
*Trends in Sociology Titles*¹

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Recent reflections on the state of publications in sociology (Becker, 2003) suggest that article titles are getting longer. I test this hypothesis with data from *ASR* since inception and a wider sample of papers from *Sociological Abstracts* between 1963 and 1999. My results indicate a rapid and widespread increase in title length. Further analyses suggest that title length does not predict citation, suggesting that long titles are not an avenue for getting more readers.

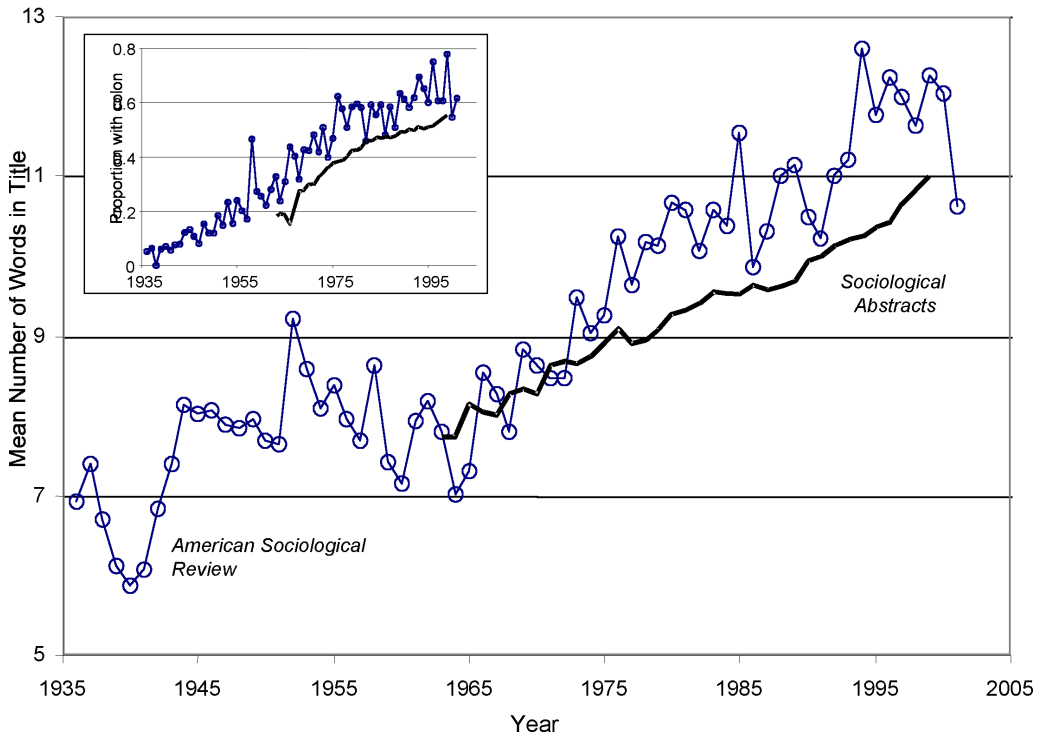
Becker suggests two syntactic features that increase title length (*iv*). First, it seems that there has been a general decline in short titles that express complete ideas, such as “Nationality and Crime” (Taft, 1936) or “Mate Selection” (Popenoe, 1937). Second, recent titles often have two parts: a general descriptive title followed by a subtitle after the colon that specifies the research problem, sample or method, such as “The Structure of a Social Science Collaboration Network: Disciplinary Cohesion from 1963 to 1999” (Moody, 2004).

A number of other disciplinary trends might also increase title length. There has been an increase in quantitative methods over time and advertising these methods in titles might increase length. Coauthorship rates in sociology have risen steadily over time, and perhaps “titles by committee” are less succinct than single-authored titles. Finally, the specialty composition of the discipline has changed, with more publications related to applied social problems relative to publications on general theory, which might lead to more specific (and thus longer) titles. Also, since new authors mimic current examples, any trend toward longer titles will be self-reinforcing. This would suggest that most of the variance in title length would be unexplainable by article or disciplinary characteristics.

Answering Becker’s second question is more difficult, as it is impossible to measure authors’ motivations for title choice without a survey of authors. However, if authors are trying “to get more and more of their article into the title” (Becker, 2003: *iv*) to compete for reader attention, we can use citation counts to test whether longer titles increase visibility.

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Figure 1
Length of Sociological Titles over Time



Results

Figure 1 shows the trend in title length over time, based on all research papers published in the *ASR* from 1936 to 2001 and all English language papers indexed in *Sociological Abstracts* (*SA*) from 1963 to 1999.² These trends show quite clearly that Becker's speculation was correct: average title length has increased steadily over time. The average *ASR* paper in 1936 had titles with just over 7 words, compared to nearly 11 words in current issues (medians 1936 = 6; 2001 = 11). A close examination of title length distributions in each year suggests that while long titles used to be uncommon, the entire distribution has since shifted right, with the bulk of the change occurring after 1960.

The inset graph in Figure 1 answers Becker's title structure hypothesis, showing that the proportion of titles using colons has increased steadily. While two-part titles were nearly unheard of in the early days of the *ASR*, nearly 70% all papers in recent issues have two-part titles. While colons generally increase title length, (7.8 without vs. 11.7 with), the presence of a colon accounts for only 28% of the variance in *ASR* title length and 18% of the variance in the wider *SA* sample, suggesting that titles without multiple clauses are also getting longer.

How have other disciplinary changes affected title length? Table 1 summarizes the effects of coauthorship, specialty discipline,³ and the number of tables in a paper (a proxy for quantitative methods) on title length, using papers indexed in *Sociological Abstracts* since the mid 1960s. Papers on Health, Social Welfare, and Family have the

Table 1
Sociological Title Length

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	9.86*	7.02*	5.91*
Areas			
Health	0.95*	0.61*	0.67*
Soc Welfare	0.64*	0.33*	0.44*
Family	0.52*	0.12*	0.24*
Soc Problems	0.47*	0.02	0.04
Organizations	0.40*	0.08	0.06
Methods	-0.61*	-0.55*	-0.21*
Theory	-0.86*	-0.42*	-0.30*
S. of Science	-0.93*	-0.52*	-0.34*
Marxist / Radical	-1.51*	-0.82*	-0.55*
Year	—	0.08*	0.06*
Coauthored	—	0.49*	0.46*
2+ tables	—	0.69*	0.75*
Two-Part title	—	—	3.21*
R-Square	0.015	0.062	0.22
N = 226,465			

* p<.001;

longest titles, while papers in Marxist / Radical sociology, the sociology of science / knowledge and theory tend to have the shortest titles. While title length differs by specialty, this accounts for less than 2% of the variance, suggesting that verbose titles are widespread. In Model 2, I add year, whether a paper is coauthored, and whether the paper has many tables. These effects generally attenuate area specialty effects, but again account for only a small fraction of the variance. Coauthored papers are slightly longer than single authored papers and papers with many tables are slightly longer than papers with few tables. Model 3 shows that these effects are independent of the use of two-part titles, though the specialty effects are further attenuated.

Finally, Becker hypothesized that authors might be using longer titles to increase the visibility of their work. If long titles effectively capture readers' attention, then they should be read—and thus cited—more often. I selected a simple random sample of 500 papers listed in both *Sociological Abstracts* and covered by the ISI citation database since 1980 to identify the number of times each paper had been cited.⁴ Because citations are time-dependent and highly skewed, I modeled the log of the citation count as a function of years since publication and number of words in the title. *These data suggest no relation between the number of words in the title and achieved visibility. The coefficient for citations never approaches statistical significance and is negative, not positive.*⁵ These findings suggest that long titles are not effectively capturing reader's attention. Perhaps the effectiveness of long titles is contextual: a long title is only distinctive when all other titles are short. When nearly 70% of titles include multiple parts, short and sweet stands out.

Notes

1. Thanks to Randy Hodson, Joan Huber, David Jacobs, Lisa Keister, Ryan Light, Betty Menaghan, and members of the Social Structure Reading Group for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. The sample excludes comments and replies, notes, book reviews, and editorial materials. The *ASR* sample was taken from JSTOR records and contains 3,615 observations. The *Sociological Abstracts* sample has 277,817 observations.
3. *Sociological Abstracts* assigns each paper to one of 146 detailed subject areas nested within 36 broad categories. For the purposes of this table, I present the nine areas with the longest/shortest average title lengths and combined sociology of knowledge with the sociology of science and sociology of business with complex organizations, since their substance is similar and the patterns are nearly identical. A comparison of all 36 specialties is available by request.
4. 1980 is the earliest data available for electronic citation records.
5. I also included models that controlled for broad research area. While some areas receive significantly more citations than others (Medical sociology, for example), inclusion of area has no effect on the relation with title length.

References

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