4-2-2021

Distinctions and Something Between: An Inspection of Eviatar Zerubavel's Concept Driven Sociology

Krzysztof T. Konecki
University of Lodz, krzysztof.konecki@gmail.com

Distinctions and Something Between: An Inspection of Eviatar Zerubavel's Concept Driven Sociology

Abstract

The paper presents short summaries and analyses of two books by Eviatar Zerubavel (2018a; 2020) that are demonstrations of his approach to cognitive sociology. The first book (2018a) shows examples of the analysis in Zerubavelian cognitive sociology, and the second one is a methodological and theoretical elaboration of his approach described in formal terms. We analyze the approach presented at the end of the paper, showing that the analysis of distinctions and perceptive categories is essential in Zerubavel analysis. Still, there is an unclear dimension (*in between*) included in the contexts of perception, lived experiences, and perception of the world beyond the categories that we introduce in our analysis.

Keywords

Creative Commons License

Distinctions and Something Between:
An Inspection of Eviatar Zerubavel's Concept Driven Sociology

Krzysztof T. Konecki
Lodz University, Poland

The paper presents short summaries and analyses of two books by Eviatar Zerubavel (2018a; 2020) that are demonstrations of his approach to cognitive sociology. The first book (2018a) shows examples of the analysis in Zerubavelian cognitive sociology, and the second one is a methodological and theoretical elaboration of his approach described in formal terms. We analyze the approach presented at the end of the paper, showing that the analysis of distinctions and perceptive categories is essential in Zerubavel analysis. Still, there is an unclear dimension (*in between*) included in the contexts of perception, lived experiences, and perception of the world beyond the categories that we introduce in our analysis.

Keywords: Zerubavelian cognitive sociology, semiotics, grounded theory

Presentation of the Books and Concepts

Eviatar Zerubavel (2020) recently wrote a book that summarizes his approach to analyzing social phenomena from a cognitive sociology perspective. This perspective is rooted in interactionist tradition, especially in Simmelian sociology and Goffmanian perspective. The perception of reality is socially framed, and we use it in interactions, usually when we do not know about the origin of our categories of perception or about the ignorance that comes from the blindness created by the points of attention that is ignited by the inherited cognitive frames for perception and categories of seeing and not seeing some objects. Therefore, how can we analyze ignored phenomena and facts that are so close to us and possibly in direct view? Zerubavel shows a practical method of analysis in the book *Taken for Granted: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable*, published in 2018. It presents the method of analyzing the areas of ignorance and imperception that are in the background of what we see. The author shows that when we concentrate more on one part of a phenomenon, we do not see another, obvious part; one that is, for this reason, not marked.

We assume the second part of the distinction in a category by default and take it for granted. When we say "woman murderer," we mark it; when we say murderer, we believe that it is a man. Usually, an occupations' labels are considered masculine; otherwise, they are marked as feminine. We should not exceed the masculine labels, and we assume that occupations and professions are mainly masculine (for example, a plumber). Among many anthropologists, the word man is practically a synonym of male, although it theoretically refers to human beings (Perez, 2019, p. 4). Seemingly, gender-neutral labels such as user, participant, person, designer, or researcher were perceived mainly as masculine in gender (Bradley et al., 2015). When we label homosexuals, we hide heterosexuals, whom we take for granted. These *lexical gaps* arise when we rarely use some terms because some objects are understood *per se* and do not need explanations with other words.

The sociologist's goal, which uses the cognitive perspective in the analysis, is to show how phenomena are perceived and not perceived. This goal is expressed in the sentence below:

Studying the unmarked, in short, requires exceptional self-reflectiveness about what we habitually and thus pre-reflectively take for granted! (Zerubavel, 2018a, p. 9)

The sociology of looking for unarticulated and silenced phenomena is the sociology of everyday life. Therefore, the politics of attention management exists in our everyday life, in the language used in the media and ordinary conversations. Not noticing something is meaningful, and it could have political meanings in relation to power. The first is the power of language, and secondly, it is connected with social structure and institutions. Social order could be maintained by using certain linguistic categories and assuming other ones. Unmarkedness is a political tool that is often used unconsciously by social actors, and revealing this phenomenon is a goal of cognitive sociologists. Gender and color are often assumed, if not mentioned; when we speak about humans, they are usually considered male and white. Dominance is included in the frames of how reality is perceived, although it is called normality (Zerubavel, 2018b, p. 58). Discussions about these frames of perception could be liberating, or they might start a new way of perceiving social objects. I think it is also a socially important consequence of Zerubavelian sociology.

Naming some unmarked phenomena makes them visible (Zerubavel, 2018a, p. 65). Studying maleness shows male language's dominance and the dominance of maleness in the social structure (Zerubavel, 2018a, p. 69).

We see that a person is social and is socially determined in his or her perception. Socialized language is vital for reproducing social structure and power. To build the conceptual structure of this cognitive determination, Zerubavel refers to the semiotics of Nikolai Trubetzkoy, and of fellow linguist, Roman Jakobson. Social distinctions are derivatives of the perceptive categories and marking or not marking some part of the categories that make distinctions. One thing can be unique and marked, while something else is "normal" and "ordinary," not significant enough to mark and mention in the public discourse (Zerubavel, 2018a, p. 97). Society produces attentional norms – what it is vital to see and talk about, and what it is not essential to notice. And these "unimportant to notice" objects could be decisive in keeping social order intact. Unmarkedness is meaningful. Zerubavel delivers a tool to uncover what is not mentioned, to foreground what is *implicit*. The dominance of some social forces could be made explicit. Personal feelings could be less important than attentional norms and subsequent perceptions of the social world.

<p align="center">***</p>

The second book I present in this paper, *Generally Speaking: An Invitation to Concept Driven Sociology*, summarizes the methodological and epistemological knowledge that comes from the scientific work experiences of Eviatar Zerubavel, who created and used theoretical concepts to analyze social phenomena in sociology. The book refers to many of the author's previous publications, so at the beginning, I mention mainly the first important breakthrough book here (*The Fine Line. Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*, 1991), where inspiration from gestalt psychology is the start of thinking on perceived and not perceived objects and the socio-psychological phenomena of ignoring, the conspiracy of silence, social distinctions, fuzzy minds, "unmarkedness," and semiotic asymmetry, which we can find in the author's other books (Zerubavel, 2015a, 2015b, 2018a).

Zerubavel is skeptical about the division of theory and methodology, writing that it is a "false distinction." He states that theory and methodology are strictly connected. A theory is needed to see something at all, while an a priori scheme of perception is needed in research. Zerubavel is not a data-driven analyst, as he testifies in the book (Zerubavel, 2020, p. 2). His

concept-driven sociology is from a different perspective than grounded theory (GT). GT is a data-driven methodology, and concepts are created in collecting and analyzing empirical data. However, the goal is the same, that is, to create a theory to understand phenomena and the conditions for their existence. Looking for patterns is the main strategy of concept-driven sociology. Grounded theory also aims to reconstruct patterns, but it starts with data and the analysis of the data, sometimes with the help of sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2006).

At the beginning of any research, analyst-researchers (they should be called analysts because they analyze extant data more than ethnographically collected data) follow proto-ideas (Zerubavel, 2020, p. 4), which leads them to observe reality and analyze it through the prisms of concepts. Later, analyst-researchers sharpen the categories and make them clear-cut concepts. These proto-concepts, and the topics associated with them, lead sociologists in their analytical work and help them focus on examples that help define concepts that describe some social phenomena theoretically (Zerubavel, 2020, p. 7). Existing concepts might be useful to see and analyze the social reality; so, generally, a scientist's attentional socialization helps him or her see some phenomena.

By using or creating concepts through generalizations, one can transgress the borders of situations, societies, or historical periods, as in the analysis of totemism in Australia (Zerubavel, 2020, p. 13). This is formal sociology (in reference to Simmel), which can be applied in many situations by transgressing them (Zerubavel, 1980, 1995). Zerubavel goes into trans-situational, conceptual sociology, which creates general concepts but not universal ones, which he explicitly underlines (Zerubavel, 2020, pp. 17-18).

Exampling is a strategy to show and sensitize the constructed concepts. Examples are treated as data that help to theorize, and this strategy is very similar to the one used by Erving Goffman (1974) in many of his analyses. Examples might represent patterns. Exemplification proves and shows the concretization of concepts, categories, and patterns of conceptually described phenomena. This is what happens in concept-driven sociology, and it is similar to presenting analytical reports in constructivist grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2006). Examples from a different context—situational, historical, or cultural—might ensure the generalizability of the concept. Thus, researchers look for similarities, lumping them from these examples but ignoring any differences and peculiarities (Zerubavel, 2020, pp. 27-29).

When comparing empirical cases from different contexts or different structural levels of society, we think *analogically*. The analyst-researcher ignores singularity and disregards context—historical or cultural—in formulating patterns. If he or she analyzes collective remembering, for example, the political fight over the tokens that are important in our past can be seen. Sometimes we have a redefinition of collective memory, exemplified in historical handbooks at school, or in the erecting of new monuments, or the naming of streets, airports, or railway stations for national heroes, which can signify a new vision of the past.

Zerubavel states that removing the context during an analysis is a methodological virtue (Zerubavel, 2020, p. 63). Analogical transfers might be very illuminating and creative, and comparative analysis across substantive fields was also the methodological principle used by Everett Hughes (Hughes, 1971, p. 316). Zerubavel believes that breaking the habit of seeking differences and starting to look for similarities between "incomparable objects" might give us innovative findings (Zerubavel, 2020, pp. 70-71), and he also states that looking for deep commonalities can even give analysts aesthetic pleasure.

Analysis

We need concepts to see reality from a particular perspective. This is the obvious truth, and we all probably agree. We see reality through filters, special spectacles, and reconstructing

it can reveal the veiled dimensions of social life. I can agree with this option of analysis. However, we need more spectacles to see more—and not only inherited concepts. We want to look for slots in reality to find something new. We need to contemplate when to choose the concepts or theories or to create new concepts. Why do we change the filter of perception? Why do we change the spectacles? What is the reason for choosing this kind of concept and not another one? What are we really looking for by using concepts if we know in advance what the reality is?

When I have chosen the concepts, I should ask: How did I find myself at this moment of theorizing? What existed before in my theorizing situation, what is there now, and what do I want to achieve with these concepts? Thus, we need contemplation at that moment (Bentz & Giorgino, 2016). When we follow the concept of looking at reality, we can be concise and disciplined in our investigation endeavor. Still, in this way, we can lose what the proto-ideas that lead us do not notice. These other phenomena (they may be casual or intervening conditions) do exist in reality, however, and they could influence phenomena named with preconceived concepts. All these preconceived concepts can make the researchers blind, as they become focused on a reality that is already structured by concepts.

Abandoning the ethnographic or historical contexts of investigated phenomena could be misleading when sharpening the concepts that might finally describe the conceptual reality created by the researcher.

Zerubavel underlines that concept-driven sociology, being trans-contextual, that is, crossing different substantive, historical, and cultural domains, could be a very creative endeavor. However, theory or concepts can limit the researcher from accessing his or her intuition—tacit knowledge that itself can inspire discoveries when exploring some domains of reality. Below, I quote Hungarian poet and writer Sandor Marai to show that a preconceived theory, or focusing on a theory and concepts and schemes, can limit creativity and the motivation to work directly with some parts of reality, like sounds or bodies. A theoretically focused mind could work in this way:

> I was visited by a lawyer from Pest who now has a factory here, and he told me that Bartók had struggled with serious financial problems in the last years of his life. He had a chance to work at the local universities on condition that he taught composition. But he did not want to teach composition because he was afraid that if he became too conscious of theory, he would lose his desire to compose. Like Mikszáth's blacksmith, who could perform eye surgery with a penknife until someone explained to him more precisely what the human eye actually is. (Marai, 2017, p. 287; entry dated April 19, 1953)

Zerubavel mentions the difference between his perspective of concept-driven sociology and grounded theory methodology (GTM): "Unlike grounded-theory practitioners, concept-driven sociologists actually establish their initial theoretical concerns before they even start collecting their data. It is their unmistakably conceptual focus. Indeed, that drives the empirical part of their research" (Zerubavel, 2020, p. 6). Yes, this is a tremendous difference with any GT. However, there are many different kinds of GT style of theorizing and research. Barney Glaser and his school of Classical Grounded Theory are empirically driven, and they assume an almost blank mind before going to the field of research (Glaser, 1978, 1992, 2002; Glaser & Holton, 2004). Strauss and Corbin's style of GTM is more moderate. Some structural perception in reality is given a priori (conditions, causes, actions, contexts, and consequences; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Charmaz's approach (2006, 2008) is, in turn, a constructivist style of research, more abductive than deductive. Concepts are important, although they do not always dominate when directing the researcher in searching for the properties to saturate them.

Charmaz used preconceived concepts and treated them as sensitizing concepts, but she was not attached to them, as is the case in concept-driven sociology. In each style of GTM, there is a necessity to ground the categories in empirical evidence and have conceptual but empirically based properties of categories. We can define concepts and look for their connections with each other later. Concepts are grounded in empirical findings.

Concept-driven sociology is a kind of structuralist sociology. It is not interested in the subject's feelings, the lived experience or in the creation of and sometimes battle, negotiations, or manipulations over the patterns of behaviors (described by them) imposed on the individual. This kind of sociology is not interested in the living experiences of an individual in context. Some structure and patterns of human minds and bodies exist. Pre-linguistic and interactionally driven cognition, here and now, in social interaction is not the aim of such research. But it does not mean that concept-driven research is not valid or not needed. We need to structure our analytical endeavors to have generalizations, and we can use many inspirations from Zerubavel's methodological proposals, for example, analogical thinking or looking for *"unmarked phenomena."* They are also illuminating and helpful when researching lived experiences in situational contexts. Ethnographical research also needs to reconstruct patterns and to contemplate the subjects' feelings in the interaction, which could enrich such research. I personally incorporate some concept-driven sociology rules in other sociological research styles, such as sociological ethnography, contemplative sociology, sociology based on personal documents, and even analytical autoethnography.

As a contemplative sociologist (Konecki, 2018; see also Bentz & Giorgino, 2016), I accept the inspiration concerning the mind's work. The two mental processes of lumping and splitting (Zerubavel, 1991, 2020), used to separate the island of meaning, need careful attention. But it is also necessary to check the subjects' living experiences and their thoughts, body feelings, and emotions that appear during the lumping and splitting. Is it only a habitual act or reflexive based on the commonsense analysis of the rules of behaviors and the boundaries that they create? How can we separate mental clusters of artists from scientists if some humanistic researchers connect both domains? (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 21) What contemplative practices are used to make such distinctions or lumping? If we experience gaps between the domains that induce us to divide two provinces of meaning, why do we not connect them? What is the reason for connecting or splitting?

The gap that appears in meditation between thoughts is sometimes the aim of meditation; however, in this situation, the void or emptiness shows the connection, not a division. Contemplating it could explain to us why it happens. Separation also evokes feelings, and it is fascinating what is going on during that time, at that point, or just in the image of the separation of me from you; the separation of the frame of a picture from you in the situation of seeing; the separation of my village from your village; the separation of present me from the old me.

Between separated worlds, there is a "gray area," a space where something is in the potentiality of being; there is an uncertain feeling of something that could happen, but it is still suspended in non-execution. Intuition might feel it, but concepts cannot describe it yet. It is a "Country of Metaxy" ($\mu\varepsilon\tau\alpha\xi\acute{\upsilon}$)—as described by Tokarczuk, (2020)—where we have a space between two worlds, and it is blurred, unclear, and open to metaphorical, analogous thinking. It is also immersed in non-linear being, a world where concepts overlap, where something new and original can emerge. In the world between, symbols are not treated literally, but they give inspiration for interpretation. There are meanings behind the literal signs that need interpretative work and intellectual speculation. There is something between small and big groups, between self and other, between life and death, body and mind, reason and emotions, wisdom and stupidity, theory and empirical facts. The interbeing is often felt and experienced but not always named. There are images, but not exact categories and concepts that divide the

world into clear distinctive areas of being. We can look for them while analyzing general concepts to avoid literal and distinctive thinking and to look for meanings that change and appear in new shapes and new experiences, and that are often *between.*

References

Bentz, V. M., & Giorgino, V. (2016). *Contemplative social research. Caring for self, being and lifeworld.* Fielding University Press.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. University of California Press.

Bradley, A., MacArthur, C., Hancock, M., & Carpendale, S. (2015). *Gendered or neutral? Considering the language of HCI*. Graphics Interface Conference 2015, 3–5 June, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. http://graphicsinterface.org/wp-content/uploads/gi2015-21.pdf

Charmaz, K. (2006.) *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* Sage.

Charmaz, K. (2008). Constructionism and grounded theory method. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 397-412). The Guilford Press.

Glaser, B. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity.* Sociology Press.

Glaser, B. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis*. The Sociology Press.

Glaser, B. (2002). Constructivist grounded theory? *Forum: Qualitative social research* [online], 3(3). http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqstexte/3–02/3–02glaser-e.htm)

Glaser, B., & Holton, J. (2004). Remodeling grounded theory. *Forum: Qualitative social research* [online], 5(2). http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/607/1316

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Anchor.

Hughes, E. C. (1971). *The sociological eye: Selected papers*. Aldine & Atherton.

Konecki, K. T. (2018). *Advances in contemplative social research,* Lodz University Press / Jagiellonian University Press.

Marai, S. (2017). *Dziennik 1949-1956*. (*A teljes Napló; Diary 1949-1956,* Polish edition) Czytelnik.

Perez, C. C. (2019). *Invisible women: Data bias in a world designed for men*. Abrams Press.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage.

Tokarczuk, O. (2020). *Czuły narrator* (*The tender narrator*). Wydawnictwo Literackie.

Zerubavel, E. (1980). If Simmel were a fieldworker: On formal sociological theory and analytical field research. *Symbolic Interaction*, *3*(2), 25–34.

Zerubavel, E. (1991). *The fine line. Making distinctions in everyday life*. Chicago University Press.

Zerubavel, E. (1995). The rigid, the fuzzy, and the flexible: Notes on the mental sculpting of academic identity. *Social Research*, *62*(4), 1093–1106.

Zerubavel, E. (2015a). *Hidden in plain sight: The social structure of irrelevance*. Oxford University Press.

Zerubavel, E. (2015b). *The elephant in the room: Silence and denial in everyday life*. Oxford University Press.

Zerubavel, E. (2018a). *Taken for granted: The remarkable power of the unremarkable*. Princeton University Press.

Zerubavel E. (2018b). *Terra cognita*. Routledge.

Zerubavel, E. (2020). *Generally speaking. An invitation to concept driven sociology.* Oxford University Press.

Author Note

Krzysztof T. Konecki, Ph.D., is Chief of the Department of Sociology of Organization and Management at the University of Lodz (Poland), Editor-in-chief of *Qualitative Sociology Review*, and President of Polish Sociological Association. He is also a member of the Board of European Society for Study of Symbolic Interaction. He has published extensively on qualitative methods and grounded theory methodology and has done the study on symbolic interactions. His research interests include the sociology of organization and management, human and non-human animal interactions, qualitative methodology of social research, visual grounded theory, contemplative inquiry, hatha-yoga and contemporary forms of spirituality. Please direct correspondence to krzysztof.konecki@gmail.com.

Article Citation

Konecki, K. T. (2021). Distinctions and something between*:* A inspection of Eviatar Zerubavel's concept driven sociology. *The Qualitative Report, 26*(4), 1150-1156. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4780