

THE THEORY PRIMER

A Sociological Guide



MARK A. SCHNEIDER

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Preface: Toward Theorizing as a Skill

THIS BOOK INTRODUCES sociology majors, as well as graduate students without much prior background, to sociological theory. It is a primer, or elementary guide, and it has three goals: (1) to familiarize students with the classics of sociological theory, (2) to show how the classics connect with current theorizing in sociology, and (3) to do this in a way that teaches students how to theorize. Of these goals, the third really dominates the book and most differentiates it from other theory texts. I take theorizing to be a *skill*, and a signally important one. Theorizing, after all, is a major component of the critical thinking we'd like all students—really all citizens—to make a routine part of their lives. But it's not something we spend much time teaching people to do.

While most methods and statistics courses in sociology are skills oriented, the theory course usually is not. It is taught as intellectual history, which is to say that exemplary classical or contemporary texts are described and analyzed in relation to their historical and cultural settings. This approach assumes that students will easily gather, simply from presentations of theories and their origins, what a theory *is* and how theorizing is *done*.

In my experience, they won't, and for several perfectly good reasons. The first is that sociologists don't agree on what a theory is. Indeed, someone visiting us from another discipline would find it hard to decide, when presented with the array of works included in the more comprehensive theory anthologies, just what we consider a theory to be. Though theoretical writings all surely give us "insight" into social life, they do so in such various ways that an outsider would have to see theorizing as incoherent. Little wonder, then, that students have difficulty figuring out what sociologists mean by it, much less how to do it themselves.

Second, existing texts usually present material discursively, in lengthy descriptions that fail to highlight a theory's logical or argumentative structure. This poses little hindrance where the logic of the theory is relatively simple, as perhaps it is with Émile Durkheim's explanation of variations in suicide rates, but throws up real barriers where matters are more complex, as they are with Karl Marx's explanation of capitalism's dynamics. Exactly how a student is to *see* the theory in the oceans of description is not clear, and seeing theories is no mean feat to begin with. I appreciate this all the more from having struggled to see them better in order to write this text. So sobering has my own experience been that I now see my past practice in teaching theory as the pedagogical equivalent of throwing students into very deep water and watching as they sank or swam. Those who sank I was ill equipped to save, while those who swam never needed my help to begin with. (Indeed, I did not really understand how I swam myself, at least well enough to teach others.)

Third, so varied are the theories that standard texts present that students get scant opportunity to reinforce hard-won generalizations about theories and their construction. Each theory seems to have a novel structure and to grow out of a novel sociohistorical circumstance. Theorizing, it would seem, is never the same thing twice, and, yet, unless there is *some* routine involved, the *aptitude* to theorize cannot be developed into a *habit of mind*, although it is precisely a habit of mind that a theory course should instill. Research suggests, after all, that students do not long retain the informational content of their courses. If this is so, however, the more time we can steal from conveying information and devote to developing and reinforcing skills, the better. But to do so, we must present our material so that it does, in fact, *reinforce* the skills we want to impart.

Teachers of theory easily forget that their own spontaneous facility at abstract reflection is not shared by the majority of their students. That students perhaps lack spontaneous facility in this regard, however, doesn't mean they can't develop the habit. Undergraduates come to higher education handicapped by an ambient culture that is profoundly hostile to abstract reflection and complex explanation. Indeed, prior to college, most students have had little opportunity to learn of and to practice sophisticated explanatory strategies. Obviously, our courses will not provide such an opportunity unless we can actually articulate what these strategies *are*, coach students through their initial efforts to grasp them, and then give them repeated opportunities to practice what they've learned.

To do this means, first, that we need a very explicit conception of sociological theory. Mine is the standard scientific one in which *a theory explains patterned variation* in the world around us. This view is narrow, but a broader

one can easily be developed later, after the explicit conception has been mastered. Next, it means that we must routinize as much of the practice of theorizing as its creative character will allow. Otherwise, students will be unable to discern the actual steps involved in creating a theory or to detect any pattern in the process after which to model their own efforts to theorize. And, finally, it means that, to the extent possible, we must show how this routine is evident in the logical development of each of the theories we teach so that it will be reinforced as the student proceeds from one theory to another. At the same time, we can build outward from this routine to show how forms of theorizing that don't employ it strictly nevertheless utilize some of its elements.

In what follows, then, I mold the classical theories as much as possible into a standard format, introduced in the first chapter and then followed throughout, from which students can learn to theorize. In doing so, I remain sufficiently faithful to the originals to place students firmly in the ongoing conversation with the classics that knits sociologists together as a community. Indeed, it is the ongoing vitality of this conversation that caused me to focus on the classics in the first place and to stress consistently their relevance to contemporary theories.

Throughout, I rely extensively upon figures to present the logical structure of theories and theorizing. In part as a result of writing this book, I'm inclined to believe that when we can't present the relationships among concepts in a theory visually, there's good reason to suspect that we don't understand them well or to worry that the theory wasn't well thought out to begin with. Visualization, in other words, is a strong antidote to fuzzy thinking, be it someone else's or our own.

Finally, I've almost completely ignored biographical information about the theorists discussed. Not only is such information soon forgotten, but it steals attention from the theories themselves. In a sense, I am more interested in the biographies of the *theories*, as they have given rise to traditions that revise and refine them, than I am in biographies of the *theorists*. Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and George Herbert Mead were indeed fascinating people, but learning about them doesn't help us acquire the habit of theorizing, whereas anatomizing and reflecting on their theories does. The theories remain very much alive for us today, sometimes in cautionary ways and sometimes as progenitors of more acute and effective contemporary theories. Throughout, I stress this contemporary connection in order to show that the conceptual strategies of the classics remain vital. The men themselves may be dead, but their habits of mind are very much alive. We *can* do sociology without the men (or their colleague Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1860–1935), but we can't without their habits of mind, their very real and ever-relevant intel-

lectual skills. A theory text that fails to impart these skills, I've come to feel, shortchanges its readers.

My aim, then, is to teach about theory and theorizing primarily by means of the classics, and to do so in a way accessible to the typical student. My emphasis on skills connects the practice of theorizing, as much as possible, with the habits and skills that statistics and methods courses teach so that the triad of theory-methods-statistics takes on a pedagogically unified aspect. Understanding variables is obviously critical here. More than any other habit of mind, coming to view the world around us as revealing patterned variation is crucial to theorizing. A facility with registering variation increases spontaneously as we broaden our experience with the world, whether on our own or through books. But it can also be stimulated by becoming familiar with existing datasets. In this regard, workbooks like Rodney Stark's *Doing Sociology: A Global Perspective* (Wadsworth 2002), which leads students through the analysis of six different datasets, can be an invaluable adjunct to a theory course. Stark provides a multitude of empirical generalizations that beg for theoretical explanation. He also provides an accessible introduction to basic statistical concepts that will give students a better sense of how the behavior of one variable can be used to explain the behavior of another.

I've found *Doing Sociology* of great help in devising exercises to clarify and reinforce the strategy of theory construction I present in this text. Adding these exercises here would make this book cumbersome and would intrude too much upon the instructional strategies adopters will likely develop on their own, but a website containing my preliminary efforts will accompany this text. I hope over time to expand on these as part of a collective project that engages students and professors who share my interest in theorizing as a skill. After all, there's no reason why theory courses shouldn't have labs in which students actually practice what we preach to them about theory, and a website is the proper place to stockpile resources in this regard.

I remain convinced that no skill more appropriately culminates a liberal education in the social sciences than the ability to theorize. Theorizing is the highest and most important practice in the sciences. To engage in it is to participate in the very activity that has made our world so profoundly different, at least in its material aspects, from the worlds of the past. No other skill could connect us more firmly with the tradition of sociology and the social sciences in general. No other could entail such intellectual adventure in its acquisition. No other, therefore, is more worthwhile *to teach*, or more pedagogically challenging. I offer this book as a step toward meeting this challenge . . . and as restitution to innumerable students I've thrown into deep water.

Note: throughout the text I have used *italics* for emphasis and **boldface** to indicate terms included in the glossary at the end of the book.

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1

Theories and Theorizing

A Definition of Theory

Theory and Explanation

Explication

Analysis

Causal Accounting

Theorizing as a Process

Developing a Problem

Creating a Theory

Evaluating the Theory

Theories, Causal Narratives, and Descriptive Narratives

Theories and Paradigms

Conclusion

IN THIS INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER, I'll first define what I mean by a **theory**. Throughout the book, I'll be using the term in a sense that's narrower and more specific than in everyday speech (as well as in some sociological writing), and we need to be clear about what it means here. Since the primary purpose of theories is to explain how the world around us works, I'll also spend some time clarifying what it means to explain in the social sciences. The longest section of the chapter then introduces you to a specific theory. Though the theory is interesting in itself, my purpose in discussing it in detail is to break down and illustrate the steps we must go through to create a theory. The remainder of the chapter will differentiate theories from some neighboring concepts, helping to clarify what we mean by the term.

A Definition of Theory

To understand sociological theories, as well as how we create them, we need first to develop a good sense of what a theory is. While there's some disagreement over this among sociologists,¹ for the purposes of this text, I'll define a theory as an integrated set of **concepts**, formed into **propositions**, that explains particular conditions or events in the world around us.

Let's unpack this definition a bit. Its key terms are *concepts* that are *integrated into propositions* and that *explain*. First, concepts are abstract terms by which we group together specific concrete phenomena in the world around us. They denote the entities of which the world is composed and define them in terms of their properties. The concept "women," for instance, groups together all female humans and defines them as having particular properties. As a concept, "women" is clearly more general than any specific woman or group of them. At the same time, "women" is less general than the concept of "females," which includes not just women but the female versions of all animals. Thus, "females" is much more general than "women," and we can see that while all concepts are general (or abstract), some are more general than others. It's because concepts are abstract that explanations using them can apply to many concrete cases; for instance, if women have some specific property, then each and every woman should have that property.

It is especially important in the sciences that our concepts be clearly defined so that we know whether they apply to specific concrete cases or not. When I use the word "women" casually, for instance, it's not clear whether I mean to include all female humans or to include only adult female humans and exclude the juveniles as "girls." This is something I'd have to clear up if I wanted to use the concept sociologically.

Second, our definition of a theory says that it *integrates* a set of concepts by forming them into propositions. The equations that are familiar to us from the natural sciences, such as $E = mc^2$, are models of what I mean by a proposition that integrates concepts. In Albert Einstein's equation, you can see, in the simplest form, how a theory involves abstract ideas (energy, mass, speed of light) and indicates their relations to one another (equivalence, multiplication, squaring). This relation among concepts (along with many additional ideas) is used to explain the relation between mass and energy that allows for their conversion. Thus, the general (abstract) theory explains the behavior of particular, concrete material—as in an atom bomb. Similarly, a proposition from Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide, which we'll discuss several chapters hence, states that suicide rates are influenced by **social integration** (i.e., how connected people are to one another), according to a specific pattern. Durkheim proposed that suicide rates are high whenever