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A NEW SOCIAL STUDIES

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The lack of a theoretical base or conceptual framework is usually considered the central problem of the social studies at the high school level. Mr. Brady has devised organizing principles which give them a unity, coherence, and comprehensiveness far superior to any traditional course or combination of courses. He makes values, individual differences, and cultural change pivotal areas. There will be serious practical difficulties of implementation, but the KAPPAN editors believe social studies teachers now have the improved levels of preparation, the increased time for planning, and the more sophisticated instructional materials to make this scheme genuinely feasible.

THIS paper proposes some rather distinct boundaries to be placed around the entire field of the social studies, boundaries that will both exclude a great deal of the traditional content and make necessary the inclusion of materials not now ordinarily a part of social studies courses. Its secondary purpose is to present a system for structuring the content to be included within those boundaries.

I

In an article in *Needed Research in the Social Studies*, John H. Haefner comments, "Curriculum development over the years, I believe, indicates that we have been seeking, and experimenting with, 'cohesive principles' which might bring some kind of order and sequence to the diverse subject matter of the social sciences, and which might serve in selecting content in social studies in the schools."

The social studies discipline here proposed consists of four areas of study which, I believe, provide cohesion and unity. The object of study is the social group, to be considered as a theoretical construct, but utilizing particular social groups as a source of data.

Pitirim A. Sorokin defines a social group as "an interacting group of individuals [which] has as its *raison d'etre* a consistent set of meanings-values-norms that satisfies their needs and for whose use, enjoyment, maintenance, and growth the individuals are freely or coercively bound together into one collectivity with a definite and consistent set of law-norms prescribing their conduct and relationships..."

In the brief discussion which follows, no attempt will be made to deal exhaustively with each of the four areas of study on a theoretical level. Instead, each area will be titled in such a way as to clearly suggest its central theoretical concern, to be followed by comments illustrating possible additional subject matter if the social group being studied was "Americans." As the

parts of the discipline are developed, they will be placed within a graphic model to assist in the conceptualization of their interrelationships.

1. Value Systems: Dominant Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs

The anthropologist Robert Redfield, in *Human Nature and the Study of Society*, testified to the importance of a study of values when he said:

. . . as each fresh effort is made to understand humanity “as it really is,” the thing turns out to be made of states of mind. And of these states of mind, the scheme of values of people are central and of most importance.

It is this scheme of values which we must come to understand if we are to understand a man or a tribe or a nation.

No one familiar with the literature on the subject would maintain that any of the social sciences has reduced the study of values to manageable proportions. It is possible, however, to gain information about a group's more important values, those which give it a distinctive configuration, from a variety of sources. Social scientists, foreign visitors, poets, and other perceptive observers are aware of dominant values, attitudes, and beliefs. They can be inferred from answers to such questions as: What is the nature of man? What are his responsibilities and rights? What are his roles in relation to other men? To his environment? What obligations does he have, if any, to future generations?

Charles Frankel has asked that such studies about the U.S. be included in the curriculum. He says:

For a number of years now, some first-rate work has been going on in the United States in the empirical study of existing social attitudes and beliefs. This work is valuable in itself, and it also provides invaluable object-lessons in the difference between genuine knowledge and mere opinion about the social facts.

There are ready-made sources of information about American values, and to books such as *Plainville, U.S.A.* and *Elmtown's Youth* can be added the observations of students themselves. Students can soon become sensitive to indicators of values in the movies they see and the comics they read. They can, for example, build for themselves an understanding of the extent to which Americans have an antipathy toward authority by seeing how frequently it is relied upon for the humor in television shows, in the characterization of the officers in “Beetle Bailey,” and even by observing their own behavior.

The American cannot be fully understood unless one appreciates the pervasiveness of this antipathy toward authority and the eight or 10 other core values which characterize him. Similarly, such core values must be determined for any people the student is seeking to understand.

As an instructional device and as an aid in the conceptualizing of certain characteristics of values as such, the core values of a particular group are placed within a diagram as they are identified, as in Figure 1. The arrow shape is primarily for the purpose of indicating the fact of value change through time.

The study of the concepts of values, attitudes, and beliefs, and the identification of them for a particular society, is one of the four parts of this proposed discipline.

2. Sociocultural Drifts

The second major area of study in this proposed social studies' discipline deals with major cultural changes that exhibit some direction and persist over a period of time, usually several years. These long-term changes or trends are sometimes called "sociocultural drifts." Such movement is the result of an accumulation of a great number of individual decisions, each of which is seen as being too insignificant to be of any consequence to society as a whole. The decisions are also usually motivated by some desire so foreign to social change that their impact is unsuspected.

For example, it is unlikely that anyone involved in the development, manufacture, or distribution of drugs is motivated primarily by a desire to institute social change. But it is a fact that in part due to the drug industry, the proportion of the aged in the United States has steadily increased, with political, economic, and social consequences that have been largely unforeseen. Similarly, it is individual decision that tacks suburb to suburb and problem to problem as urban areas expand without plan.

Sociocultural drifts make few headlines, but they are the raw material of most problems that societies face. Population increase, automation, urbanization, centralization, and a constantly increasing' gross national product, are five of perhaps 10 such important trends in the United States. C. Wright Mills underlined their importance when he wrote in the introduction to *White Collar*, "The first lesson of modern sociology is that the individual cannot understand his own experience or judge his own fate without locating himself in the trends of his epoch. . . ."

As these trends in the society being studied are identified, they are placed in an arrow shape also and juxtaposed to "Dominant Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs."

The causes of long-term drifts or trends of social change and the identification of these for a particular society are aspects of the second area of study in this proposed discipline. '

3. Historical and Geographic Factors Influencing Values and Drifts

After the dominant values and the major directions of drift within a society being studied have been established, the objective is now the identification of historical experiences of sufficient impact to create those values and trends.

This is the province of the historian, but involves an approach to history that, in the United States at least, has been in some disrepute. By bringing the unavoidable subjectivity of historical writing into the open, it appears less scientific, a "textbook style" becomes nearly impossible, and controversy is built into the writing at a level that is apparent to the layman as well as the scholar.

Nevertheless, an awareness of the "childhood experiences" of a people is essential to an understanding of that people. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis of American Democracy" is hardly an adequate explanation of America's democratic political institutions, but who would claim that those institutions can be understood without a knowledge of the impact of the frontier? And who would deny that America's geographic isolation has not been of consequence in the formation of the values of her people?

Turner's thesis has already been mentioned. Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted*, Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and David Potter's *People of Plenty* explore three of the eight or 10 major historical factors¹ which may have helped to mold the modern American. This approach would replace the traditional chronological study of American history. In the study of a society, the major historical and geographical factors and their relative influence would be the content of part three of this proposed social studies discipline. Figure 3 shows one arrangement of the three components of the discipline so far introduced.

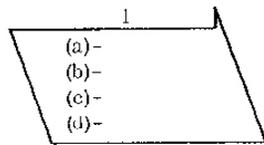


Figure 1

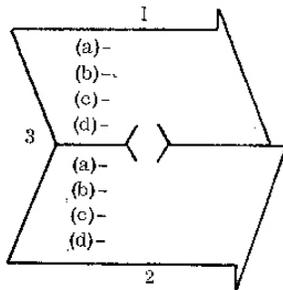


Figure 2

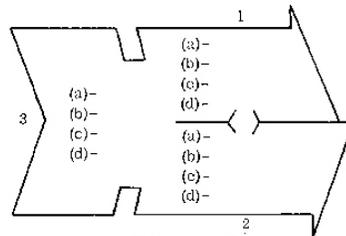


Figure 3

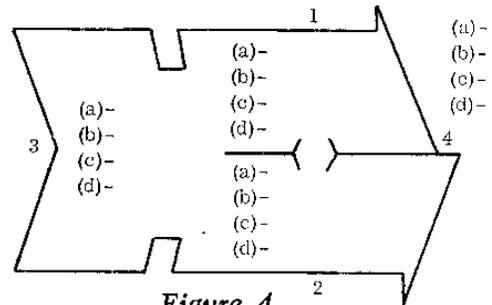


Figure 4

4. Social Problems: Value-Drift Conflict

A more elaborate version of the model here proposed suggests three kinds of problems: value-conflict, drift-conflict, and value-drift conflict. For purposes of instruction at the secondary level, however, value-drift conflicts encompass a sufficient range of problems for this fourth area of study.

The failure of the two points of the arrow to coincide represents a generalization regarding the tendency of value changes to lag behind the drifts, particularly in complex social groups. In using the model to study tradition-directed societies, the two points would more nearly coincide. This lag between values and drifts may at first appear to be Ogburn's "cultural lag" between the material and nonmaterial aspects of the culture. They are not the same, for although "values" are part of the nonmaterial culture, "drifts" include more than mere material change.

While advanced students might want to consider questions relating to social disorganization or disintegration at this point, most would concern themselves with the more frequently discussed social problems. The relating of values and drifts in the model helps avoid one of the greatest weaknesses in the traditional "problems" courses—the failure to take formal account of the values or attitudes of those who can institute or veto solutions. For example, if you placed them side by side in the diagram, it can more readily be remembered that a particular American value (that there ought to be a direct relationship between time spent on the job and

wages paid) will be an obstacle to the solution of problems which will arise from the trend toward automation.

The completed diagram is shown in Figure 4, and represents the model that is proposed for the whole of the social studies discipline at the secondary level. It would be applied to every society—ancient or modern, primitive or complex—of which a study is to be made. Simple as the diagram is, it helps to conceptualize social change, the static tendency of values, the dynamic nature of sociocultural drift, the interaction of the four categories of social studies, and a possible cause of social disorganization or disintegration.

II

What characteristics of such an approach to the social studies would seem to recommend it?

First, it has an inherent flexibility, for the content changes as scholarship opens new doors to the past and the passage of time alters the problems with which a society is confronted. Combined with a teacher education program which emphasized the structure of the discipline rather than the content, the creation of a “self-renewing” teacher might be more nearly realized.

Second, it directs the student to the kinds of questions for which he must seek answers, rather than presenting him with information to be learned that will very likely soon be dated. It adapts admirably to a “discovery” method of learning.

Third, it makes relevant a great deal of really worthwhile reading that does not ordinarily fit into the traditional curriculum. Alexis de Tocqueville, Lord Bryce, Thorstein Veblen, and contemporary writers of real stature have direct comments to make about the questions such a social studies program raises. It constantly pushes students into areas of inquiry in which social scientists are working, removing the “Mickey Mouse” stigma abler students sometimes attach to social studies.

Fourth, it provides a perspective beyond that which is possible from the usual courses offered. By applying the model to representative cultures in various parts of the world, crucial rather than superficial differences appear, and a dimension of humanness emerges that is not realized when those peoples are lost in the usual textbook descriptions of events that happened to follow one another in time-proximity and space-adjacency.

Fifth, it provides guidelines for the contributions of social scientists to the curriculum. Committees of some of the disciplines have already prepared materials which fit in very well. Individual sociocultural drifts would make excellent units, as would separate treatments of dominant values. Social scientists could contribute further by being the authority for the future addition or deletion of particular items within each of the content areas. Incidentally, an independent social studies discipline which made well-defined demands on the various social sciences might head off the competition for the high school student's time that is shaping up among them.

Sixth, the curriculum presents opportunities for integrating other areas of study. Values are the artist's and author's central concern. They defend, delineate, or rebel against them, or pit value against value to create conflict. It is even possible that values and value change could provide a major unifying device for the study of American and other national literatures.

Seventh, the model provides bases for prediction, which is, after all, a major aim of science. In this respect also it is superior to most existing "problems" courses which frequently attempt to utilize the methods but disregard the objectives of science. Two factors bearing on prediction, multiple causation and cumulative causation, are suggested by the arrangement of components of the model.

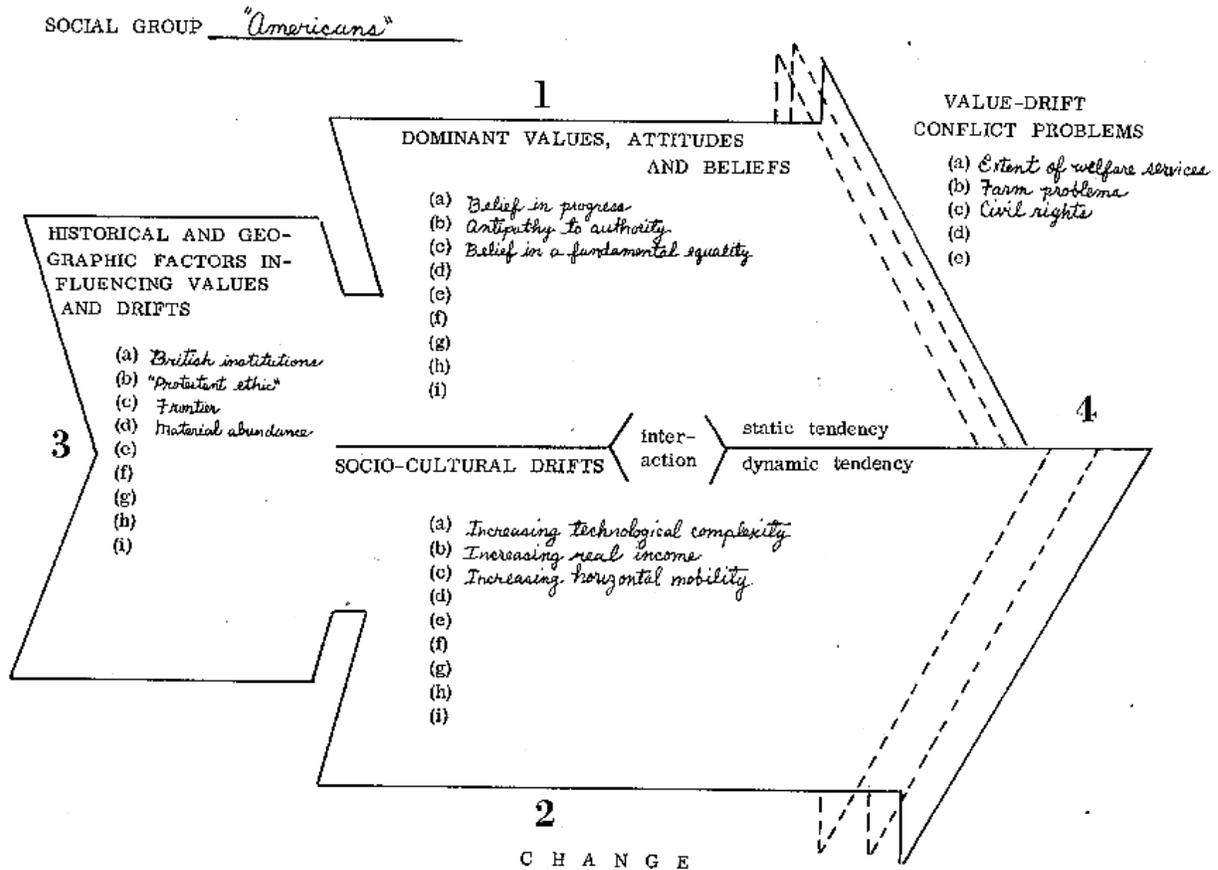


Figure 5

Eighth, a commonly accepted discipline would permit the intra-discipline communication essential to improvement and refinement. Those who maintain there is strength in a variety of social studies curricula miss a point. Strength comes from many different approaches to a common content rather than from variation in content.

Ninth, as an instructional device, the model appears to be psychologically sound. Ausubel, in *Education and the Structure of Knowledge*, says:

The principle of subsumption . . . provides a key to understanding the processes underlying the psychological accretion and organization of knowledge. The human nervous system as a data processing and storing mechanism is so constructed that new ideas and information can be meaningfully learned and retained only to the extent that more inclusive and appropriately relevant concepts are already available in cognitive structure to serve a subsuming role or to provide ideational anchorage.

. . . control over the accuracy, clarity, longevity in memory, and transferability of a given body of knowledge can be most effectively exercised by attempting to influence the crucial variable of cognitive structure. This can be done both substantively and programatically by using for organizational and integrative purposes those unifying concepts and propositions in a given discipline that have the widest explanatory power, inclusiveness, generalizability, and relatability to the subject matter content of that discipline. . . .

III

The political, social, and economic instructional objectives which the social studies have adopted over the years are of almost heroic dimensions. Nothing less than magic could bridge the gulf between those objectives and most of the activities common to the traditional social studies. But there are believers in that magic, those who have a vague but certain conviction that mere exposure to an account of the past or to a description of the mechanical processes of government somehow creates citizens of a high order.

The objections will be particularly great to any curriculum that establishes boundaries of lesser extent than those previously claimed. To give up such objectives as “educating for democratic citizenship” or for “socially useful work” is like giving up a necessary measure of social control. But such objectives, those which come very close to suggesting a manipulative function for the social studies that is not claimed by other subjects, must be eliminated. Social studies will not be a legitimate discipline until its primary concern is the search for truth in a well-defined area of knowledge.

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