Reference Groups and the Formation of Opinion*

by Robert K. Merton

I

Two things must be evident at once from the title put before you. One, that I have adopted the traditional practice of putting those key terms into the title which are least well defined, in the hope that because of their very conspicuous nature there, you might temporarily overlook the difficulties involved in formulating these terms in more precise language that is ordinarily the case. The second thing which must have struck you as you looked at the title is that unlike some people who occupy themselves by carrying coals to Newcastle, I am here carrying reference group theory to Newcomb. If you suspect that I strained a point in order to arrive at alliteration, you're entirely justified.

The fact is, nevertheless, that it must seem odd for an outsider like myself to come to the University of Michigan and talk about reference group theory. For Michigan, the place where that Angellic old man Cooley lectured for so long, is also the place where he opened the door to reference group theory by some very suggestive pages on the "looking-glass self." But in a way, the paradox of selecting that subject for this place is very much to my purpose. For one of the central points I'd like to develop today deals with the marked discontinuity between the social and

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psychological theory of the past and present social research, and in part, I'll be concerned with asking why the beginnings represented by Cooley remained dormant for almost a generation or more before they were taken up in empirical research.

Translated into the language of contemporary research, what Cooley was driving at is that attitudes toward self, self-evaluations of self-images are in some way a function of the opinions regarding oneself attributed to others. That's not as illuminating and as cogent and brief a statement as Cooley's own description of the looking-glass-self, but it may conceivably turn out to be more useful in practice.

The questions which Cooley did not raise are perhaps of somewhat more interest to us today. He did not, for example, -- any more than his opposite number at Chicago, George Mead, -- he did not raise the question of which "others" are taken to provide the frame of reference for self-evaluation of self-appraisal. The notion that the judgments or attitudes or opinions of others are germane to one's self-appraisal, and the terms "other", "another", "the others" turn up literally on scores of occasions in the pages of Mead, and to some extent, of Cooley and James. That notion remains an undefined conception. I suggest that it remained undefined because in the generation following Cooley it was not made the subject of systematic empirical research. There emerged a concept which was loose and unspecified, but which was not identified as such, because it was not utilized in actual inquiry. This, then, is one of the possible
reasons for discontinuity between speculative formulations of the past and contemporary social research.

The second theme which I like to think will run through this discussion deals with the factors making for interplay between theoretical or speculative formulations and systematic empirical inquiry (as distinct from anecdotal observations of the kind to which Cooley and Mead were devoted). In this connection, I want to suggest a pattern of work, only in its beginnings today, which may help us bridge the gap in the field of social psychological surveys between theoretical products of the past and present investigations: that is the procedure of re-analysis of studies which have been completed and put forward in print for all the world to see. For some reason, not quite clear to me, the tradition has arisen in our field of not spelling out in a research report the new theoretical questions which have emerged in the course of that research. The purpose of re-analyzing the same material which has already been interpreted in print is to develop the unexplored hypotheses and conceptions which seem consistent with the reported data even though they have not been included in the document itself.

Indeed, the greater part of what I'll have to say today is a boiled-down version of one part of a book shortly to appear, entitled "Continuities in Social Research", with the more informative subtitle, "Studies in the Scope and Method of 'The American Soldier'". That volume is devoted exclusively to a re-analysis of the methodological design, the substantive hypotheses, and the general theory which were either implicit or expressed in the two volumes of
"The American Soldier" and is intended to indicate just how nominally completed researches can be re-examined and re-analyzed to provide new links with research of the future. I hope to exemplify this point in connection with reference group theory.

One of the impressions gained from such re-examination is that the authors of "The American Soldier", like the authors of other social research reports, had their collective noses so close to the inevitable grindstone as not to see that studies of presumably unrelated patterns of behavior, scattered through the many hundred pages of those volumes, may be dealing with special cases of a more general underlying pattern. To this degree, the re-analysis is an effort to generalize the more particular findings of an empirical inquiry. One of the suggestions I will want to put before you is that over a wide range of subject-matter, whether it be the budgetary practices of various economic strata in the civilian population, the evaluation of soldiers regarding their chances for promotion, the behavior of renegades or traitors to their class (aspirants for social mobility), or the assimilation of the immigrant, —whether the range of concrete subjects is as wide as that or wider, —the function of re-analysis of such seemingly unrelated studies is to show these concrete behaviors as exemplifying special instances of somewhat more generalized conceptions. An order as large as that, I'll be able to fill only in small degree this afternoon.

Finally, I want to suggest in the course of this discussion that precisely because applied social research is focused on specific
problems of decision or action, the problem tends to be formulated in terms particular enough to be utilized by the men of affairs, with the result that underlying theoretical uniformities are obscured by the highly particular formulations which are put forward.

Now, then, those are the themes that I imagine to run through this talk. The materials which I plan to use in order to illustrate and document these themes are drawn very largely from the re-analysis of materials in "The American Soldier" and to some degree from the as yet unpublished researches on the so-called "Elmira Voting Studies" of the last presidential election.

II

The term "reference group" was first used, I believe, in the doctoral dissertation, which you all know, by Herbert Hyman called "The Psychology of Status" and published in 1942. (In passing, I urge the thesis that this out-of-print dissertation has formulated more theoretical problems with regard to reference group behavior than have yet been caught up in our empirical research.) But whatever the source of the term, the notion that groups somehow 'determine', as we like to put it, the attitudes and behaviors of their members is of course a notion older than sociology itself and one which in that pale, unelaborated form is not very instructive. Every time a new survey shows a difference in attitudes or in opinions between social strata or between groups, it is in effect
documenting the fact that, in some way, groups apparently determine the dominant opinions of their members. In this sense, long before either of these terms existed, we have assumed that the membership group yields a frame of reference for its members.

What is relatively new is the thought that non-membership groups—groups of which one is not a member—may also provide a significant frame of reference for attitudes, self-evaluations and judgments. Ultimately, of course, reference group theory must be generalized to the point where it can account for both membership and non-membership group orientations. Immediately, its major task is to search out the patterns through which individuals come to relate themselves to groups to which they do not belong.

So far as I can see, the kind of observation which forced attention to the primitive fact of positive orientations to non-membership groups was that of a substantial proportion of group members exhibiting behavior or expressing attitudes at odds with that most common in the group. In research, concern with non-membership groups as providing frames of reference was stimulated, I think, by the observation of deviant behavior or deviant attitudes or by "inconsistencies" in the behavior or attitudes among members of a group.

I'd like to take several illustrations from "The American Soldier" where this emerges upon appropriate re-analysis of the material. The Research Branch found that, in general, Negro soldiers in Northern camps felt that they were better treated than
did those in Southern camps. Their survey showed significant
differences between the proportion of Negro soldiers in the two
regions who felt they were given equitable treatment, for example,
by the local bus service or by the local police. Yet despite this
difference in attitude, it was found that Negro soldiers in southern
camps were, in terms of various indices, as well adjusted as Negro
soldiers in northern camps. Whether the index referred to their
being usually in good spirits or to the extent to which they were
worried or upset or so on through a long list of indices, there was
no significant difference between the self-evaluations of Negro
soldiers in the North and in the South. In fact, the marginals in
those comparisons looked almost as though they were based on the
same sample, with differences of the order of 1 or 2 per cent. And
so, the authors were faced with this anomaly and apparent inconsist­
ency in their data: why should Negro soldiers in one context judge
that they were more severely discriminated against in the South and
yet not reflect this in their self-adjustment? This discrepancy
led to the search for some interpretive intervening variable other
than group-affiliation or sheer regional location. And as you all
know, the provisional after-the-fact interpretation utilized here
was the reference group conception of relative status. That is to
say it was hypothesized that Negro soldiers in the South relative
to Southern Negro civilians were in a comparatively favorable
position compared to Negro soldiers in the North relative to Northern
Negro civilians. And though there is not a single allusion in the
two volumes of "The American Soldier" to the notion of reference
group, you will identify this as a special application of reference group conceptions, since the self-evaluation is by hypothesis here a reflection of the frame of reference provided by the status of Negro civilians in the two areas.

One could go through, as indeed we have, a dozen or so inquiries where it could be shown that in each case the notion of a non-membership reference group is called into play when there seems to be some inconsistency between the behavior observed among the members of a group and that which would be expected as typical behavior, whether that expectation is based on common-sense, prior findings or theory.

I might briefly mention a second case to illustrate a comparable point. You may recall that the Research Branch in their study of evaluations of chances for promotion in the Army, came out with the rather surprising finding that by and large, the lower the rate of actual promotion opportunities in a branch or for a given status, the larger the proportion of men expressing satisfaction with promotion opportunities. In this case again, an inconsistency between what might be expected on common-sense grounds and the actual empirical finding led the authors to develop a reference group hypothesis. It was hypothesized in this case that the frame of reference for evaluations by individuals within an outfit was provided by the objective rates of promotion: a high promotion rate presumably inducing excessive expectations among members of the group so that they are more likely to be frustrated by their present
position, whereas within the context of relatively low rates of promotion, an objective improvement in position is more likely to be experienced as better than expectation. In this case, the frame of reference for evaluation of chances for promotion is provided by one's own membership-group. This, then, raises one of the central questions in reference group theory: under which conditions are one's own groups taken as a frame of reference for self-evaluation and attitude-formation, and under which conditions do out-groups or non-membership groups provide the significant context? In raising the question, I hope I have not also inadvertently raised the hope that there is a substantial beginning to an answer.

But though we have little, so far as I know, by way of an answer, we do have some directions for future research bearing on the question. Until recently, (and I base this on a review of published studies which have explicitly made use of reference group conceptions) indices of identification with non-membership reference groups have not been systematically built into the design of social research. Rather, they have typically been introduced as after-the-fact interpretations which hypothetically permitted one to resolve those 'inconsistencies' in the data of which I spoke earlier. For example, of these studies in "The American Soldier," none included any indicator in the survey schedule itself which would provide data showing whether the alleged reference groups were indeed taken as a point of reference by the individuals in the sample. Rather, these were brought into an after-the-fact, interpretive hypothesis. They were assumed, not demonstrated.
Now there's nothing in principle, of course, which prevents the inclusion of indices of orientation to non-membership reference groups in the study design, but this does involve a number of methodological problems which come to mind immediately.

First, are there theoretical grounds for supposing that non-membership reference groups will be the same irrespective of the issue or attitude under consideration? And, if not, how do we arrange for individuals to supply data on the reference groups operating in each kind of instance?

Second, are there differences between the reference groups spontaneously selected by individuals and those selected from a list supplied to individuals by the interviewer or the investigator?

Third, insofar as individuals explicitly and consciously adopt such group frames of reference, social researches involving interviews with large numbers of people face no great difficulties of procedure. But there is, of course, no reason to assume that such reference group frames are uniformly explicit. Numerous experimental studies have shown that individuals unwittingly respond to various frames of reference introduced by the experimenter. To the extent, therefore, that reference groups are unwittingly adopted as contexts for behavior and evaluations in the ordinary routines of daily life, survey research techniques must be considerably extended to detect their operation.

Fourth, the conception of reference group behavior implies that the individual has some knowledge or image of the attitudes and norms
prevalent in the reference group. To that degree, reference group theory must be linked with a theory of perception within social contexts, including in its fuller psychological elaboration some treatment of the dynamics of perception and in its sociological elaboration, some treatment of the channels of communication through which this 'knowledge' is gained. Which processes make for accurate or for distorted images of the norms of other individuals and groups (taken as a frame of reference)? Since some perceptual and cognitive processes are definitely implied even in a description of reference group behavior, it would seem advisable to have these explicitly incorporated in the theory.

At this juncture, then, I suggest that at least these four inter-related questions wait to be variously dealt with in empirical studies of the role of reference groups in shaping attitudes or behavior. I believe that continuity of research related to reference group theory will be furthered by successively identifying variables presently implied in the theory and by planfully incorporating these in the format of research. The suggestion seems obvious enough to be superfluous, except that students of reference group behavior have barely begun to identify the variables implied in such studies of this behavior as, for example, those in "The American Soldier". And, quite often, therefore, these variables continue to be implied in after-the-fact interpretations rather than explicitly incorporated in the design of observation.

In this connection, I want to say a word about the place of
ex post facto or after-the-fact interpretations in social research. It is, I think, widely felt that there's something slightly indecent or intolerable, undignified or even intellectually corrupt about an after-the-fact interpretation. It is sometimes said, and there is high authority for holding this view, that it is only a matter of ingenuity and industry to develop after-the-fact interpretations or hypotheses which are consistent with the observed data, and that, being capricious, these have no proper place in the development of social theory and research. This seems to me only part of the story.

Not every ex post facto interpretation is an ad hoc interpretation. Sometimes, they are previously confirmed hypotheses applied to a new set of data. And what is more to the point, after-the-fact interpretations can play a distinctive and important part in advancing the continuity of theory. After-the-fact interpretations that emerge in the course of an empirical study are typically the new links to succeeding studies. They advance continuity in social research by providing a bridge between the hypotheses tested, to some degree, in one research and the development of new hypotheses which can be tested in further research. And some of these hypotheses could not readily have been anticipated, or as a matter of historical record were not anticipated, but originated in the attempt to account for empirical findings that turned up in the course of a research. Such provisional after-the-fact interpretations, as instanced in "The American Soldier", are empirically grounded basis for developing new research which builds upon what has gone before.
The need for achieving continuity in social research can be illustrated by taking up another problem of reference group behavior that has been often noted but left pretty well undeveloped. After the fashion of William James and Cooley and Mead, social psychologists note the fact that people have multiple selves, multiple roles, multiple statuses, going on to indicate that certain attributes of situations seem to call some rather than other of these multiple roles into play. But, to my knowledge, this conception has been followed up with respect to multiple group affiliations only. It has not been systematically developed with respect to multiple non-membership reference groups, where it would seem all the more pertinent. For although an individual's group affiliations may be numerous, they are nevertheless relatively few compared with the innumerable non-membership groups which constitute potential frames of reference. With regard to reference group theory, then, there arises the central question to which I have previously alluded: what is the structure of the social situation which leads to some rather than other non-membership groups being selected as the significant context of attitude-formation?

This problem can be illustrated by another case drawn from "The American Soldier." This study yielded the empirical finding that the older married men in the Army were more likely to consider their induction unjustified than the younger unmarried men. And again, in attempting to account for this differential in attitude, the authors introduce a provisional reference group hypothesis.
The attitude is reinforced by comparison of their own situation with that of other status categories. In comparison with unmarried associates in the Army, the married man feels that induction exacted undue sacrifice from him, and in comparison with married civilian friends that he is all the more deprived by having been inducted at all. Here then, the authors of the study are seizing upon multiple statuses as possible frames of reference, both operating in the same direction to produce dissatisfaction with one's own situation.

Even if there were independent, empirical data showing that these comparisons had indeed taken place, that these multiple statuses had indeed constituted frames of reference, there would still be occasion to move on to the next theoretical question: on which grounds would we anticipate that these statuses would typically be selected as a basis for comparison rather than any other of the numerous potential reference statuses with which they might have compared themselves? However, this case does yield a clue to a type of factor which may operate to determine the typical selection of certain rather than other non-membership groups as a frame of reference. The institutional norms pertinent to the (induction) situation may focus the attention of members of a group or occupants of a status upon certain common reference groups. After all, the draft rules did provide for exemptions in connection with marital status and age. And since these institutional rules are defined in terms of marital condition and age, these become the statuses most
relevant for comparison with one's own situation. However this may be, it seems clear that a next step in the direction of amplifying our still primitive conceptions is that of designing studies in which we can identify the factors leading to the selection of some rather than others among the potential reference groups (or statuses) of a non-membership character.

Another type of problem which awaits inquiry and which grows directly out of this same study in "The American Soldier" (as well as other recent researches) concerns the operation of different types of reference groups, not merely the operation of multiple reference groups. Thus, the hypothesis advanced in this study uniformly holds that the married soldier compared his own lot with that of individuals with whom he is or has been in actual social relation: associates in the Army or civilian friends. This, then, leads us to consider behavior when the frame of reference is provided by impersonal status categories in general (other married men, other noncoms, etc.) and by those representatives of these status categories with whom the individual is in direct social relation (married male friends, noncom associates, etc.). For example, which takes precedence in affecting the evaluations of the individual when these operate at cross-purposes?

This question leads at once to the relative significance of general status categories and of subgroups of which one is a member. Suppose, for example, that all or almost all of a married soldier's married associates have also been drafted, even though, in general,
this status category has a smaller proportion of inductions than the category of the married male. Which basis of comparison will, on the average, prove more effective in shaping the individual's evaluation of his own lot? Will he compare himself with the other drafted benedicts in his subgroup or clique and consequently be the more ready to accept induction for himself, or will he compare himself with the larger status category of married men, who are generally more often deferred, and consequently feel aggrieved over his own induction? The question has, of course, more general bearing. For example, are workers' expectations of their personal prospects of future employment shaped more by the present employment of themselves and their associates on the job, or by high rates of unemployment prevailing in their occupation at large?

This case from "The American Soldier" thus points to the need for cumulative research on the relative effectiveness of frames of reference yielded by associates and by the more general status categories (which these associates may represent).

I want to say another word about my suggestion that reference group interpretations presuppose that individuals have some image, valid or distorted, of the situation or norms of attitudes of the group serving as a frame of reference. For however obvious this may seem, it has somewhat less obvious implications for research, implications which have not always guided research practice. It means that the research must include in its design (a) data on the character of the images of what obtains in the reference group, and
(b) data on the social processes through which these images come to be sustained.

An illustrative case, though it does not deal directly with reference group hypotheses, is provided by a study of a biracial housing development which we conducted some years ago. In brief, we found that the "racially prejudiced" white residents were more likely to say (1) that there was a Negro majority in the development, though in fact the numbers of the two races were identical; (2) that the Negroes in the development were less educated than the Whites, though in fact the educational distributions of the two racial groups here were practically identical; and (3) that the Negroes generally objected to biracial residence though in fact only a fraction of about ten per cent expressed any such objection. In short, the more prejudiced whites seem more often to have distorted images of the condition or the attitudes of the Negro group in the community.

But results of this kind—the last of which, for example, appears to represent a projection of one's own attitude toward biracial communities onto the other group—are obviously incomplete so far as the formation and persistence of these images is concerned. The social processes militating against or confirming these images are an integral part of the research problem. We found, for example, that the prejudicial attitudes tended to minimize contact between the races, thus affording less occasion for obtaining a more accurate knowledge of the numbers or the educational level or the attitudes of the Negroes. Insofar as attitudes found expression in social relations, this
tended to maintain the distorted images intact. And correlative, in those instances where, through force of circumstance, there was more frequent interaction of 'prejudiced whites' with Negroes in the development, there was a smaller proportion of these cognitive distortions.

Though this case is only tangential to research on reference group behavior, it may illustrate, in primitive fashion, the points at which such research might include actual data on the cognitive picture of what prevails in the reference group, and the processes which tend to support or to curb these conceptions.

I have time to mention one other problem calling for investigation in this field: who is most likely to take a positive orientation toward non-membership groups as a frame of reference for his own attitudes? Some recent clues are provided by the Elmira study of voting behavior now in process of analysis. Preliminary findings suggest that it is the individuals least integrated into the community who are most likely to take non-membership groups as a frame of reference. It appears that it may be the isolates within the group, the individuals who are nominally members of the group but are not closely geared into the social relations within it, who most often exhibit such orientations. But there is obviously need for more systematic empirical evidence to elaborate and to check this supposition.

As a discreet sociologist, I inquired into the prevailing folkways of this group before beginning this talk. My informants numbered
three, allowing me to calculate the consensus of opinion with relative ease. From them I learned (a) that the norm for talks by visiting firemen wa