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Standards in sociology: A position statement at the 25th anniversary of the European Academy of Sociology

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Abstract

In this note we outline a vision on standards for sociology. The occasion is given us by the 25th anniversary of the European Academy of Sociology (EAS), an institution that aims to promote those standards. We first revisit the founding aims of EAS and evaluate the extent to which they have been realized. We then consider the challenges and opportunities currently facing sociology and the social sciences more broadly and propose three key principles to advance disciplinary standards in sociology. These key principles concern the integration of theory and empirics, open science practices, and engagement with wider societal debates. We conclude by calling for unity in basic disciplinary standards agreed upon by the sociological community,

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alongside diversity in research questions and methods to foster creative sociological explanations and descriptions.

Keywords
sociology, standards in sociology, european academy of sociology

The European Academy of Sociology – EAS (https://www.european-academy-sociology.eu) was initiated by Peter Abell, Peter Hedström, and Siegwart Lindenberg, and formally established in the year 2000 in Paris. Raymond Boudon was elected as the Founding President, with 23 Regular Fellows, and Ralf Dahrendorf, Gudmund Hernes, Gordon Marshall, and Robert Merton as Honorary Fellows.

EAS's foundation was announced in the *European Sociological Review* by Lindenberg (2002). The 2002 statement notes that there is "a great need for an international effort to improve, and, where appropriate, to maintain the standards of sociological research" and describes EAS as a "fellowship of respected scholars with expertise in many different areas of sociology, united around the common concern to promote rigorous standards in sociology". EAS is an international, non-governmental, and non-profit association, funded fully by fellows' membership fees, with three objectives:

(a) to promote and maintain rigour and excellence in European sociological scholarship, research, and education,
(b) to further integration of the social sciences (including its behavioural and economic variants), and
(c) to provide independent advice on matters of sociological relevance to European institutions.

In this note, we describe EAS's development and vision with some reflections on its place within the European sociology, to mark and celebrate its 25th year jubilee. Looking back, what have we achieved in 25 years? And looking ahead, in the evolving and challenging contemporary social sciences landscape, what basic principles should be promoted to facilitate the three objectives of the EAS?

Past and present

Since its foundation, both the Academy and sociology as a discipline have changed. The composition of the Fellowship has expanded and diversified, as

of now with 42 regular, 25 Emeritus and two Honorary fellows, representing a wide range of different specialisms and career stages, including more European countries and a greater representation of women.

EAS has established two academic prizes: the *Distinguished Publication Prize* and the *Raymond Boudon Award for Early Career Achievement.* The Boudon award is given for major new contributions in the field and has facilitated the recognition and career development of junior scholars. EAS thus embodies and encourages some of the major contributions in cutting-edge European sociological research.

The 25th anniversary of EAS arrives in challenging times. Some of the disciplinary issues that motivated the establishment of EAS remain, as we review below. In addition, European sociology and related disciplines have faced new challenges arising from shifts in the wider societal and scientific landscape, such as rapid changes in information technologies, increase in the prominence of private organisations in science production, and populist charges against sciences. If sociology is to thrive in this age of artificial intelligence, massive digital data, and large language models, the discipline needs to keep improving (see Lazer et al., 2021). But to what extent have disciplinary standards in sociology improved in the last 25 years?

In 2000, EAS fellows regarded the quality of European sociology as "highly variable", with "excellent research", "considerable advances in serious theory formulation", and "excellent programmes for undergraduate and graduate education", but also research of "low quality", "mediocre" training programmes, and declining ability "to attract talented students and faculty". EAS was set up to help "turn the tide" (Lindenberg 2002).

Many of these challenges still apply. Over the past 25 years, competition for students has intensified across the social sciences and beyond, and sociology often loses out, leading to relatively fewer enrolments in sociology programs (for the US trend see Cohen 2021). Debates on the variable quality of sociological research, be it within quantitative (Bernardi et al., 2017) or qualitative (Small and McCrory Calarco 2022) approaches, on how to evaluate disciplinary quality (Leahey et al., 2023; Otte et al., 2023), on the heterogeneity of sociological "styles" (Kuehn and Rohlfing 2022), and sociology's positioning between the scientific method versus activism (Scheitle 2018), have intensified. Overall, arguably the tide remains to be turned. Indeed, our motivation for writing this note partially stems from the need for sociology to engage in ongoing reflection on and evaluation of its own standards.

We nevertheless also see positive developments in the discipline and in European sociology. EAS fellows have played their role in some of them, but

many have been initiated by other scholars. We want to mention some examples.

First, many organisations now help foster standards in European sociology and social sciences by supporting high quality research and providing fora for disciplinary and inter-disciplinary discussions. Examples include the *European Consortium for Sociological Research*, the German *Academy of Sociology* as well as sections of established associations (e.g. *Decision-making, Networks, and Society* at ASA, Research Committees such as RC28: *Social Stratification and Mobility* and RC45: *Micro-Macro Modelling* at ISA), and interdisciplinary organisations such as the *International Network for Social Network Analysis* and the *European Social Simulation Association*.

Second, there are considerably more programmes with excellent training in sociology that attract and retain talented students and scholars. To mention a few in different European countries: the undergraduate *Q-Step* programme in the United Kingdom, the *Doctoral* and the *Max Weber Postdoc Programmes* at the European University Institute (Italy), the training programmes at the *Institute for Analytical Sociology* in Linköping (Sweden) added to other strong Scandinavian programmes, the *Centre for Doctoral Studies in Social and Behavioural Sciences* at the University of Mannheim (Germany), and the *Juan March Institute* in Madrid (Spain). Others grew considerably such as the *Interuniversity Center for Social Science Theory and Methodology* (ICS) in which four universities in the Netherlands collaborate.

Third, there is now a large and growing body of new textbooks and handbooks for training and research in sociology, which contributes to developing a "core" for the discipline. New resources include an introductory sociology textbook (Van Tubergen 2020) and introductions to specific fields (e.g. Platt 2019). Goldthorpe (2021) discusses pioneers of sociological science, including also the statistical roots of sociology, which are absent from the history of ideas usually found in books on social theory. Breen and Müller (2020) describe progress in large-scale empirical research programmes. New handbooks such as Manzo (2021) and Gërxhani et al. (2022) cover a broad range of established and emerging research fields. More specialized handbooks focus on established specific fields, such as Gangl et al. (Forthcoming) on social stratification and on emerging approaches such as computational social sciences (e.g. Yasseri 2025).

Finally, while sociology still lags other disciplines in open science practices, there is now a strong effort to catch up. International and national sociology journals (e.g. *European Sociological Review, Sociological Science, Sociological Methods and Research, Rationality and Society, European Societies,* and *L'Année Sociologique*) have strengthened their

requirements for authors to make their research material openly available. Large sociology conferences today (e.g. ISA and ECSR) routinely feature sessions on open science and reproducibility in sociology. Well-established domain-specific organizations such as the *International Network for Social Network Analysis* and new sub-fields like computational social science have also released guidelines on sharing data and code to allow large-scale replications (Neal et al., 2024) as well as agenda-setting papers to create consensus about good practices and foster cumulative knowledge production (e.g. Flache et al., 2017).

Future

To take us forward in building on these positive developments and to further strengthen the discipline, we outline three basic principles which are vital for achieving the three objectives of EAS listed above. The first two principles help achieve the first two objectives, namely, to reinforce high standards in European sociology and to further integration of cognate social sciences.[1] The third principle is about increasing the credibility of sociology in providing independent advice to European or other institutions.

Integration of theory and empirics is essential

Good science relies on an integrated approach of theory, methodology, and data. But what are the main building blocks of this approach?

Theory building. Theory building is not simply listing past empirical findings or summarising published articles and then deriving empirical expectations. It is also not coining new terms or inventing jargon. In Gambetta's (n.d.) terms, good theory helps solve "empirical puzzles" by providing answers to why a specific outcome occurs. To many of us, this is accomplished by formulating hypotheses that link macro-conditions to the outcomes via micro-components. These micro-components often include individual characteristics, such as beliefs, desires, and actions, and their complex relationships, modelled by, for instance, dual-process approaches. Theorizing often also includes specific social mechanisms, like imitation and learning, and interaction structures, like networks or opportunities (e.g. Hernes 1976; Wippler 1978; Elster 2015; Coleman 1990; Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Lazega 2020; Kroneberg and Tutić Forthcoming). Empirical predictions should be derived from interlinked theoretical building blocks rather than simply reiterating empirical regularities (e.g. Raub et al., 2022). Our aim is to generalize theoretical insights rather than empirical findings.[2]

Models. Many EAS fellows are committed to a type of explanatory sociology that encourages systematic investigation, through explicit (formal or informal) modelling of the social mechanisms involved in empirical patterns (see e.g. Boudon 1979). Those "generative models" may not only help us explain empirical puzzles or regularities, but, in principle, also generate novel predictions for new settings which can be subsequently tested. Mechanisms in such models can be derived from deeper theoretical premises such as rationality (Gambetta 1998) or generated inductively by learning via comprehensive analysis of data (Merton 1987).

Today, machine learning or similar powerful algorithms are increasingly used for *pattern recognition* and *prediction* (LeCun et al., 2015). We believe the strength of sociological theory and models championed by the EAS and summarised here lies in its power for *explanation* (Keuschnigg et al., 2018). We think that this strength of sociology should be promoted, particularly now, to balance private industry's focus on classification and prediction with sound explanation.

Causality. There is now a growing consensus in the social sciences as to what types of empirical designs allow for "causal inference". Sociology should be part of this consensus to further the integration of sociology with other social, behavioural, and economic sciences. Analyses based on observational data are employing stronger statistical designs than has been the earlier state-of-the art in sociology, to better estimate causal relationships (Brand et al., 2023; Breen 2022; Gangl 2022; Morgan and Winship 2015). Experiments are specifically designed to establish cause-and-effect relationships and are now increasingly used to measure a range of sociological topics such as norms, disorder, discrimination, and trust (Barrera et al., 2024).

Although adherence to the causal inference consensus offers clear benefits for the discipline, the emphasis on causal identification must be balanced against the need to engage with substantively important questions that may not yet be amenable to causal methods. Moreover, causal estimands derived from observational data often apply only to narrowly defined subpopulations, limiting their external validity (Breen and Pan 2026). Experimental designs likewise often face external validity constraints due to non-representative samples or artificial settings. Sociological approaches to causality (see e.g. Manzo 2022) which require more than simply identifying a causal link between two variables supplement and strengthen causal research designs in sociology.

Description. Not all research could or should be theory driven or seek to estimate causal effects. Careful descriptive analyses are important for the

advancement of sociological science, both for its own sake and for theory building through providing explananda (see Goldthorpe 2004). This also includes qualitative research, especially when it is linked with and leading to quantitative research (Varese 2022).

Sociology should be an open science

Trust in science builds on "organized scepticism" (Merton 1973, p.277). This is facilitated through openness, transparency, and replicability. EAS is committed to the open science movement. The process through which a sociologist makes inferences should, as much as possible, be open for review by the scientific and the wider community. This requires transparency and openness in the many decisions the researcher makes in generating hypotheses, settling on empirical designs, creation and analysis of quantitative or qualitative data, analysis protocols and codes, written materials, and the final product. While each research project is unique and some will have elements which cannot be open for inspection immediately, the research community and institutions such as journals, professional organisations, and universities should demand sociology to be an open science.

Adopting values of open science will help integrate sociology with its neighbouring social sciences most of which are increasingly embracing a common set of open science practices. Promoting these practices will help maintain research quality in times of increasing competition for funds and academic visibility, and populist attempts to discredit or defund science. As Merton (1973:277) wrote "The abuse of expert authority and the creation of pseudo-sciences are called into play when the structure of control exercised by qualified compeers is rendered ineffectual". As funding bodies in Europe and elsewhere are increasingly relying on non-scientific or political criteria ahead of research excellence and peer and expert judgement, it is essential to reaffirm the importance of peer-reviewed quality control and adherence to established scientific standards. Open science will facilitate this process.

Our stance here is necessarily conceptual. Concrete guidelines for open science, such as detailed procedures for preregistering hypotheses or for sharing data collection materials and code, develop incrementally through disciplinary experimentation and refinement. Contemporary recommendations are already available, and journals and other institutions should ensure that they remain aligned with these evolving standards (see Auspurg and Brüderl 2022).

Engaging with pressing social issues requires care

Many EAS fellows were drawn into sociology motivated by the desire to improve the world. Indeed, every scholar is a citizen with full rights and responsibilities to engage with the world around as everyone else. However, following Merton (1968), we find it important to clearly distinguish between academic work, that is, the processes through which sociological knowledge is produced on the one hand, and political action, aimed to make a societal change, on the other. The former should be governed by the sociological principles summarised above. The latter is not within our remit. Research has documented that values may induce biases into research designs, which may distort the measurement and interpretation of social phenomena (Borjas and Breznau 2024). Hence, while scholars may hold personal commitments on socially and politically relevant issues, even if those may be informed by their research and evolve with new knowledge, we believe it is important for integrity and transparency that the practice of sociology remains distinct from activism.

Sociology has a tradition of applied research serving public institutions. Social policy research, which empirically evaluates existing policies and proposes new ones, has become more widespread across Europe and elsewhere since EAS's inception in 2000 (see Platt n.d). We have seen many examples during the Covid19 pandemic (e.g. Mills and Ruttenauer 2022). Such research provides a domain where social change can be studied and pursued sociologically, particularly given the development of causal approaches that more robustly connect policies and outcomes. Predicting and driving change requires linking the policy tools and outcomes with the key actors, incentives, beliefs, opportunities, and other social mechanisms. As illustrated by De Graaf and Wiertz (2019), this requires analytical theory building. Sound measurement of the social world and advanced methods of empirical testing of policy impact are also needed for sociological policy evaluation.

We maintain that sociological research need not and, in many cases, should not always be oriented toward broader public or policy debates. In our view, some of the most valuable sociological insights emerge from research driven primarily by intellectual curiosity. We also understand that policy research is not the only, or indeed the fastest way to pursue social change, if one is motivated for doing so (see Cohen 2025 for a wider treatment and alternatives). Adhering to demanding sociological standards is essential, though, not only for producing sound knowledge that can motivate change, but also to maintain the discipline's credibility when providing independent advice on matters of sociological relevance.

Before concluding, we emphasize that the principles that we submit to discussion should be understood as applying to the discipline as a collective enterprise rather than to prescribing or evaluating the conduct of individual sociologists. For instance, when we argue that theoretical and empirical work should be integrated, we do not imply that individual researchers must achieve such integration in each and all of their individual projects. Instead, other researchers working in the same or other fields or sub-fields should be capable of bringing together theoretical and empirical contributions that may be undertaken independently. Nevertheless, both theoretical and empirical research should be formulated in ways that facilitate such integration. For example, purely theoretical work should ultimately generate testable implications, while empirical work focused on measurement or description should ultimately enable better tests of theories. Likewise, the implementation of open science practices cannot rest solely on individual scholars. It requires structural support from institutions such as journals, funding bodies, and universities, which must establish the incentives and conditions necessary to sustain these practices.

Conclusion

Since its foundation in 2000, EAS has evolved into a diverse and dynamic set of fellows motivated to advance its foundational objectives. Looking ahead, EAS is poised to take more concrete actions, led by new and old members alike, in line with the three principles listed above. We are eager to expand EAS's collaboration with partners across Europe and beyond, and to facilitate exchange with European institutions around issues on the assessment of research quality and outcomes, and other matters of sociological importance. We call for a unity in basic disciplinary standards agreed by the sociological community, with diversity in research questions and methods for creative sociological explanations and descriptions. EAS is determined to foster critical discussions of these issues.

Author note

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Notes

1. Here we focus primarily on the practical integration of adjacent social sciences and sociology. We advocate the adoption of established best practices from cognate disciplines in areas such as methods and open science to strengthen sociological research standards and to mitigate the risk of disciplinary insularity. Interdisciplinarity as a broader scientific paradigm, encompassing structural and institutional dimensions, raises important but distinct considerations that fall beyond the scope of this note.
2. Methodological individualism (especially its "weak" form, see Udehn 2002) is frequently associated with the approach outlined here. However, we contend that the theoretical rigor we advocate is not contingent upon methodological individualism, nor upon alternative frameworks such as macro-level or structural theories (e.g. Blau and Schwartz 1984). Rather, rigor is defined by the logical coherence between premises and conclusions and by a theory's capacity to generate testable predictions, thereby rendering it open to empirical test.

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