

Lessons from Learning the Craft of Theorizing

Lessons from Learning the Craft of Theory-Driven Research*

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Lessons from Learning the Craft of Theorizing

Abstract: This paper responds to Richard's Swedberg's call for analysis of the craft of theorizing and to Gabriel Abend's work on the meanings of theory. Their work is applied to a retrospective case study of the theoretical content of the introduction to the author's dissertation. The case study includes lessons drawn from several sections of that chapter: the choice of a research topic; identifying originating, specifying and subsidiary questions; distinguishing between the object and the subject of the research; reviewing the social policy and social science relevance; identifying the relevant research tradition; presenting a general conceptual framework and a specific conceptual problem, and specifying the empirical problem addressed by the research design. In addition, ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions are discussed. Conclusions are drawn about the meanings of theory employed as well as implications for empirical examination work of the process of sociological theorizing.

Lessons from Learning the Craft of Theory-Driven Research

1. INTRODUCTION

Swedberg (2009) suggested that sociologists explore what we mean by the craft of theorizing. He reasoned that if theorizing is a craft, it must involve a set of skills of some kind, although the specific skills utilized might vary depending upon the type of sociological theory involved. He called for a renewed focus on the context of discovery of theory. Seen as such, theory is a process which one learns by engaging in theorizing.

If so, it helps to ascertain how sociologists go about crafting theory. This paper presents a single case study of the theoretical approach of the author’s completed dissertation (Authorlastname 2003). After all, as Swedberg (2008) pointed out, the very process of theorizing can be thought of as a conversation in which one serves as the judge of one’s own theory. In doing so, should theory be regarded as an art, as a science, or as a craft which incorporates elements of both? Some have situated sociology at an intersection of the humanities and the social sciences (Alford 1998; Zald 1991). If this is the case, the nature of theory in sociology could have multiple meanings located within an environment of ontological and epistemological pluralism, as pointed out in this journal by Abend (Abend 2008).

Abend raised an important question about exactly what sociologists mean by the words theory, theoretical, and theorize. He developed a typology of what theory means to sociologists, as well as an alternative way of thinking about theory. He explained that semantic differences arise about the meaning of theory, ranging from the inclusion of discussion of the classical texts to the presentation of formal theoretical statements. This makes it difficult to judge whether a particular work makes a theoretical contribution. He suggested that doing a semantic analysis of theory would improve mutual understanding of theoretical diversity and stimulate substantive theoretical debate. Table 1 facilitates the present application of Abend’s typology.

Abend’s Multiple Meanings of Theory (Adapted from Abend 2008)		
<i>Types of Meanings</i>	<i>Description of Meaning</i>	<i>Associated Tasks</i>
Theory ₁	General proposition or logically-connected set of propositions related to relationships among variables of a phenomenon, P. For theory ₁ , P is seen as the value of a variable, y.	Correlational at a minimum; more complex, longitudinal models may assert causality.
Theory ₂	Strives for a causal explanation of a specific social phenomenon, P.	Factors/conditions of causal relevance identified and

		interaction effects discussed; counterfactual test for causal relevance often employed.
Theory ₃	Answers questions about empirical phenomena, such as making sense of what P all about. P is not viewed as the value of a variable, y.	Hermeneutical/interpretive at a minimum; may or may not arrive at a causal explanation via the interpretive effort.
Theory ₄	Explores the meaning of various classical and contemporary texts, inquiring about their significance, relevance or usefulness.	Various kinds of semantic exegeses, critiques, and interpretations of texts. Does not involve having or formulating a new theory per se.
Theory ₅	A <i>Westanschauung</i> or overall perspective on the social world, expressed as a theoretical framework.	Syntactic (not semantic) presentation of the conceptual and linguistic rules and equipment we use to view the social world. May incorporate uses of theory ₁ or theory ₂ .
Theory ₆	Normative social theory which rejects the fact/value dichotomy.	Often interdisciplinary in nature. Often engages the humanities.
Theory ₇	Presentation of conceptualizations of overriding issues for sociology, such as micro/macro; structure/agency; nature of sociological theory.	Often includes some application of theory ₄ as part of the development of the presentation.

Abend's main purpose was to propose a set of ways of thinking about the meaning of theory, while simultaneously stressing that theory is not an object that can be precisely defined. He criticized sociological perspectives that reject ontological and epistemological pluralism and tie theory to the scientific method of the natural sciences. Abend stressed that sociology faces a semantic predicament about the meanings of theory. He proposed a typology of the meanings of theory, as a start towards clarifying these multiple meanings. While sociologists may continue to disagree about the nature of theory, Abend (2008) contended that if sociologists accept the principle of ontological and epistemological pluralism and apply the principle of practical reason, we might achieve consensus regarding the parameters of the meanings of the theories.

2. ANALYTIC APPROACH

Over the years, many sociologists may have wondered how their work fits into Turner's typology, just as today many may wonder which of Abend's meanings of theory is consistent with their work (Turner 1986). This paper includes a case study of my

dissertation's theoretical approach. The case study includes lessons I learned about how I tried to incorporate theory into my dissertation. However, the case study section was produced previously and independently of the rest of this paper. In the discussion section that follows the case study, I retrospectively discuss what I understood theory to be at the time. In doing so, I situate my approach within Abend's typology and discuss the notion of theorizing as a craft.

There are many books on the on the design of social research (Alford 1998; Becker 1986; Becker 1998; Ragin and Becker 1992), including Mills' work on social science as the practice of a craft (Mills 1959). Many works have sought to clarify the mysteries of epistemology (Abbott 2004; Laudan 1996; Little 1991). However, there is little peer-reviewed journal literature which explicitly discusses the process of theorizing. Also, a search of the literature in sociology shows that no peer-reviewed article has explicitly addressed the preparation of thesis proposals or the place of theory within them. Finally, this is one of the first published papers to respond to Swedberg's call for inquiry into the nature of theorizing in sociology (2009). The next section presents an abbreviated version of a previously prepared case study of the theory and method of the author's dissertation.

3. CASE STUDY

Each research project is the product of an individual's own sociological imagination. Conceiving and carrying out research is often as much an art as it is a science. But there is still value in seeking to explicate how one scholar sought to address theoretical concerns in the prospectus and introductory chapter of a single completed dissertation, and the lessons learned in the process.

3.1 Research Topic as an Exercise of the Sociological Imagination

I formulated the initial question for my dissertation in a Coney Island restaurant in downtown Toledo, Ohio. Nursing a cup of coffee, I was contemplating the rejection of a funding proposal for dissertation-related research which sought to apply Perrow's society of organizations perspective to a study of older adult volunteer and voluntary association participation (Perrow 1991). I picked up a copy of the Toledo Blade and read a brief item about the way in which the growth of property tax exempt property was seen as reducing funding for public schools in Ohio's large cities. At around this same time, I was reading Jonathan Kozol's book *Savage Inequalities*, which discussed how unequal property tax revenues reinforce educational inequality (Kozol 1991). I jotted down this question on a napkin: "Is it possible that there is something about the growth of public and nonprofit institutions – the very institutions often held responsible for addressing America's urban social problems – which may have exacerbated these problems?"

Perhaps because of the emotional impact of reading Kozol's book, I suddenly realized that I had a question consistent with something which my dissertation co-chair, the University of Michigan's Howard Kimeldorf, had said in his historical methods course: "You have to write a dissertation which grips you in the heart." Later, he clarified, "A dissertation comes from the heart, but is guided by your head." (Howard Kimeldorf, classroom comment 1996, and personal communication 2006, cited with permission.)

The first lesson here is that getting away from the ivory tower (in this case going to Toledo) may be associated with exercising the sociological imagination. Also, identifying and cultivating a research site can sometimes come before identifying a research topic. This experience also demonstrates the importance of not giving up when one's original topic doesn't pan out. Finally, it shows that the same theoretical approach can often be applied to more than one topic and at more than one level of analysis. For instance, I moved from the individual and organizational levels in the field of gerontology to the organizational and institutional levels in the fields of urban and fiscal sociology, using the same theoretical perspective in both (Perrow 1991).

3.2 Originating, specifying and subsidiary questions

Having an initial question, I consulted Howard Kimeldorf's (1998) memorandum on four key questions which should be answered by a research proposal, all four of which are identified in this paper. The first question is, "What do you want to know?" In other words, what is the substantive problem? Kimeldorf suggested distinguishing between the originating and specifying questions of a research topic. An originating question addresses the larger issue or concern which first draws you to a problem. A specifying question concerns the unique way in which a study seeks to address a problem that is related to the originating question.

This is an especially useful distinction that Kimeldorf borrowed and adapted from his mentor Maurice Zeitlin, who in turn borrowed and adapted it from his mentors (private communication, Howard Kimeldorf, 2002, used with permission). However, Charles Tilly suggested beginning research with a wide-ranging question (here termed the originating question), exploring theory relevant to such a question (here most closely related to the adoption of a specifying question), and finally posing an even more manageable subsidiary question which can be answered with available data and is relevant to the larger question (Tilly 1990).

What I had so far was an originating question, the "Is it possible...?" question identified above. Next, I asked myself: "Had anyone else raised an issue related to the originating question?" Yes, it turned out (McEachern 1981; Mullen 1990; Quigley and Schmenner 1975; Swords 1981). But there had been no recent sociological study of the social system of real property or the question of property tax exemptions.

Still, the question as initially posed was not specific enough. I would need a second, or specifying question. That question was: “Is it possible that the growth of the property tax exempt real property of public, nonprofit and religious organizations has had significant unanticipated negative consequences for urban schools, governments and communities?” I was wondering about the unanticipated consequences of a form of purposive social action (Merton 1936), namely the granting of property tax exemptions to public, nonprofit and religious property.

In some cases, a specifying question can serve as the research question. In such cases, the research process can begin on the basis of that question. In other cases the specifying question needs to be still further refined and narrowed along the way. Often a third, subsidiary question should be identified (Tilly 1990). My subsidiary question was: “Has the growth of property tax exempt public, nonprofit and religious sector property been characterized by the displacement of developed property from the tax rolls, or has it primarily involved the development of undeveloped land or underdeveloped or deteriorating property? In short, did this growth involve displacement or development?”

This subsidiary question, as well as the competing displacement versus development theses which were embedded within it, had originated in yet another kind of question. That question was a counterfactual question, a “what if” question about what might have happened differently if something had not already happened. As Tilly has pointed out (1996)1996), counterfactual explanation strongly reinforces the contribution of social science to ethics and politics. For example, what if the property which had become exempt was underdeveloped land? How could we know whether that property would have ever been developed for taxable use? The data requirements and design dilemmas for answering such a counterfactual question would have been immense. Nevertheless, the counterfactual question suggested that the mere removal of undeveloped land from the tax rolls was likely a positive externality-generating form of development, rather than a negative externality-generating form of displacement.

Accordingly, one lesson learned from this experience is to move from originating to specifying questions, explore whether there are any relevant counterfactual questions, and finally to consider whether a more specific subsidiary question should be asked.

3.3 The Object and the Subject of the Research

Ragin and Zaret (1983) distinguished between the object and subject of research. The object of social research is what it is that you are observing in your research. The subject of research concerns relationships among variables, the character of historical events, the nature of discourses or any number of other topics associated with qualitative or quantitative social research.

The object of my primarily quantitative historical comparative sociological research was the property valuation of real property in 17 urban cities and counties in Ohio since 1955. The subject of my research was change over time in the relationship between three sub-systems of the social system of real property: real property which is taxable (residential, agricultural, commercial, or industrial), real property which is tax exempt (property used for governmental, nonprofit charitable, nonprofit educational or religious purposes), and real property which is subject to tax abatements. More specifically, the subject of my research was whether or not this change involved the operation of a particular social mechanism of theoretical interest (Elster 1989; Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Stinchcombe 1991): the process of externalization of costs (Perrow 1991, 2002) from the exempt sub-systems to the taxpaying sub-system.

The externalized costs were seen as being generated when property owners within a taxing jurisdiction experienced increased property tax millage rates or reduced levels of millage-funded amenities due to the removal of taxable property from the tax rolls. Removal of property from the tax rolls may generate a negative property tax capitalization effect on the rate of growth of property values in that taxing jurisdiction, compared to adjacent taxing jurisdictions not facing increased millages or reduced amenities (McEachern 1981; Oates 1969; Tiebout 1956). I defined the process of removal of property as “displacement” when it involved the removal of viable developed property from the tax rolls. I defined the process of removal of property as “development” when it involved the removal of undeveloped land. The lesson here is that distinguishing between the subject and the object of research is an important step in clarifying the logic of a theoretically informed analysis of empirical data.

3.4 Literature Review: Social Policy and Social Science Relevance

The second question which Kimeldorf suggested should be answered is, “Why do you want to know it?” Answering that question provides the intellectual rationale for the choice of a topic and for the research questions which have been identified. In order to do so, I next included a section on the relevance of my topic to social policy and to sociology.

I cited calls for social research which is relevant to the key policy choices and social problems being faced by contemporary institutions (Flyvbjerg 2001; Zald 1987, 1999). I identified unresolved policy debates about property tax exemptions (Brody 2002; Grimm 1999) and about state policies designed to compensate for the effects of exemptions (Bowman 2002; Carbone and Brody 2002).

Next I discussed the dissertation’s sociological relevance. I pointed out that Harvey (1973) had discussed the concentration of public buildings in the inner city, and Molotch (1976) had discussed real property in his theory of the urban growth machine. I situated research on property within larger discourses on space, place and the natural

and built environment (Gans 2002; Harvey 1982; Swanstrom, Dreier and Mollenkopf 2002 2002; Tickamyer 2000). The lesson here is that by including an explicit section on policy relevance and/or sociological relevance, the relationship between sociological theory, social research and social policy can be further strengthened.

3.5 Research Tradition: What is a Research Tradition Anyway?

The subsidiary question of my dissertation responded to the suggestion of my primary dissertation advisor, David Tucker, that I utilize a competing theses approach, specify the research tradition in which I was writing, and clarify which conceptual and empirical problems I was addressing (Fligstein 1990; Laudan 1977; Platt 1966; Romanelli 1989; Tucker, Hurl and Ford 1994).

According to Laudan (1977), progress in science takes place within the framework of distinct research traditions. The institutionalist tradition, broadly considered, was the research tradition most closely related to the object and subject of my research (North 1993; Rutherford 1994; Scott 1995; Stinchcombe 1997). I reviewed literature which called for a sociology of vital institutions that would address property rights (Zald 1999), the structure of institutional spheres (Hinings and Greenwood 2002), and the link between organizations and social systems (Stern and Barley 1996). The institutionalist tradition often examined the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action (Merton 1936), looked at the dark side of organizations (Hinings and Greenwood 2002), and recognized that institutions didn't always work as assumed (Stinchcombe 1997). I discussed property tax exemptions as an example of the institutional mechanisms discussed by Polanyi, of the highly institutionalized processes discussed by Selznick, and of the institutionalization of economic action discussed by Stinchcombe (Polanyi 1944; Selznick 1996; Stinchcombe 1983).

The lesson of this section is that by identifying the relevant research tradition it becomes possible to identify literature which is either directly or indirectly related to your topic. The fact that your own topic is very different from other topics found in that research tradition doesn't mean that the tradition's method and theory won't be applicable to your topic.

3.6 Conceptual Framework: Conceptual Problem Addressed

Next I identified the specific theories that stemmed from or were compatible with that tradition and were related to my topic. I related Perrow's conceptualization of externalization of costs to the broader set of economic theories about external economies and diseconomies (Marshall 1920; Mishan 1971), more recently known as positive and negative externalities (Cornes and Sandler 1996). Perrow's concept, externalization of cost, is the latest in a long tradition of explicitly institutionalist interpretations of externalities (Kapp 1950; Papandreou 1994). Institutionalists contend

that externalities are pervasive within capitalist economies but also exist in any society which has experienced the ascendance of large organizations (Perrow 2002). Finally, I discussed the emerging sociology of externalities (Callon 1998; Krohn 2001; Yonay 1998), in light of earlier work on the externalized costs of urban growth (Harvey 1973; Molotch 1976).

Having identified my general theoretical framework (the theory of externalities) and the more specific theoretical perspective (Perrow's concept of externalization of costs), I next identified the specific conceptual framework I would use. I linked a conceptual definition of negative externalities to an original conceptual definition of displacement. I explained that displacement involved the removal of viable developed taxable property from the tax rolls, thereby externalizing costs onto the taxable sectors. The operational definitions of displacement and development were discussed later in the research design section. I then explained the relationship of positive externalities to my original conceptual definition of development, namely that development involved the removal of undeveloped land or non-viable property from the tax rolls, to be used for exempt purposes.

One lesson here is that there is value in defining a series of conceptual definitions. One set is fairly abstract. In my case the more abstract set included the conceptual definition of externalities. That set was derived from the theoretical literature but was re-worded in a way which made sense to me. The next set was less abstract and was more amenable to serving as the basis for later operational definitions of those same concepts. In my case this second set included the conceptual definitions of development and displacement. In other words, just as the research question moved from an originating to a specifying to a subsidiary question, my conceptual framework moved from a general conceptual definition to a more specific conceptual definition.

This was also my way of answering the third question posed by Kimeldorf: "What do you think the answer is?" (Kimeldorf 1998). I hypothesized that there were two possible answers. In other words, there were two competing theses which I would consider in my dissertation: displacement and development. These were not causal or explanatory hypotheses, in which independent variables are used to explain variation in a dependent variable. They were theoretically informed alternative characterizations of the nature of the growth and development over time of an important set of social institutions. In that sense, they were an example of ecological theory (Hawley 1950). Both economic theories of externalities and the institutionalist tradition have embedded within them a number of implicitly ecological theories. With respect to theories of externalities, Stinchcombe (1983) argued that ecological theory can inform an analysis of property rights and productive activities by drawing connections between the general ecology of a society and the kinds of enterprises that can be found in a particular place.

One lesson here is that theory is relevant not only to explanatory studies but to descriptive studies as well. Although exploratory research is often unable to test hypotheses drawn from general theory (Tucker et al. 1994), it can still generate logical hypotheses that are empirical generalizations about the data at hand (Romanelli 1989).

3.7 Ontological, Epistemological, and Methodological Assumptions

Michael Mann has pointed out that in some respects it matters little whether sociologists advocate positivism, interpretivism, realism or some other epistemological point of view, since in reality sociologists operate “*as if* they could apprehend and describe reality through the process of operationalization, and *as if* they could rely on absolute standards of scientific proof for their results to be evaluated” (Mann 1981:548, emphasis in the original). This is an important observation, but it is also important not to surrender to epistemological defeatism, whereby a scholar fails to pay attention to key ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. Approaches which adopt methodology as window dressing (Laudan 1977:58) or seek to keep untidy issues of philosophy out of sociology (Layder 1990:5) can combine to inhibit a clear theoretical and empirical approach.

However, the burden of identifying such assumptions should not rest entirely on the individual scholar. A research tradition should provide the ontological, epistemological and methodological tools for solving the empirical and conceptual problems arising from within that tradition (Laudan 1977). Furthermore, it isn’t always necessary to explicitly discuss such questions in the thesis itself. My dissertation did not do so. My prospectus, however, did discuss my ontological and epistemological assumptions. I adopted the intermediate version of the microfoundations thesis, which requires an approximate account of the underlying mechanisms operating at the individual level (Little 1991:196). I also included a methodological appendix that consisted largely of a discussion of the post-positivist, realist-compatible approach of Laudan to my research (Laudan 1977).

The lesson of the inclusion of at least some discussion of such matters in the thesis proposal or dissertation prospectus is that it ensures a level of comfort on the part of the writer and the reader that the approach being used is appropriate given the questions being asked and the data being used.

3.8 Data and Research Design: Empirical Problem Addressed

In my research design section, I addressed the fourth question asked by Kimeldorf (Kimeldorf 1998): “How do you intend to find out?” Kimelforf suggested reviewing how others have sought to answer similar questions, explaining the logic of how you are doing so and explaining how you will know if your answer is correct. In this section, I discussed how I would engage in an empirical test of my competing theses,

with the full details deferred to a chapter presenting the results. I embedded this discussion of competing theses in the context of Platt's approach to problem solving and Laudan's distinction between the solving of conceptual and empirical problems (Laudan 1977; Platt 1964; Tucker 1994).

Conceptual problems involve complex theoretical issues which can often be solved by a strictly theoretical discussion. But in their simplest form, conceptual problems can be solved by providing clear conceptual definitions of abstract concepts and by devising somewhat less abstract conceptual definitions that are amenable to being operationalized using empirical data. After all, concepts are the building blocks of theory, and each attempt to define theoretical concepts helps solve conceptual problems.

Empirical problems are often related to difficulties in developing the operational definitions of theoretically-imbued concepts. An empirical problem is not merely a problem of measurement. Rather, an empirical problem is a problem related to how one can empirically test theories, in this case competing theories. A test of my two competing theses involved an important empirical problem, one that had never been posed or solved. That problem was how to quantify and interpret the extent to which the growth of property tax exemptions and abatements was consistent with the displacement thesis, the development thesis, or a null hypothesis (lack of a preponderance of evidence for either thesis).

In my case, solving the empirical problem involved the use of a displacement-development index and a displacement percentage statistic (the details of which are omitted here). I defended the simple mathematical model (a ratio of two ratios) employed by pointing out that sociologists should not let statistical methods govern their research design or choice of sample size. After all, an overly mathematicized approach can often result in the asking of less important questions (Sørensen 1998; Stern and Barley 1996), and to narrowness in the conceptualization of institutions (Stinchcombe 1997).

By seeking to solve this empirical problem, I sought to make a methodological contribution to analysis of the social system of real property. I also sought to make a theoretical contribution by testing competing hypotheses derived from Perrow's society of organizations perspective and the larger sociology of positive and negative externalities. Finally, I sought to make a policy contribution related to ascertaining the extent to which property tax exemptions carry with them unintended consequences.

The lesson drawn from the research design section is that there is value in seeking to explicitly distinguish between a conceptual problem and an empirical problem, as part of a broader problem-solving approach to social scientific progress (Laudan 1996). By translating the original set of research questions into a set of

progressively less abstract but linked conceptual definitions, a conceptual problem is addressed and a theoretical contribution is made. By further restating the specifying or subsidiary research question as an empirical problem to be solved, it becomes possible to make a methodological contribution and to make a theoretical contribution by testing the competing theses.

3.9 Conclusion to the Case Study

This case study engaged in the retrospective examination of the logic and structure of the introductory chapter of the author's dissertation. The eight steps above were found to be useful in producing empirical research that is both theoretically relevant and useful for informing social policy. Our sociological imaginations lead to myriad questions and therefore it is often helpful to boil them down into originating, specifying and subsidiary questions, which sometimes involve competing thesis. We work from a wide variety of research traditions, and it is helpful to identify the tradition which is closest to our topic. Within those traditions, we use a wide variety of conceptual frameworks, which Mills (1959) noted often involve reaching beyond disciplinary boundaries. We grapple with a bewildering variety of approaches to ontology, epistemology and methodology. Most importantly, we each seek to research social life in a way which makes sense first and foremost to ourselves.

4. DISCUSSION

As of the writing of the above case study, what did I understand theory to be, as used in my dissertation? As can be seen, I used a number of words related to theory: theoretical relevance; theoretical predilections; social science relevance; broader theoretical questions; thesis; competing theses; relationship of sociological theory to economic theory; conceptual framework; conceptual problem; general theoretical framework; specific theoretical perspective, and empirical problem.

Seen in further hindsight, I first discussed theory in a manner consistent with Abend's theory₄. In other words, I focused my discussion on classical theorists and modern sociologists who have made recognized theoretical contributions worthy of discussion and inclusion. Next I identified a conceptual framework which was consistent with theory₂. For instance, I explained what a conceptual problem consisted of, and then presented an original conceptual definition of the concept of negative externalities. After identifying a relevant counterfactual question, I formulated two competing theses. Although I presented a model for calculating the proportion of displacement and development, I was not in any way employing theory₁, at least as far as I can see.

Although not presented in the above case study, my use of theory₂ was consolidated in the concluding chapter. I re-discussed the research questions in relation

to the theory of externalities and to Perrow's work. I re-presented the specific competing theses of displacement and development. I summarized my results, namely that my findings strongly refuted the view that displacement was the dominant characteristic associated with the growth of the public, nonprofit and religious sectors in Ohio's urban areas and in the Toledo area in the second half of the 20th century. I characterized the growth of exempt property as the outcome of a process of both development and displacement, with the preponderant explanation being the process of development. In doing so, I more fully consolidated my use of theory₂.

Next I interpreted these results by discussing the possibilities of a tragedy or a triumph of the commons associated with the growth of exempt property. Emulating a conversational device employed by Jane Jacobs (Jacobs 2000), I illustrated the findings via an imaginary conversation between an MSW and an MBA, both of whom were familiar with the film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. I went still further towards interpretation, presenting a thought experiment rooted in the distinction between George Bailey's Bedford Falls and Mr. Potter's Pottersville from that film. In retrospect, I was clearly engaged in theory₃. I was engaged in raising and answering questions about an important empirical phenomena in order to make sense of what my P (exempt property) was all about. I was interpreting the nature of the growth of exempt property. In doing so, however, I was clearly also flirting with theory₆.

Having engaged the humanities substantively via my discussion of the film, I asked the reader (Authorlastname 2003, p. 288): "Imagine a world, imagine a country, imagine a state, imagine a village which did not have the institutions which are now exempt from the property tax." Here, I was clearly embracing a form of normative social theory which valued the object of my research. Having already consolidated the more standard theory₂ approach and have already paid fealty to classical and modern texts via a theory₄ approach, I now took an interpretive theory₃ and a normative theory₆ turn.

I concluded the dissertation in a way consistent with theory₇. I contended that institutional analysis of positive and negative externalities was an important supplement to class and organizational analysis of the nature of social power. I argued that this could be advanced via a sociology of externalities that examines the historical evolution of institutions which externalize the costs and benefits of instituted organizational privileges. In the concluding chapter I broke out of the iron box of the counterfactual question which had appropriately constrained my theory₂ to the consideration of two competing theses. I presented a theory₃ interpretation, discussed my results with respect to normative theory₆ and raised issues of sociological theory consistent with theory₇.

5. CONCLUSIONS

One conclusion from this initial attempt at a sociology of sociological theorizing is that there can be substantial variation even within one dissertation in meanings of theory used. One might hypothesize that there is significant variation among some dissertations in the meanings of theory employed, and that in other dissertations there is a clear focus on one meaning of theory. Ascertaining this would require a fuller contribution to the sociology of sociological theory than this case study could provide.

However, if this application of Abend's typology to a single dissertation has been a valid one, it would appear that theorizing is rich with multiple meanings, even within one dissertation. Theory takes many forms, some anticipated in the original design, some unanticipated until the conclusion of the research.

Abend relied upon the scientific continuum of Alexander (1982) to explicate the quantitative extent to which a body of work is primarily 'theoretical' or 'empirical' in content. Abend and Alexander both used quotation marks to stress that there is no clear qualitative differentiation between where data begins and theory ends. The Alexander continuum, like Abend's typology, has possible application in the empirical analysis of the production of sociological theory.

As Bourdieu pointed out, we all seek the judgment of others. We are insecure and uncertain about the judgment of others and so we seek certainty, we seek assurance, and we seek consecration (Bourdieu 2000). For sociologists, one false solution to our uncertainty about the nature of theory or the meanings of theory would be to seek a false security in a conceptualization of social science which is fixed and formulated. At the opposite extreme, we might surrender to an approach which is diffuse and unformulated, despite the known costs of eclecticism (Tucker 1996).

Before fully embracing either of those options, there appears to be good reason to take stock of the actually existing nature of sociological theory. Based upon empirical examination of the evolution of the nature of sociological work in recent decades, what can we conclude about the kinds of meanings which sociologists ascribe to theory? Ultimately, we can't resolve the semantic predicament about the nature of theory without a fuller empirical examination of the extent of sociology's ontological and epistemological pluralism and of the meanings of theory found within the work of sociologists.

Based upon the present case study, theorizing does seem to be a craft. Theorizing can't easily be reduced to a scientific procedure, nor can it easily be confined to a single category of a typology of its meanings. Theorizing appears to be a craft that is learned and used over the life of a sociologist. In this case, understanding the process of theorizing employed during four years of dissertation research required several additional years of intermittent work on the included case study and further re-

consideration in the light of the work of Abend (2008), followed by a subsequent paper presentation (Authorlastname 2010).

This suggests that just as there is tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1967), there may be tacit theory. Often, we may be theorizing without even realizing it, or without understanding exactly how we are doing it. It helps to remember that most anyone can learn a craft and be good at it (Sennett 2008). And that includes the craft of theorizing.

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