

Generally Speaking: The Logic and Mechanics of Social Pattern Analysis¹

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This paper examines social pattern analysis, the yet-unarticulated research strategy that guides formal sociologists in their efforts to distill generic social patterns from their specific cultural, situational, and historical contexts. Following in the implicit methodological footsteps of Georg Simmel, social pattern analysts view specific sociohistorical configurations as mere instantiations of such patterns, thereby deliberately disregarding various idiosyncrasies of the particular communities, events, and social situations they examine. Analytically focused, they thus draw their evidence from multiple social contexts, thereby making their essentially decontextualized findings more generalizable. Furthermore, in sharp contrast to historians and ethnographers, they try to highlight universality rather than singularity, thereby focusing their attention on the common formal features of any given pattern across those contexts while deliberately ignoring differences among its various specific manifestations. The outcome of such transcultural, transsituational, and transhistorical (that is, transcontextual) mode of inquiry is an empirically grounded “social geometry.”

KEY WORDS: analogy; comparative research; decontextualization; focus; formal sociology; genericity; Georg Simmel; social pattern analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Although well known for his work on money, the city, and modernity, it is Georg Simmel's "formal" perspective on social life that constitutes his distinctive sociological legacy. Unlike Comte's, Tocqueville's, Marx's, Spencer's, Tönnies's, Durkheim's, and Weber's social analyses, which are for the most part historically or culturally situated, Simmel's *formal sociology* almost resembles physics in its quest for transhistorical as well as transcultural *generality*.

Although never explicitly laid out by Simmel, formal sociology presupposes a distinctive methodology that cuts across various methods of collecting data, ignoring the conventional split between "qualitative" and "quantitative" ones. Having used it for many years to study the social organization of the way we classify, remember, and ignore things (Zerubavel, [1991] 1993, 2003, 2006), I present here the underlying basics of this remarkably useful yet thus far unarticulated methodology I call "social pattern analysis."³

A SOCIAL GEOMETRY

As Simmel ([1908] 1959:316, 319, 318) points out in the opening chapter of his magnum opus, *Soziologie*,

to detach by analysis the forms of interaction or sociation from their contents [is] the basis for the only, as well as the entire, possibility of a special science of society as such.

[T]here remains for a sociology in the strictest sense ... nothing but the treatment of [those] forms.

[The essence of sociology is] the detachment of the pure fact of sociation, in all its manifold forms, from its connection with the most diverse contents.⁴

In fact, he even compares sociologists to geometers, who focus specifically on the formal properties of physical objects:

Geometrical abstraction investigates only the spatial forms of bodies ... Similarly, if society is conceived as interaction among individuals, the description of the forms of this interaction is the task of the science of society in its strictest and most essential sense (Simmel, [1917] 1950:21–22).

Both geometry and sociology leave to other sciences the investigation of the contents realized in the forms ... they explore (Simmel, [1908] 1959:320).

³ For a preliminary attempt to do so, see Zerubavel, 1980.

⁴ See also Coser, 1971:180; Vaughan, 2004:318.

Indeed, geometrical images are quite common in formal sociological analysis. According to Dan Ryan (2006:228–229, 243–248), for example, the “epistemological geometries” underlying social information transmission systems include “circles” of knowing and not-knowing, “chains” of who finds out from whom, and “loops” that some people are brought into and others left out of, whereas Donald Black (2002a, 2002b, 2004) writes about the “geometries” of law, discovery, and terrorism.

Discussion of Simmel’s formal sociology has thus far revolved primarily around the relations between form and content, yet approaching social life “geometrically” also highlights the inherent tension between specificity and generality. A “social geometry” presupposes an essentially *generic* outlook distinctly characterized by its indifference to singularity, as “to scrutinize a situation generically ... is to seek out its abstract, transcendent, formal, analytic aspects” (Lofland, 1976:31).⁵ As Lewis Coser (1971:179) puts it,

particular historical events are unique: the murder of Caesar, the accession of Henry VIII, and the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo are all events located at a particular moment in time and having a nonrecurrent significance. Yet, if one looks at history through the peculiar lenses of the sociologist, one need not concern himself with the uniqueness of these events but, rather, with their underlying uniformities ... The sociologist is concerned with *King* John, not with *King John*.

Social pattern analysts are thus purposefully oblivious to the idiosyncratic features of the communities, events, or situations they study, looking for general *patterns* that transcend their specific instantiations.⁶ (In so doing they thus also resemble linguists, who try to identify general language patterns that transcend their specific instantiations in actual speech [Simmel, [1917] 1950:22].)⁷ Their work is therefore quite distinct from studies involving cases that “are bound temporally, spatially, and culturally and [thus] inadequately cast to serve as clear instances of generic sociological categories” (Blumer, [1956] 1969:130–131) that transcend the here-and-now or there-and-then of ethnographic or historical research. Thus, when studying the social organization of denial, for example, although the specific “elephants in the room” people jointly pretend to ignore often vary across social groups and change over time within any given group, they would nevertheless look at the formal properties of the conspiracies of silence revolving around them (Zerubavel, 2006).

⁵ See also pp. 32–33, 49–51; Lofland, 1995; Prus, 1987.

⁶ See also Lofland and Lofland, 1995:157–159.

⁷ See, for example, Saussure, [1915] 1959:13–15.

Yet how can we actually distill the strictly generic from the culturally, historically, and situationally specific properties of social phenomena? Furthermore, as sociology is increasingly divided into many subspecialties with their own distinctive subfield-specific concerns, how can we actually develop the *formal sociological imagination* that would enable us to identify general social patterns across those conventional yet highly essentialized mental divides?

MULTICONTEXTUAL EVIDENCE

A major prerequisite for achieving this goal is a firm commitment to the *comparative* method, commonly regarded ever since Comte ([1830–1842] 1975:244–247) as one of the principal methods of sociological inquiry.⁸ That entails drawing on *multicontextual* evidence. Ultimately searching for general patterns that transcend any one particular context, we must thus draw on as many contexts as possible.

As we all know, the larger our sample, the more generalizable our findings. Yet social pattern analysis calls for maximizing not just the number but also the variety of contexts represented in our sample. After all, *the wider the range of our evidence, the more generalizable our argument.*

Social pattern analysis thus involves comparing phenomena “spanning diverse settings” across “widely different contexts” (Prus, 1987:264).⁹ As Timur Kuran (1995:xi. *Emphasis added*) explains in *Private Truths, Public Lies*, “a book purporting to analyze a universal social process must justify its claim to generality by testing its thesis *in diverse contexts*. It must connect facts previously treated as unrelated by identifying common patterns in geographically distinct, temporally removed, culturally specific events.” Allan Horwitz (1990:15. *Emphasis added*) makes a similar argument in *The Logic of Social Control*: “This work utilizes *a broad range and scope* of empirical material to develop empirical generalizations about the behavior of social control. These generalizations are not particular to specific historical periods but predict social control processes *in many diverse settings*.” Erving Goffman likewise stresses the importance of collecting “lots of different things”: “When I do these studies I take *a large number of illustrations, variously obtained* ... and try to get a formulation that is compatible with all of them” (Verhoeven, 1993:341, 340. *Emphasis added*).

Thus, in marked contrast to its Weberian counterpart, the Simmelian sociological tradition is pronouncedly transcultural, and social pattern

⁸ See, for example, Ragin, 1987.

⁹ See also Glaser and Strauss, 1967:156.

analysts draw their evidence from *multiple cultural settings* in order to establish the genericity of the social patterns they identify. Thus, when discussing the “divide and rule” pattern of domination, Simmel ([1908] 1950:164–169) constantly moves across such diverse cultural contexts as England, Venice, and Peru. Drawing on such disparate cultural milieus as Iran, Mexico, Namibia, and Japan has likewise been critical to my effort to develop a *transcultural* sociology of memory (Zerubavel, 2003).

Yet social pattern analysis entails comparing situations “widely scattered” not only in space but also in time (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:155). In marked contrast to Marx, Simmel’s analysis of social conflict, for example, is pronouncedly transhistorical. Thus, in the same paragraph, he discusses its unifying role in such *diverse historical settings* as ancient Greece, medieval Spain, and eighteenth-century North America (Simmel, [1908] 1955:100). Drawing on the historically disparate contexts of early Christianity and the French Revolution (Zerubavel, 1982a, [1981] 1985:82–95) has likewise been critical to my effort to develop a *transhistorical* sociology of time.

In fact, social pattern analysts draw their evidence from multiple social contexts even within the same culture and historical period. Thus, when analyzing “total” institutions, for example, Goffman (1961a) draws on such diverse settings as orphanages, mental hospitals, and concentration camps almost interchangeably. Such an “omnivorous” style of inquiry also characterizes *Stigma* (Goffman, 1963b), which features African Americans’, blind persons’, and homosexuals’ “spoiled” identities just as promiscuously, as well as *Frame Analysis* (Goffman, 1974). It is likewise evident in the way divorcés, retirees, and ex-convicts are featured quite interchangeably in Helen Ebaugh’s (1988) work on “role exit,” and in Lynn Chancer’s (1992) analysis of “sadosomachistic” power relations between employers and employees as well as lovers. By the same token, Kristen Purcell (2001) looks at standardized tests, antitrust laws, affirmative action programs, as well as the way beauty pageants and baseball leagues are designed in an effort to uncover the formal logic of establishing parity. Examining bedtime stories, wedding ceremonies, and ritual throat clearings likewise helps one uncover the logic of marking boundary crossings (Zerubavel, [1991] 1993:18–20), while comparing interactions between doctors and terminal patients and Holocaust survivors and their children similarly reveals the formal features of conspiracies of silence (Zerubavel, 2006:47–52).

Identifying formal patterns also presupposes indifference to scale. Social pattern analysts must therefore disregard the conventional split between “micro-” and “macro-” sociology and, following Simmel ([1908] 1950:135–36, 145–69), uncover the formal features of social triangles

regardless of whether they consist of two parents and a child or Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Kurds. And when exploring the social dynamics of denial, they must likewise examine the way wives ignore their husbands' drinking problems as well as the way nations collectively ignore the glaring incompetence of their leaders (Zerubavel, 2006).¹⁰

CROSS-CONTEXTUAL SIMILARITY

The fact that a formal pattern manifests itself “in myriad ways across times and places” (Horwitz, 1990:16) does not mean, however, that it is therefore not one and the same pattern.¹¹ Indeed, it is its common features across those different contexts that social pattern analysts need to uncover. As Everett Hughes ([1951] 1971:342) describes the challenge of developing a *transcontextual* sociology of work,

the essential problems of men at work are the same whether they do their work in the laboratories of some famous institution or in the messiest vat room of a pickle factory. Until we can find a point of view and concepts which will enable us to make comparisons between the junk peddler and the professor without intent to debunk the one and patronize the other, we cannot do our best work.¹²

It is the search for cross-contextual similarity among seemingly dissimilar phenomena that so distinctly characterizes the formal sociological imagination. Whereas most comparative scholarship highlights cross-cultural and historical variation, social pattern analysts use the strategy of comparing specifically in order to identify *common* patterns across different social contexts. In marked contrast to the common comparativist tendency to focus on differences among unique cultural and historical configurations, they view those configurations as but different manifestations of a single generic pattern. Their comparisons are therefore designed to highlight the formal commonality rather than the cultural, historical, or situational singularity of the various specific manifestations of that pattern.¹³ They involve,

compar[ing] phenomena that may be radically different in concrete content yet essentially similar in structural arrangement. For example, leader–follower relations may be seen to be structurally the same both in deviant juvenile gangs and in conformist scout troops (Coser, 1971:180).

The general idea is thus to compare phenomena,

¹⁰ See also Vaughan, 2002:30.

¹¹ See also Davis, 1971:315.

¹² See also his discussion of the formal similarity between the social marginality of female and black professionals in America (Hughes, [1945] 1971).

¹³ See also Comte, [1830–1842] 1975:246–247; Tilly, 1984:97–115.

that seem to be noncomparable on the substantive level but which on the formal level are conceptually comparable ... Anyone who wishes to discover formal theory, then, should be aware of the usefulness of *comparisons made* on high level conceptual categories *among the seemingly incomparable*. He should actively seek this kind of comparison ... [which] can greatly aid him in transcending substantive descriptions ... as he tries to generate a general, formal theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1971:186–187. Emphasis added).¹⁴

Transcending singularity thus entails favoring John Stuart Mill's ([1843] 1895, Book III, Chapter 8)¹⁵ "method of agreement" over his "method of difference" as a preferable mode of inductive inquiry. In other words, it implies opting for *lumping* rather than splitting (Zerubavel, 1996) as one's overall style of theorizing. That involves *drawing on different contexts interchangeably so as to highlight common underlying patterns*.¹⁶ One must thus note the "wide degree of general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals" (Van Gennep, [1908] 1960:3), for example, if one is to uncover the underlying formal properties of "rites of passage."

That explains the critical role of *analogy*, which implies a "recognition that ... different things can be treated as the same" (Holyoak and Thagard, 1995:39),¹⁷ in social pattern analysis. Urging sociologists to uncover the "commonalities of structure and processes that exist despite the appearance of difference in events, activities, and phenomena," Diane Vaughan (2002:30) thus calls for "selecting cases based on analogous circumstances occurring in different social settings" and regards the act of "comparing similar events, activities, or phenomena despite variation" in their manifestations as the distinctive hallmark of the "analogical" kind of theorizing she advocates. Her analysis of the remarkably similar interpretive work one sees in interactions between both couples and air traffic controllers (Vaughan, 2002) exemplifies the methodological virtues of drawing attention to such "Simmelarities," as she so appropriately calls them (Vaughan, 1998:7).

It was indeed Simmel ([1908] 1959:316–317. Emphasis added) who explicitly urged sociologists to,

demonstrate that *the same form* of sociation can be observed in quite *dissimilar contents* ... A parallel is found in the fact that the same geometric forms may be observed in the most heterogeneous materials ... [T]he same form of interaction obtains among individuals in societal groups that are the most unlike imaginable ... Superiority, subordination, competition, division of labor, foundation of parties, representation, inner solidarity coupled with exclusiveness toward the outside, and

¹⁴ See also pp. 182–185, 188; Glaser and Strauss, 1967:82–90.

¹⁵ See also Skocpol, 1984:378–379.

¹⁶ See also Vaughan, 1992.

¹⁷ See also p. 19.

innumerable similar features are found in the state as well as in a religious community, in a band of conspirators as in an economic association, in an art school as in a family.¹⁸

Indeed, he thus uncovered the similar dynamics underlying the relations between two individuals competing for the same lover as well as between three political parties (Simmel, [1908] 1950:156–158). As Coser (1971:179. Emphasis added) points out,

in Simmel's perspective a host of otherwise distinct human phenomena might be properly understood by reference to the same formal concept. To be sure, the student of warfare and the student of marriage investigate qualitatively different subject matters, yet the sociologist can discern essentially similar interactive forms in martial conflict and in marital conflict. Although there is little similarity between the behavior displayed at the court of Louis XIV and that displayed in the main offices of an American corporation, a study of the forms of subordination and superordination in each will reveal *underlying patterns common to both*. On a concrete and descriptive level, there would seem little connection between the early psychoanalytic movement in Vienna and the early Communist movement, but attention to typical forms of interaction among the members of these groups reveals that both are importantly shaped by the fact that they have the structural features of the sect.

By the same token, it was essentially similar behavior patterns in such different settings as an operating room and a merry-go-round and among such temperamentally contrasting professions as flight attendants and bill collectors that led Goffman (1961b) and Arlie Hochschild (1983) to make general observations about “role distance” and the social organization of feeling. Formal similarities between medieval Chinese eunuchs’ and modern Western domestic servants’ social affiliation structures likewise helped Coser (1974:11–13, 21–31) uncover the formal pattern of undivided commitment, while a similar lack of contact between voters and their senators and ordinary scientists and Nobel laureates led Peter Blau (1977:47) to theorize about the social insulation of elites. In a similar vein, it was the essentially analogous situations of standing in line at the bank and submitting a paper to a journal that helped Barry Schwartz (1975) uncover the formal properties of waiting, and formal similarities between folk-songs, anniversaries, and historic neighborhoods that led me to become aware of our basic urge to “bridge” the past and the present (Zerubavel, 2003:40–48, 52–54).

Such mental lumping, however, presupposes disregarding obvious differences among various manifestations of the formal pattern, as when Christena Nippert-Eng (1992) compares women’s interruptibility at home and at work, when Karen Cerulo (1995) examines formal semiotic commonalities between national anthems and flags, or when Ian Watson

¹⁸ See also Simmel, [1917] 1950:14–15.

(2005) compares the ways we evaluate the quality of restaurants and grade students' performance. By the same token, only by disregarding whether her informants specifically abstained from meat, alcohol, or sex could Jamie Mullaney (2005) uncover the formal properties of social identities based on avoidance,¹⁹ only by ignoring the obvious differences between the aftermath of earthquakes or terrorist attacks and remission from cancer could Samantha Spitzer (2006) uncover the generic properties of "dormant dangers," and only by focusing on the common features of the Waco, Tupac Amaru, and Ruby Ridge standoffs could Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2000) make general observations about the role of contingency in social action. As Wayne Brekhus (2003:137–138) rightly points out, "the ways gay men organize their identity ... also reveal something about how Christians, Democrats, feminists, doctors, bird watchers, mothers, African Americans, Italians, southerners, Gen X'ers, baseball fans, vegetarians, drug dealers, kindergarten teachers, and jazz musicians organize their[s]."

FOCUS

The general style of inquiry associated with social pattern analysis also affects the kind of data its practitioners tend to collect. Indeed, they are rather "omnivorous" not just in how they gather their evidence in disparate contexts but also in what they consider evidence.²⁰ As evident, for example, from the way Goffman (1974; [1976] 1979; 1963a) uses newspapers, magazine ads, and etiquette manuals, social pattern analysts can indeed find their data practically anywhere.²¹

That does not mean, however, that the highly *eclectic* manner in which they gather their evidence is therefore unsystematic—an accusation often made against both Simmel²² and Goffman. In fact, social pattern analysis requires a great deal of methodological rigor, yet of a rather different kind than what we conventionally teach students in our methods courses. Essentially tied to a particular analytical focus (rather than a particular setting, period, or sampling procedure, as in ethnographic, historical, or survey research), it basically requires from its practitioners that they stay *analytically focused*.

Indeed, social pattern analysts start collecting their data only after having committed themselves to a particular focus of scholarly attention.

¹⁹ See also Howard's (2006:308) analysis of "delabelers."

²⁰ See also Glaser and Strauss, 1967:161; Glaser and Strauss, 1971:184.

²¹ See also Davis, 1983.

²² See, for example, Glaser and Strauss, 1967:155.

After all, establishing that focus determines what data they actually get to collect.²³

Essentially interested in formal patterns, their focus is pronouncedly analytical.²⁴ They basically conduct *theoretical sampling* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:45–77), thereby “decid[ing] *on analytic grounds* what data to collect ... and where to find them” (Strauss, 1987:38. Emphasis added). In other words, they are “active sampler[s] of *theoretically relevant data*” (Glaser and Strauss, 1971:183. Emphasis added).

Moreover, noticing formal patterns presupposes confining one’s attention to only certain aspects of actual situations. Rather than blaming the fact that they ignore other aspects of those situations on the practical impossibility of studying everything, social pattern analysts actually regard their deliberate effort to view those situations *selectively* as a methodological virtue, a necessary precondition for staying analytically focused.

Essentially representing an “e.g.” rather than “i.e.” approach to data,²⁵ social pattern analysis involves a *theme-driven* rather than a data-driven style of inquiry, where specific situations are viewed as *exemplifying* general patterns, as part of “an effort to see the universe in a grain of sand.”²⁶ Studies associated with this style of inquiry may be situated in particular cultural or historical settings, yet they are never studies *of* those settings.²⁷ The actual “locus of study,” notes Clifford Geertz (1973:22), “is not the object of study. Anthropologists don’t study villages ... they study *in* villages.” As Kai Erikson ([1966] 2005:xvi. Emphasis added) points out in *Wayward Puritans*,

the data presented here have not been gathered in order to throw new light on the Puritan community in New England but to add something to our understanding of deviant behavior *in general* ... [T]he Puritan experience in America has been treated in these pages *as an example of human life everywhere*. Whether or not the approach taken here is plausible ... depend[s] on the extent to which it helps explain the behavior of other peoples at other moments in time, and not just the particular subjects of this study.

It is the mental process of *abstraction* that allows social pattern analysts to focus on, and thereby uncover, generic patterns. “The more abstract one’s way of conceiving things,” notes Hughes ([1956] 1971:438), “the more likely one is to make generic discoveries which apply to many concrete ... phenomena.” Indeed, adds Simmel ([1908] 1959:316), “abstractions alone produce science out of ... the unity of reality.”²⁸

²³ See Zerubavel, 1997:48–50.

²⁴ See also Zerubavel, 1980:30.

²⁵ On these two modes of scholarship see Margalit, 2002:ix.

²⁶ Lofland, 1995:40.

²⁷ See, for example, Zerubavel, 1979:xvii. See also Zerubavel, [1981] 1985:x–xi.

²⁸ See also Simmel, [1917] 1950:11.

Abstraction, of course, presupposes conceptualization, and analytical foci usually revolve around “sensitizing” concepts that “suggest directions along which to look” thus providing “a general sense of relevance and guidance in approaching empirical instances” (Blumer, 1954:7).²⁹ “Every science,” notes Simmel ([1908] 1959:313; [1917] 1950:11, 21), “rests upon an abstraction inasmuch as it considers the totality of [a] thing ... from the viewpoint of a particular conception” in accordance with which it “extracts only one ... aspect out of [this] totality.” “Sociological phenomena [are thus] factored out of ... reality by means of ... concept[s]” that help keep social pattern analysts analytically focused.³⁰

CONCLUSION

It is certainly not my intent to discredit historical, ethnographic, or other kinds of scholarship that underscore the uniqueness of specific social settings and situations. Having done much work based on such scholarship myself (Zerubavel, 1977; 1979; [1981] 1985:31–40, 70–100, 105–137; 1982a, 1982b, [1985] 1989:5–82; 1992), I am well aware of its merits. I am also quite aware of the inherent limitations of social pattern analysis. Essentially oblivious to the idiosyncratic peculiarities of the concrete, it is inevitably blind to cultural, historical, or other kinds of social variation. Even Simmel himself never regarded his formal analyses of social life as in any way superior to the historically specific ones featured in *The Philosophy of Money* or “The Web of Group Affiliations.”

Yet when studies we conduct in specific social settings are viewed as studies *of* those settings, we may not realize that the particular sociohistorical configurations we examine are but specific manifestations of more general social patterns. That is precisely what prevented Edward Evans-Pritchard, for example, from appreciating the extent to which his analysis of the Nuer kinship system actually sheds light on the formal sociological features of *any* genealogical system.³¹

Social pattern analysis helps us avoid such intellectual blind spots and uncover generic patterns invisible to anyone interested only in the specific. “Analy[zing] the limited number of forms which could be extracted from the bewildering multiplicity of social contents,” notes Coser (1965:8), allows “insights into social life denied to those who [are] content with descriptions of the concrete.”

²⁹ See also Denzin, 1970:14–15; Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:28.

³⁰ See also Blumer, 1931:520.

³¹ Contrast, for example, Evans-Pritchard, 1940:106–108, 200–201 with Zerubavel, 2003:64–66. See also Davis, 1971:315.

Doing that, however, presupposes an intellectual readiness to *decontextualize* one's findings. After all, one needs to transcend the specific context in which one first encounters a formal pattern in order to actually notice it! Indeed, it is our ability to "fre[e our] curiosity of the peculiarities of some one time and place by developing a good set of abstract ideas for comparing one case or situation with another," notes Hughes ([1956] 1971:439–440), that allows us to identify "many situations in various parts of the world comparable to those that originally aroused [our] interest."

Needless to say, one must ignore variation in order to notice formal patterns. We must deliberately disregard obvious differences between immigrants and transsexuals and between the practices of posting pictures of deadbeat dads and outing gay celebrities, for example, in order to uncover the formal properties of boundary crossings and forced publicity. By the same token, we must ignore numerous obvious differences in order to notice the essentially similar sociomnemonic tactics used by nations and companies to portray their past in their history textbooks and publicity brochures, and realize how fundamentally similar are the memory wars between Serbs and Albanians over the original settlement of Kosovo and anthropologists and molecular biologists over the dating of the evolutionary split between humans and apes (Zerubavel, 2003). And only by deliberately disregarding any variation among specific conspiracies of silence (which also presupposes intellectual cross-fertilization among conventionally separate "subfields" and "literatures") can we actually appreciate the rather similar manner in which families and large organizations collectively deny the presence of "elephants" in their midst (Zerubavel, 2006).

It is the formal sociological imagination that allows us to "see" the generic when we look at the specific and thereby realize that setting statutes of limitations is actually not that different from enacting bankruptcy laws or letting bygones be bygones (Zerubavel, 2003:9, 94), and that studies of "lowly" occupations in fact shed light on work-related behavior in *any* occupation (Hughes, [1951], 1971:343).³² As such, it is the kind of sociological imagination that produces works like *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* rather than *The Presentation of Self in the Shetland Islands*. And there, in a nutshell, lies the great promise of social pattern analysis.

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³² See also Prus, 1987:263–264.

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