

You shall hear of wars and of rumors of wars.

It is very depressing that sociology graduate students are so terrible at sociology where it might actually help them. I regularly see cohorts of young sociologists publicly demonstrate their absolute incapacity for the use of sociological findings and methods at the same time as they are earnestly expressing their belief that what the world needs more of is guidance by sociologists like themselves. Further, I am amazed that students who readily accept and inform us that all sorts of phenomena are shakier than we think because they are really socially constructed (including things like quantum physics) switch to believing that “since everyone says it, it really is true” when it comes to departmental rumors. Before getting up in arms and publically humiliating yourself for a cause that sounds good, but you actually don’t necessarily know about, go through the John Levi Martin patented check-list of questions to ask yourself. We’ll start with social psychology and then go to history.

- 1) Do you understand social psychological phenomena whereby judgments in groups are made? Do you understand situations and their pressures, affordances, or demand characteristics? Would you recognize them if you were in the middle of one?
- 2) Do you know about how cognition works? That we tend to believe what we hear first, and then it takes a great deal of cognitive effort to reject this?
- 3) Do you know about dissonance reduction? It’s not quite what Festinger first thought, but do you know that it becomes harder for people to change their beliefs after they have made a public stance? That even when people realize they are wrong, they often tend to invent aspects of the world that would lessen their humiliation (“Well, it turned out that they were right after all: still, I’m sure that they went about it in some *wrong way*, and so I don’t have to feel bad for my false defamations”)? Can you recognize this process when it starts to well up in you?
- 4) When it comes to evaluating sources, do you understand what self-selection does? Do you know what it means when you allow people to come to you to change your mind, and you make no effort to find out whether there are those who think the opposite but *don’t* come to you?
- 5) When you hear a claim, do you do what a good historian does, and ask yourself
 - a) Do I believe that this person is *motivated* to tell the truth?
 - b) Do I believe that this person is *able* to tell the truth (as opposed to motivated, but not necessarily granted access to the truth)?
 - c) Would someone who *did* have this access be talking to me right now? If so, why? If not, why not?
 - d) And hey, what *is* this person’s motivation? If this person wasn’t the one who was the primary source, what might have been the motivation this person to contact whomever talked to whomever talked to my source?

- 6) When someone tells you something about a confidential procedure, how do they know this? Doesn't it mean that somewhere along the lines of your source, someone is doing something wrong? If so, why would you allow yourself to be mobilized by this person? If some people were doing something right, wouldn't you not know what they are doing? Is someone who thinks differently from your source in a position to answer back? If not, then couldn't one say *anything* about *any* confidential procedure and you would evaluate it as true?
- 7) If you have a scenario in your mind that explains the production of actions that (you have been told) were wrong, can you run it forwards? Is it plausible? That is, we often hear bold explanations for a complicated chain of events in which all the evidence is accounted for, including many seemingly odd bits of information. Thus, for example, someone may claim that the U.S. knowingly let Pearl Harbor occur as a scheme to get the nation into the war. Claims like this should not be ruled out, because there *are* conspiracies. But if there *was* one, would we expect this? If the goal was to allow for a first attack, why would one make it so incredibly disabling to the navy? *Any* attack would be just as successful in accomplishing the task of getting the nation into the war – one would not allow the Pacific fleet to be crippled at the same time.

So when you hear a rumor of faculty or administration or staff members doing something wicked and you prepare to sanction them, you might pause and ask yourself, well, why would they do this? Would *I* do this? If I don't think *I* would, why do I assume *they* would? Because they are paid, dedicated agents of capitalism / patriarchy / stasis / positivism etc.? Really? Do I assume that they are more conservative to me because they wear sport jackets? Just because they're older than me? Do I really know anything about them? (And this brings us to....)

- 8) If you *do* believe that a frontwards-running story is plausible, because you believe that the actor in question *would* do something that you wouldn't (because of flaws in his or her character), do you have any *independent* reasons to accept your characterization of this person as a premise? That is, if you hear one side of a story, and this leads you to conclusions that contradict what were (so you are told) the actions of someone else who has heard *more* than one side, the most obvious explanation for the disjuncture would be the second side (the one you have not heard). If, instead, you conclude that the difference is to be attributed to a characteristic of the actor in question, do you have any reasons to make this attribution other than the action that is to be explained? (That is, you wouldn't normally accept that a defendant's guilt was established by his reputation as a criminal, in turn established by the fact of the accusation you are considering. Or would you?)
- 9) If footmen tire you, what shall you do when horses come? Many idealistic young sociologists who are eager to imagine that they are going to be the Galileo standing up to the inquisition, speaking truth to power, have blown it before they get on stage. Why assume that you're going to be great at facing the devil himself, indeed, spitting in his face, if you can't maintain your own clarity and independence of thought in the face of three or four of your friends?