MD on [June 18, 2015 at 4:12 pm](#) said:

On policy levers: I would add that the absence of an initially obvious policy of one will persist. By dismissing causal factors that lack policy levers, an i they can't identify a relevant policy lever, no one else can. The unfortunate causal factors that have no policy levers provides opportunity for others to them to solve the problem.

Swiss Frank on [June 19, 2015 at 1:13 pm](#) said:

> Many of our outstanding social problems remain outstanding because th immediate jurisdiction of the state: ... because they involve an exercise of dropping out of high school).

While I like and and agree with your analysis, I felt this one example might This can in fact be put in the remit of the state. Brasil and Mexico have ha and Progres-a-Oportunidades aid programs, that give almost ridiculously s immunization and school attendance. The Economist mentioned, I believe some form. My suggestion for school attendance in the US is that they be \$200/month for 12 months every time the kid advances a level of literacy e

excellent attendance. This could allow the parent to reduce MW employment to give some oversight to homework and attendance. It also serves to rectify discount benefits in the far future, and more-so as you move to less-successful 12th-grade literacy landing a good solid job is so far in the future that parents pay \$200 this month (or \$50 this week) if and only if your kid's attendance is poor to command attention.

Naturally this type of govt prompting hasn't been shown to work in this country. It strikes me that there's enough of a chance that it can't be said out of parents' hands that youth's continued attendance in school.

<http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2012/01/focus-2>

<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21638333-developing-countries-heres-how-they-should-do-it>

Awesome We11es on June 20, 2015 at 4:59 am said:

"The difference is that people on the left are often more keen on solving various problems. It means: "...people on the left are often more keen on [using the state to] solve various problems."

Jacob Felson on June 20, 2015 at 11:21 pm said:

The phrase "normative sociology" is, I think, almost redundant if by sociology is meant the currently practiced. Some examples:

- * Sociologists' explanations of global inequality in recent decades have been based on world systems theory (with notable exceptions, i.e. the work of Glenn Feldman), the empirical basis of which is quite limited. Social stratification textbooks in sociology are based on the work of leading economists on the subject, i.e. Acemoglu and Robinson. I suspect to many sociologists given his focus on market-based solutions.

- * My sense is that most sociologists believe strongly in the power of neighborhood performance, even after the Moving to Opportunity experiment provided proof to the contrary.

- * The evidence from innumerable twin studies about genetic effects on outcomes seems to have had little impact on much of the discipline for precisely the reasons mentioned above.

Perhaps I shouldn't paint with such a broad brush. There are probably a good number of sociologists moved by evidence, but with a few prominent exceptions, they aren't as vocal as they should be.

There is a book about this by one of the heretics in the field, Christian Smith: *The Moral Education of Americans*.

There are certainly exceptions, but I think much of the field is guilty.

guest on June 21, 2015 at 11:06 pm said:

Some people, wherever they look, see injustice and suffering — this garden of Eden, is lost upon them. You can't appease that mind set. Their righteous anger is justified.

Patri Friedman on June 24, 2015 at 1:57 pm said:

Great post in general, but:

"I actually think this sort of confusion between the moral and the causal or having a lot of sympathy for "qualitative" social science, I think the problem is one of the major advantages of quantitative approaches to social science is that it's impossible to get away with doing normative sociology."

Seems like you've never heard of macroeconomics. Or, more generally, p-techniques available to impose one's "shoulds" on quantitative social scier bring things from should-based reasoning" towards is-based reasoning, bu way too far. There is tons of normative quantitative analysis in the social s

Bill on [July 3, 2015 at 10:32 pm](#) said:

Really enjoyed this. I'm interested to know whether you think scapegoatist different to you to blame for something so you can feel less personal resp of the variants above (e.g. #1) or an additional/different one. When I've ob thoughts on climate change I've come to the conclusion that they "want" to culprits. Blaming corporations is certainly a very practical step as it makes unite and take action (policy levers). But I have a feeling there may be sor the expediency of finding a course of action.