

May 2026

Influence and Isomorphism

The decoupling of impact from publication venue in American sociology

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Abstract: DiMaggio and Powell's 'The Iron Cage Revisited' is one of the most influential papers in the history of sociology. This article examines its place amongst other citation classics in the field over almost a century. Taking a cohort-based approach, I identify the ten most influential articles published in each decade from the 1930s to the 2010s. I show that 'The Iron Cage Revisited' marks an inflection point in the discipline's expansion and consolidation. It is the high-water mark of a particular sort of article: a theory paper published in one of the discipline's two leading generalist journals. And it marks the beginning of a long and still-continuing decoupling of the most-influential work from the highest-prestige journals. I suggest the reasons for this shift are to be found in how the structural and demographic expansion of American higher education in the post-World War II period was processed within the discipline, in ways consistent with the arguments laid out in DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) "The Iron Cage Revisited" is one of the most successful articles in the history of sociology. The Web of Science's database says it has accumulated over thirty-two thousand citations; Google Scholar reports over seventy-seven thousand. It is the most-cited paper ever published in the *American Sociological Review*, and the most-cited sociology paper written in the 1980s. Its main concepts—coercive, normative, and especially mimetic isomorphism—have been taken up not only within sociology but across the social sciences, most notably in the world of organizational studies and management (Greenwood and Meyer 2008; Heugens and Lander 2009).

In this article, I place "The Iron Cage Revisited" (hereafter TICR) in the context of other "citation classics" in sociology. I take a cohort-based approach. That is, I divide the period from 1930 to 2019 into decades and identify the ten sociology articles from each decade that have the highest number of lifetime citations. By this measure, TICR marks an inflection point in the history of American sociology's expansion and consolidation as a discipline. It is a pure example of a once reasonably common kind of paper: a theoretically focused, self-consciously agenda-setting piece published in one of the discipline's two leading general-interest journals. But it is also the high-water mark of this combination of form and outlet. Beginning in the 1970s and accelerating in the 1980s, the most influential articles in American sociology, as measured by citation count, stopped appearing in the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS) and the *American Sociological Review* (ASR). Those journals retained their place as the most prestigious outlets in the discipline. Publication in them continued to be central to establishing a successful career at the elite end of the field. But they are no longer the place where the most-cited articles are likely to appear. Impact became decoupled from venue.

Why did this happen? I argue this shift is broadly institutional in character, driven by forces that TICR itself identified. The massive structural and demographic expansion of American higher education after World War II increased the size of all academic disciplines and changed the conditions under which people established scholarly reputations and professional careers. There were far more academics writing far more papers. The number of publication outlets increased substantially. However, the most prestigious journals had been founded in earlier waves of institutionalization and did not much change the format, frequency, or number of articles they published. This led to significant changes in the character of the gatekeeping role these elite journals played. They became increasingly important as focal points for career competition, as publication in them became more important for securing a high-status job or consolidating one's career.

In a broadly neoinstitutional fashion, this led to the elaboration of new standards at those outlets, in particular with respect to the kind of article seen as worthy of a place in their pages. Elite sociology journals settled on a model that favored articles that could plausibly claim to present both a substantial empirical finding *and* an advance in either theory or methods. This is a high bar to meet. Run-of-the-mill “findings” were unable to clear it. But so were papers that primarily developed theory or methods. However, over the long run, research literatures still principally prize and most reward good ideas and useful tools. Thus, the most widely cited papers continued to be more specialized exercises in theory or methods. That is, authors did not stop writing or citing those papers, but the most-cited ones of that type did stop appearing in AJS or ASR. A large structural shift in the organizational field of American higher education produced new standards and models for evaluation, accompanied by the elaboration and reproduction of those models in professional training and placement. Elite journals remained elite, but the character of their importance shifted with the composition of their content. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) exemplifies this shift and also helps explain it.

In what follows, I begin by briefly discussing existing work on the citation career of TICR itself. I then place it in the context of the changing situation of the most measurably successful (i.e. the most-cited) articles published in sociology in each decade from the 1930s to the 2010s. I show how the shifts I describe are visible in even this very small slice of the very top of the field, and discuss how the ideas DiMaggio and Powell developed can help us understand the patterns we find.

IMPACT AND IRRATIONALITY

Intuitions about career success and intellectual influence in academia are torn between contingency and inevitability. On one side is Max Weber’s description of academic life as a “mad hazard” (Weber 1958, 134). On the other is the apparently steady reproduction of a stable hierarchy of prestige rooted in organizations and networks (Bourdieu 2007). Quantitative measures of influence and success provide a link between the two that can be made to emphasize either aspect.

Efforts to understand TICR’s influence reflect both aspects. For example, Mizruchi and Fein (1999) argued that TICR was being selectively interpreted by those who cited it. They found that the paper’s concept of mimetic isomorphism had received disproportionate attention relative to its coercive and normative

siblings. They argued that the emphasis on mimetic isomorphism reflected a dominant discourse in North American organizational theory that favored cognitive explanations over ones rooted in the exercise of power. Contingent aspects of its success—the fact that it was cited for just one part of its argument—were understood in terms of the more structural aspects of the field.

Greenwood and Meyer (2008) and Heugens and Lander (2009) also discuss the paper's influence. The former suggests that TICR's use of the idea of organizational fields helped it gain traction; the latter conducted a meta-analysis of papers testing at least some of TICR's claims, finding that the published literature has more testing of and support for the effects of mimetic isomorphism than the other two types. In Powell and DiMaggio (2023), TICR's authors themselves reflected on the circumstance of the paper's development and subsequent career. They also describe their efforts to place the paper in one of the two leading journals. After it was rejected by AJS, Powell wrote to Mark Granovetter (his former graduate advisor) for advice. Granovetter replied "Fix the typos, stick it in an envelope and send it to ASR" (Powell and DiMaggio 2023, 9).

Influential works are often remembered in highly selective ways, a point long-recognized by students of scholarly fields. Work tends to become widely cited through the accumulation of references made more or less in passing rather than by way of sustained and repeated close-readings of their contents (Cole 1975). Indeed, if revisited and read word by word, almost any citation classic will reveal something much more rich and strange than whatever it is most commonly cited for, even to the point where the original work's function in the literature might be unrecognizable to its author. Papers may end up being highly cited not just for material that the author would have seen as tangential, but for content that is not in the article at all, or for a conclusion it actively argues against.¹

These tendencies toward the irrational interact uncomfortably with the character of the academic labor market which, again, is characterized both by steady elite reproduction in general and high levels of uncertainty in particular cases. Academics pursue their careers in a strongly hierarchical world of universities and journals. The evaluation of quality is a somewhat uncertain process; it is not obvious in advance what a truly innovative or useful idea looks like; institutional affiliations are highly salient; the stakes for individuals are high in terms of both career success and identity-validation. These conditions are an ideal breeding-ground

¹See, for example, Vaisey (2014) on how sociologists of culture took the wrong lesson from Schuman and Johnson (1976).

for broadly “neoinstitutionalist” processes that might lead us to cite DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Meyer and Rowan (1977) in the same breath.

On this view, in the face of chronic uncertainty, rationalized models of organizational life are elaborated by credentialed experts, decoupled from the practices they are meant to regulate, and diffused by way of fads and fashions. In a basic sense they are a species of ritual. Institutionalists differ in where they locate the source of this irrationality. Perhaps it is rooted in deep-seated cultural models of the individual’s relationship to society. Perhaps it is a side-effect of opportunistic power struggles amongst political actors. Or maybe it is the legacy of the purest historical accident. But the imagery is a kind of fusion of Weber and Durkheim. Real organizational capacities and consequential processes work in the service of a fundamentally arbitrary but highly legitimated symbolic order seeking to impose order on the world in the name of rationalization. If this symbolic order systematically benefits elites, it amounts to a kind of conspiracy against the public, or those further down the hierarchy (Bourdieu 2007; Burris 2004).

Conveniently, articles and citations can be counted, which makes them much easier to incorporate into rationalized processes of evaluation and allocation. These counts lead easily to rankings, and rankings are powerful tools for organizing the world (Espeland and Sauder 2016; Fourcade and Healy 2024). Citations are particularly unforgiving. Most articles fall dead-born from the press and are never cited at all, strongly amplifying the “winner-take-all” character of status competition in these fields. The Matthew Effect is a harsh mistress (Merton 1968). In a perfectly self-reproducing status order, elite professionals would publish their work in elite journals, and those articles would be the field’s most-cited publications.

And yet, things do not run as cleanly as all that. The social life of academic articles, and the influence they have, does not play out at the same tempo as the careers of the people who write them. Over the long-run, the taste of a field does not simply reflect the centrality of its most prestigious members. Moreover, what an author wants from a publication (e.g., warm praise and a good job) is not the same as what the field may want from an article (e.g., a great idea or a useful tool). Even a very successful article, a paper that makes the name and career of its author, will most likely be forgotten relatively quickly (McGail 2021). Over a multi-generational time frame, much larger forces of economic change and cohort replacement may shift the ground under everyone’s feet.

In short, the quantities that an academic prestige system is metaphorically maximizing may both shift over time and have quite different effects from the perspective of authors than from the point of view of articles. In the next two

sections I present evidence that, since the 1970s in sociology, placement in elite journals has become decoupled from influence as measured by citations, at least at the very highest levels of influence.

DATA AND METHODS

To investigate the character of the most-cited papers in sociology, I collected data on the top ten most-cited sociology articles from each decade between 1930 and 2019.² “Sociology articles” means articles published in any journal classified as “Sociology” in the Social Science Citation Index. The citation counts are from the Web of Science (WoS) and are cumulative across all WoS databases. This means they include all citations *to* these sociology articles from any other source in the data, regardless of field.

I divided the period 1930 to 2019 by decade to find the ten most-cited papers that were published in each decade. Note that each paper’s citation count is the *total* number of citations it has *ever* received, across all years since it was published. By selecting the most-cited papers from within each decade, we get a cohort-based picture of which papers from each era have had the strongest influence on the field. A straight count of the most-cited papers between 1930 and 2019 would produce a different list, partly because the citation base, i.e. the universe of papers that can cite sociology articles, expands tremendously along with the growth of academic research across all disciplines.

To account for the expansion of the citation base, I also collected annual data from WoS on the total number of citations to all sociology articles across all WoS databases and aggregated it by decade. This allows us to standardize the total citation count of any particular article relative to the total number of citations made to all sociology articles published in a given decade. Figure 1 shows the citation base for each decade. For example, across all WoS databases, all sociology articles published in the 1930s have about 25,000 citations to them in total. Of these, just over 3,800, or fifteen percent, are to Merton (1938).

SOCIOLOGY’S MOST-CITED ARTICLES BY DECADE

Figure 2 shows the top ten most-cited sociology papers from each decade, from the 1930s to the 2010s. The y-axis shows the authors and titles of each paper,

²Supplementary figures, data, and code to reproduce the analysis are available at <https://github.com/kjhealy/rp-influence-isomorphism>.

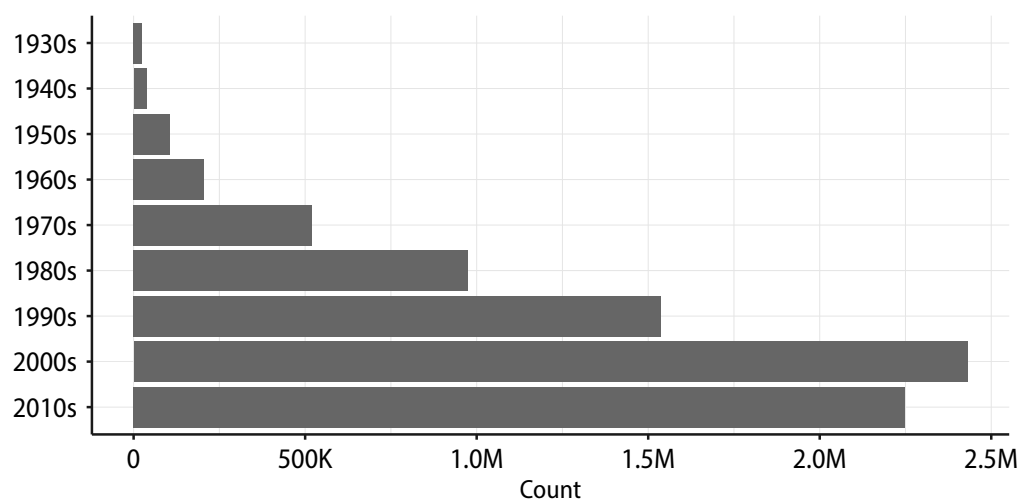


Figure 1: Total citations to all sociology articles published in each decade.

truncated for the sake of space as necessary. The papers are broken out by decade of publication and sorted by citation count within each decade. The x-axis shows the total number of citations each paper has received across all Web of Science databases since it was published. (We will examine a relative measure below.) A label in each row shows the number of citations to each paper and also specifies the journal where it appeared. The journals are color-coded: ASR and AJS are highlighted in blue and gold, respectively; other journals have a gray background.

Several patterns are evident. The first is the sheer volume of citations accumulated by the papers from the 1970s and 1980s. The most-cited paper from the 1970s, Granovetter (1973), has over 24,000 lifetime citations. By comparison, the most-cited paper from the 1930s (Merton 1938) has about 3,800 citations, despite a thirty-five year head start. Meanwhile TICR, published in 1983, has over 32,000 citations. Papers in more recent decades are, of course, at a comparative disadvantage simply because they have had less time to accrue citations. But it is also clear that the citation advantage held by papers from the 1970s and 1980s is not simply a matter of time. This cohort of papers benefits the most from the expansion of the field that accompanied the expansion of universities in the postwar period, and the subsequent growth of the citation base as more and more faculty began writing more and more papers.

The second pattern is the character of the papers themselves. A majority of the most-cited articles, across the decades, are either primarily theoretical or primar-

The Top 10 Most-Cited Sociology Papers From Each Decade, 1930s-2010s

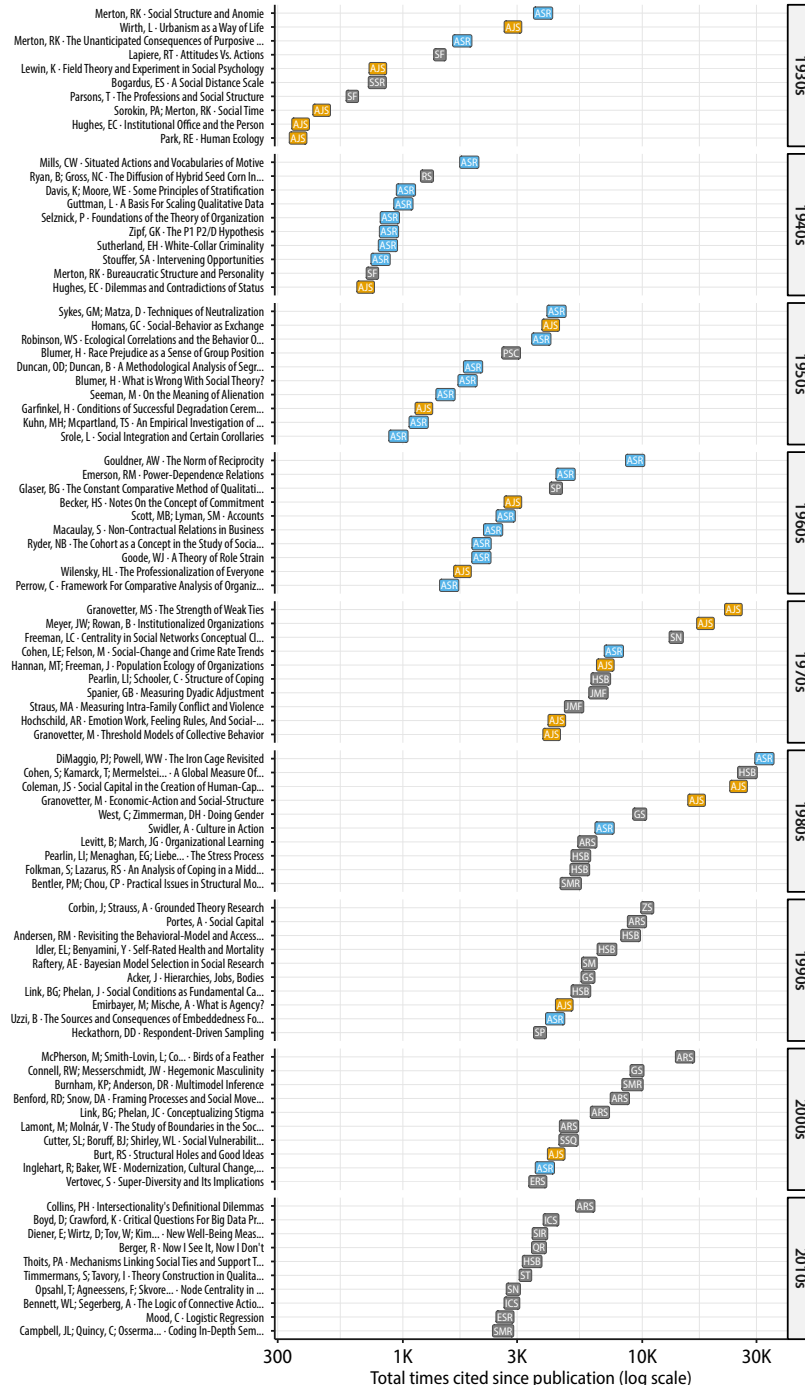


Figure 2: Top 10 most-cited Sociology papers from each decade.

ily methodological in their content, rather than being focused on the presentation of findings from a particular empirical study. For example, Granovetter (1973) is “The Strength of Weak Ties”. While it does briefly sketch the author’s dissertation study, which later appeared as Granovetter (1995), it does so schematically, by way of illustration of the main theoretical argument, and as one example amongst several. The content of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) we already know about. It is a wholly theoretical paper. Similarly, Swidler (1986) is “culture as toolkit”; West and Zimmerman (1987) is “doing gender”; Collins (2015) is the idea of “intersectionality” developed as a framework. Again, all theory papers. On the methods side, we have Freeman (1978) on measures of network centrality; Bentler and Chou (1987) on SEM estimation; Corbin and Strauss (1990) for grounded theory coding Raftery (1995) on model selection; Heckathorn (1997) on respondent-driven sampling; and more besides. The most influential papers across the decades present theories or tools. Specific findings, however important, tend not to make it to this (admittedly rarefied) level of influence.

The third pattern is the shift in publication outlets. In the 1930s, five of the top ten papers appeared in AJS. The ASR’s first issue was in 1936 but it still has two papers in that decade.³ In the 1940s and 1950s, ASR dominates: seven of the top ten papers from each decade were published there, with AJS accounting for most of the rest. The 1960s show a similar pattern. One top ten paper from that decade appears in *Social Problems* (Glaser 1965). The rest all appear in ASR or AJS. But beginning in the 1970s, things begin to fragment. ASR and AJS steadily decline in prominence each decade. By the 2000s, only one of the ten most-cited papers comes from ASR and none from AJS. By the 2010s, neither journal has a single paper in the top ten. The journals that do appear—the *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Gender & Society*, *Sociological Methods and Research*, *Social Networks*, *Sociological Theory*—are more specialist outlets, or journals of reviews, rather than potentially competing general interest journals such as *Social Problems* or *Social Forces*. This is a complete reversal of the midcentury pattern.

A final pattern, smaller but worth noting, is the steady rise of co-authorship. All of the most-cited papers from the 1920s (not shown) have a single author. This steadily increases from the 1930s onwards, with some notable reversions in the 1960s and 1990s. By the 2000s the average number of authors on a Top-10 paper is two, and in the 2010s it is 2.5.

³Though not shown here, I also collected data for the 1920s. Unsurprisingly, almost all the most-cited papers published in that decade appeared in AJS.

Using cumulative citation counts prompts us to ask whether we might want to express these totals relative to some denominator. A natural one is each decade's citation base, i.e. the total number of citations (from anywhere, at any time) to all sociology articles written in a given decade. Because this base grows very sharply almost every decade, normalizing by it tends to favor older papers and penalize more recent ones. It is much more difficult for more recent papers to have any kind of notably large "market share" of all citations. Table 1 shows the resulting percentages for the most-cited paper from each decade.⁴

As noted earlier, Merton (1938) accounts for over fifteen percent of all citations to sociology papers published in the 1930s. The decades from the 1940s to the 1980s are all in the range of about five to just over three percent, with TIGR being at 3.38%. That is, of every citation to a sociology paper published in the 1980s, about one in thirty is to DiMaggio and Powell (1983). The drop-off from the 1980s to the 1990s is very sharp, falling by about an order of magnitude as the citation base grows by about 50 percent. By that point, it is no longer possible for even the most-cited paper to get the kind of share that was possible for the 1980s cohort. If we choose a slightly different denominator, based on the total number of sociology papers *published* in the discipline within each decade, we see a similar if less severe pattern. Again, the shift from the 1980s into the 1990s is very sharp.

EXPLAINING THE SHIFT IN OUTLET

A full explanation of these patterns is beyond the scope of this short paper. But, given that we have a summary view of almost a century of the most significant work in the discipline, we can try to place it in context. What did universities in general and the discipline of sociology in particular look like in the United States at the beginning of our citation data? And how might their growth and expansion have helped create the patterns we have just seen?

Sociology in the United States

The modern research university and the discipline of sociology both emerged in the late nineteenth century, with sociology as a field somewhat behind the curve of university expansion more generally (Clark 2007; Veysey 1987; Calhoun 2007). By the 1910s, the overall status order of the American university system had taken

⁴The full table and an accompanying figure are in the replication package for this paper.

Table 1: The most-cited sociology paper from each decade, with each paper's share of total citations to all sociology articles published in that decade.

Decade	Authors	Title	Share
1930s	Merton, RK	Social Structure And Anomie	15.49%
1940s	Mills, CW	Situated Actions And Vocabularies Of Motive	5.08%
1950s	Sykes, GM; Matza, D	Techniques Of Neutralization	4.11%
1960s	Gouldner, AW	The Norm Of Reciprocity	4.56%
1970s	Granovetter, MS	The Strength Of Weak Ties	4.63%
1980s	DiMaggio, PJ; Powell, WW	The Iron Cage Revisited	3.32%
1990s	Corbin, J; Strauss, A	Grounded Theory Research	0.68%
2000s	McPherson, M; Smith-Lovin, L; Cook, JM	Birds Of A Feather	0.62%
2010s	Collins, PH	Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas	0.26%

on much of its current form. The first effort to rank U.S. universities and colleges was made by Kendric Charles Babcock in 1911 ([Babcock 1911](#)). His four-class system ordered schools in a manner closely aligned with the modern hierarchy found in U.S. News and World Report rankings. The main exception, in terms of the composition of the status hierarchy, was the later expansion of the University of California system, most of whose major campuses did not exist when Babcock made his list.

Sociology had established itself as a distinct discipline in many though by no means all American universities by the 1920s. A central tension was between a more reform-oriented vision of the field, with a focus on social problems and policy, and a view of sociology as a more abstract, theoretical, and scientific enterprise ([Turner 2026](#)). The size of the discipline remained relatively modest both in comparison to other social sciences and with respect to what it would later become. The *American Journal of Sociology* was the quasi-official journal of the field in the United States from its founding in 1895 until the mid-1930s. The *American Sociological Review* was established in 1936 as the flagship journal for the Ameri-

can Sociological Association, partly in reaction against the central position of AJS and its control by the faculty at the University of Chicago.

For our purposes, the most important shift in the discipline's structure and character comes after World War II, when the expansion of American (and global) higher education generally brought a rapid increase in the number of sociology departments, faculty positions, PhD programs, and journals (Geiger 2019; Frank and Gabler 2006). We can think of this shift in two phases: first, the immediate postwar expansion from the end of the 1940s to the end of the 1960s; and second, the arrival of students educated as part of that expansion in the ranks of the faculty themselves. This makes the 1970s and 1980s a key moment in what might broadly be called "Boomer Sociology," when the first generation of students born after World War II were coming into their own as scholars and the discipline reached its largest size in terms of faculty and enrollments.

Consequences of expansion and increased competition

Across this period, sociology was and has remained the least disciplinary of the social sciences, never fully resolving the initial tensions that characterized its founding. Unlike political science, its remit was not defined by an institutional domain like the state. Unlike economics, there was much less consensus (whether organically achieved or successfully imposed) about the core theory and methods of the field. And while elites emerged and consolidated, the field as a whole remained rather more porous and internally heterogeneous than its social-scientific siblings in both personnel and topical focus. This comparative heterogeneity can be seen down to the present on numerous dimensions (Fourcade et al. 2015).

As the number of PhDs increased, so did the competitiveness of academic work. This was not always a matter of competitiveness directly for academic positions, though as the initial wave of expansion ended job markets became much tighter. Authors need jobs but also want their peers to read their work. The benefits of publication in top journals rose on both dimensions. Over time, ASR and AJS responded with—or gravitated toward; for our purposes the particular mechanism does not matter—a model that demanded papers make significant contributions on multiple fronts: theoretical innovation, methodological rigor, and empirical findings, all in one article. The idea of a "full package" paper of interest to a relatively wide swathe of the field became an expectation for acceptance in flagship journals.

This can be seen in Figure 2. On the theory side, there is only one purely "big idea" paper from ASR or AJS after the 1980s (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). As for

the other ASR and AJS articles, in contrast to e.g. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) or Granovetter (1985), each of Uzzi (1996) (ASR), Inglehart and Baker (2000) (ASR), and Burt (2004) (AJS), is an empirically focused paper that presents findings from a particular study in depth, and which has a strong theoretical idea attached to it. They are exemplars of the newer sort of AJS or ASR paper. These are also the last papers in our most-cited lists to appear in those journals. After that, the most-cited papers are either primarily theoretical or primarily methodological, and they appear in other outlets.

While it cannot be demonstrated with just these data, it is tempting to see these shifts as recognizable processes of normative and mimetic isomorphisms. Professionalization is one of the main engines of organizational homogenization. In fields with members trained in similar programs, credentialed through similar procedures, competing for a limited number of positions, and evaluated by somewhat vague but widely shared criteria, the organizations they inhabit—and the outputs they produce—will tend to converge in form and practice. In sociology in particular, the relative lack of disciplinary consensus may have made isomorphic processes somewhat more intensive at the level of elite journals. Journal editors were more likely to see themselves as setting and modeling standards for the discipline as a whole, through the peer-review process. Meanwhile, on the departmental side and in matters of hiring and evaluation, a publication in a flagship journal may have acted as a consensus point or counterweight in faculties who otherwise disagreed strongly on matters of theory and method. It is hard to dismiss the value of an ASR or AJS.

Whatever the reasons, the empirical trend is clear. The kind of paper that TICR exemplifies became less likely to appear in ASR or AJS, even as it remained the kind of paper most likely to become widely cited over the long run. The most highly cited articles remain theory and methods papers. Big-idea theory papers found homes in *Theory and Society* (for a time) or *Sociological Theory*. Methods contributions went to *Sociological Methods and Research* or *Sociological Methodology*. Review and synthesis pieces went to the *Annual Review of Sociology*. Papers developing concepts within specific subfields—gender, race, culture, networks—found receptive audiences in journals like *Gender & Society* or *Social Networks*.

The *Annual Review of Sociology* (ARS) deserves further mention in its own right. It emerged as one of the most important venues for highly cited work from the 2000s and 2010s. Reviews synthesize and cite a large body of prior work. Demand for them increases as literatures grow in size. Once a good review exists, subsequent authors may cite it as a convenient summary rather than citing the individual papers it covers. A review may thus absorb credit from the work it

reviews. This concern has a long history in the scientometrics literature (MacRoberts and MacRoberts 1989), though the evidence for it is mixed (Lachance et al. 2014; Miranda and Garcia-Carpintero 2018). Specifically in sociology, it is also true that the most-cited annual review pieces tend to frame a problem, set an agenda, or introduce an organizing concept. That is, they tend to function as theory papers under the cover of a literature review.

CONCLUSION

From the 1920s to the 1970s, sociology's most-cited papers were published in its two most important generalist journals. The *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology* remain the most prestigious journals in the discipline. They are vitally important for the establishment and consolidation of individual careers. But, at least at the very top end of the distribution, they no longer publish the discipline's most-cited work. Beginning in the 1970s, and increasingly since the 1990s, the articles that have the most influence on the discipline appeared elsewhere. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) is both at the hinge-point in this change and helps explain why it is located there. The demographic expansion and steady professionalization of sociology transformed the expectations attached to individuals facing an often-uncertain job market. Sociology's relatively lower degree of disciplinarity may have increased the gatekeeping power of flagship journals. Acceptance patterns at these journals shifted and were likely reinforced through PhD training, the job market, and the tenure process. As a result, the average quality of work went up, papers in flagship journals became more similar to one another, and what ASR and AJS were likely to accept became decoupled from what the field found most valuable to cite.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Christina Aaron for research assistance and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier version.

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