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Review of David and Judith Willer, *Systematic Empiricism: Critique of a Pseudoscience* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1973)

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Willer, David; and Judith Willer. 1973. Systematic Empiricism: Critique of a Pseudoscience. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Thesis: Mainstream sociology, typically grounded in data generated by survey questionnaire techniques in tandem with systematic statistical analyses of correlations between **ad hoc**, arbitrarily selected (or, at best, very loosely rationalized) variables (i.e, empirical categories) is the very **opposite** of genuine (i.e., logically rationalized and philosophically defensible) scientific research. In essence, the Willers argue from a formalist platform that our standard sociological methods and statistics courses are scientifically worthless and that the novice sociologist who hungers after the "latest statistical techniques" and/or longs for a "good data set to analyze" is fundamentally an idiot who will nonetheless be showered with grant money and undoubtedly offered a good job by like-minded and equally stupid sociologists.

Major Assertions and Definitions

"We have been told a great number of falsehoods, the greatest of which is that empiricism is science" (p. 4). "Systematic empiricism developed from the [British] statistical tradition" (p. 58) and "is concerned with generalization through Karl Pearson's methods of relation, R.A. Fisher's methods of association, and induction to a denumerable set (population) from a smaller randomly selected set (sample)" (p. 44). "Generalizations are summarizing statements based on two or more observations of similarities" (p. 23). "The causal principle is an assumption (not open to proof) that there are cause-effect relations between observables. The empiricist researcher makes this assumption before attempting to search for order in the world in terms of causes" (p. 93). "Empiricism is systematic in that it consistently maintains observation as the sole basis of thought connection and in that it may systematically develop its techniques for generalization; but its individual statements cannot be rationally connected, and thus they form independent bits of knowledge" (p. 28). "Empiricism offers no basis for selection of topics for study among the infinity of things which can be observed . . . . The survey researcher is therefore often no more than a well-trained spy for those having the economic power to support them" (p. 87).

"'Theory' is often introduced into the research design [of systematic empiricism] by selecting from among the works of so-called theorists and introducing their attempts to describe society as if they were scientific theories . . . . This procedure . . . provides the researcher with a feeling that he has actually used theory in his design . . . . Borrowing empirical categories of Mead, Thomas, and Pareto [for example, as did Stouffer in **The American Soldier**] easily [but only loosely] provided criteria for selection [of data to be collected]. The importance of the 'theorist' and the high esteem given to him are reasons enough [for systematic empiricists] for use of his ideas because then the experiment [or survey] itself is backed by the method of **authority**. This is a partial explanation of the

symbolic relationship between empirical research and grand theory in sociology" (p. 65). "The significance of the theorist is, in turn, related to the number of researchers who have used his work, and we may again observe the elaborate ritual of mutual back-scratching which supports empiricist sociology when its logic fails" (p. 83).

"The established (and so-called "scientific") methods of sociology [e.g., the survey, scaling, tests of significance, correlation, partial correlation (i.e, statistical experiments), causal path modeling, etc.] are not the methods of science, but those of empiricism" (p. 4). The purpose of empiricist data collection "is to **find** an empirical generalization in the data. These generalizations are consequently referred to as **findings**" (p. 63). "Sociological surveys . . . today are intended to be analytic in the sense that they are intended to establish relations among observables" (p. 61), but "statistical generalizations from survey research are unrigorously uncertain. No [scientifically legitimate] positive associations can be made in the survey, and thus it is meaningless to relate variables by correlation" (p. 85). "The survey results in relative frequencies and nothing more. The attempt to transform these frequencies into empirical relationships by the application of statistical procedures is unjustified and futile" (p. 86). "The whole procedure might be described as systematic magic" (p. 67). "Scientific laws do not result from existing sociological methods; indeed, they cannot" (p. 5).

"The result [or "finding" in systematic empiricist research] is one [or more] subjectively selected association[s] sorted out from an objectively unlimited universe. The number of associations found is thus limited only by the number of researchers. This problem is obscured in the empiricist research procedure either by standardizing survey procedures . . . so that the "important" variables become a matter of tradition or by including an elaborate set of empirical generalizations ("hypotheses") which are vague enough (not having theoretical definitions) that they can be used to justify a multitude of empirical studies" (p. 83).

"Sociological knowledge is not scientific, but it could be" (p. 137). "Science is a system of knowledge because of its consistent use of a combination of empirical, rational, and abstractive connection in gathering and applying knowledge; but it is systematic also in the integration of its explanatory statements into a rationalized whole." (p. 28). "Abstraction is . . . a matter of establishing an isomorphism between theoretical nonobservables and empirical observations" (p. 26). A scientific explanation . . . employs not general causal statements, but determinative laws" (p. 20). "A theory is a constructed relational statement consisting of nonobservable concepts connected to other nonobservable concepts" (p. 24). "Prediction and explanation in science are . . . the result of calculation of possible values through the use of mental constructs, which are a product of the imagination rather than of the senses" (p. 27).