



How Do you Make Sociology out of Data? Robert K. Merton's Course in Theorizing (Soc 213–214)

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Abstract

How do you use theory effectively in empirical research; and how can you learn to do this in a practical way? This is a crucial question to answer for any sociologist; and it is addressed in this article by presenting and analyzing the contents of a course on theorizing that Robert K. Merton taught during 1942–1954 at Columbia University. In teaching this class Merton was probably the first sociologist to single out the topic of theorizing as its own distinct area of knowledge, study and teaching. He also pioneered a new kind of theorizing in sociology, centered around the use of systematic empirical data. In presenting Merton's arguments, special attention has been paid to the tools for theorizing that he devised, such as *respecification*, *reconceptualization* and *levels analysis*. Next to nothing of this material is discussed in Merton's published writings. It is suggested that underlying Merton's work in theory is the idea that it is only through theory that data can become sociology.

Keywords Theorizing · Theory · Merton, Robert K. · Empirical research · Concepts

A little theory goes a long way
- Merton in a lecture on theorizing from 1950¹

How do you use theory effectively in empirical research; and how can you learn to theorize in a creative and sociological way?² Every sociologist knows that it is imperative to be able to handle theory well in their research, but also that this is difficult to do. There exist plenty of theories to choose from; and it is hard to figure out

¹Merton 950:B436F8; *emphasis added*.

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how to go from theory to facts, and then back to theory again. While there are plenty of theory courses around, few courses are given in how to theorize. There also exists very little work on the topic of theorizing that is practical in nature and helpful when you are engaged in empirical research. More generally, it is also true that there exists no easy answers to these questions.

There does, however, exist at least one sustained attempt by a major US sociologist to teach a practical course in theorizing; and this article is devoted to a presentation of this attempt as well as an analysis of how it fared. For a number of years Robert K. Merton taught a graduate course in theorizing at Columbia University that is little known, entitled “Social Theory Applied to Social Research (Soc 213-214).” The course was given from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s or the period during which modern sociology was undergoing a revolution at Columbia University through the introduction of a number of new quantitative methods.

This article will take a close look at this course with the following three concerns uppermost in mind. First and foremost, what can Merton – one of the foremost theoreticians in U.S. sociology – teach us about theorizing that is also relevant today and can be taught to students? Second, what new light does this course throw on Merton’s own work, including his idea of middle-range theory? And last, in what way can knowledge of this course add to the history of theorizing in sociology?

Theorizing, to supply a quick description of the way in which this term will be used in this article, refers to the practical creation and use of a theory, coupled with the insight that this does not happen in a linear and logical fashion. Its primary focus is on the ways in which a theory *actually* comes into being and how it is used (e.g. Merton 1968:4, 441–46; 1991:xxi-xxii). Improved knowledge of what Merton calls “the process of discovery” complements in this way “the (reported) process of demonstration” (Merton 1978:B372F2; cf. Reichenbach 1938).

To theorize in sociology, as opposed to theorizing in some other science, means to turn empirical material into *sociology*; and it was especially this process that Merton’s course was focused on. At the time when Merton was at Columbia University, sociology was undergoing a revolution in data collection and data analysis; and this presented Merton, who defined himself as a “confirmed social theorist,” with a unique opportunity: to add the theory part and, in doing so, turn sociological theory in a new direction (Merton 1994:16, 1998b:165).

In brief, the material from Merton’s lectures in Soc 213–214 allows us to follow in detail how one of the central figures of modern sociology taught students how to handle theory in the process of conducting empirical research. Merton never published anything based on this course, making the material in the archives at Columbia University our only source for how Merton viewed theorizing.³

³ The material from Soc 213–214 can today be found in “Robert K. Merton Papers, 1928–2003” at Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Library (see especially Box 132, Folder 4; Box 436, Folders 7–8; Box 149, Folder 12; Box 365, Folders 4–5; Box 437, Folders 2–4). The material from this course amounts to about four hundred pages and consists of Merton’s own notes for his lectures; a small number of pages with notes in Merton’s handwriting; notes from Merton’s lectures by his teaching assistants Alice Rossi and Hanan Selvin; student assignments, including reading lists; a few essays by students; and material relating to James Coleman’s experiences of Soc 213–214.

Merton's View of Theorizing in Soc 213–214

Merton taught the course on theorizing for the first time during the spring of the academic year 1941–1942.⁴ At the time he was 31 years old and had worked a few years at Tulane University after getting his PhD at Harvard University in 1936. Merton was hired at Columbia University in 1941 and viewed himself primarily as a theorist. Soon, however, Paul Lazarsfeld would involve Merton in a whirlwind of empirical research; and the two would for the next few decades work very closely and meet for something like 3 hours every day to discuss research projects and similar issues (Merton 1998a:309).

While Lazarsfeld helped to introduce a new type of empirical research at Columbia, which was primarily quantitative in nature, Merton saw as his task to develop an approach to sociological theory that would turn the results from this research into sociology. For this to happen a new type of theorizing was needed, one that was based on what Merton and Lazarsfeld called “systematic data,” that is data that had been collected in a systematic way through representative sampling (e.g. Merton 1950:B436F8). Merton’s course on theorizing, Soc 213–214, was largely a response to this situation.

All that remains from the first time Merton taught the course in theorizing are his notes for the introductory lecture. The general purpose of the course, according to these notes, was to teach the students how to use theory in an effective way in their research. To do this, he explained, they had to learn to look at theory in a new way. Theory, Merton emphasized, does not consist of a set of labels that you attach to some phenomenon; it represents a special way of interaction. You interact in your mind with data; and you do this in specific ways. “*Theorizing [is] a form of social behavior*” (Merton 1942:B436F8; *emphasis added*).

Merton also told the students how he would teach theorizing during the rest of the course. “[The] emphasis will be on direct examination of researches to ascertain the content and operation of theory” (Merton 1942:B436F8). More precisely, much of Merton’s course was devoted to teaching the students how to work on existing sociological studies, and in this way learn what role theory plays in a sociological analysis. “*The pedagogic assumption: one learns by doing*” (Merton 1942:B436F8; *emphasis added*).

Merton was well aware that he was approaching sociological theory in Soc 213–214 from a totally new perspective. He had himself taken theory courses for Pitirim Sorokin and Talcott Parsons at Harvard, in which the focus was exclusively on existing theories and their content (e.g. Nichols 2010:79–81). His course in theorizing, however, differed in two important respects from the this way of proceeding. First, its focus was on “theory work” or the theory-related part of the research process which precedes the finished version of a study, which is presented to one’s scientific colleagues.⁵ Second,

⁴ The course is described as follows in the Columbia Course Catalogue for 1941–1942: “Critical examination of the use of theory in empirical research. Detailed analysis of standard sociological monographs. Empirical consideration of the interrelations of sociological theory and social structure” (Nichols 2010:89).

⁵ In *Social Theory and Social Structure* Merton uses several pages to argue that there exists a “rock-bound difference between the finished versions of scientific work as they appear in print and the actual course of inquiry followed by the inquirer” (Merton 1968:4). The former is dismissed as “the story-book version of scientific inquiry.” As far as I have been able to establish, Merton uses the term “theoretic work” (e.g. Merton 1945:465); he is nonetheless viewed as having introduced the term “theory work” in sociology (Levine 2006:239).

Merton insisted that theory must be developed in direct contact with systematic data, and that its primary task was to turn this data into sociology. While theorizing had existed as long as there has been sociology (even if it had not been written about or taught), Merton wanted to introduce a new type of theorizing in sociology, one that was based on systematic data and could transform these into sociology.⁶

Merton was well aware that this approach to teaching sociological theory was novel. There existed no literature whatsoever on the topic. “It is not too much to say,” he said in 1942, “that there is not a single general work in sociological theory that is adequate for our purposes” (Merton 1942:B436F8). The sense of being involved in a novel and pioneering effort followed Merton during the many years he taught Soc 213–214. When he introduced his course to the students in 1950, he said that its purpose was

to move toward the procedures utilized in social theorizing with an eye to setting problems for empirical research. Not a history of social theory, nor substantive content of theory, but what may in essence be *a new kind of ‘beast’* – the counterpart of methodology in field of research procedures; method of theorizing, which consists of operations just as collection of social data consists in operation. (Merton 1950:B436F8; *emphasis added*)

Merton taught the class on theorizing every year for more than a decade, more precisely from 1942 to 1954. Its title always remained the same, “Theory Applied to Social Research”. According to Merton, this title had been carefully chosen even if it was somewhat odd sounding. The emphasis was on “apply” or how you use theory on empirical material and in this way turn it into sociology. Theorizing, in brief, was a special type of theory work.⁷

Part 1 of the course was given during the fall term, and Part 2 during the spring term. Both consisted of about twelve lectures; and the course was only for graduate students.⁸ Merton lectured from prepared notes for 2 hours, while a teaching assistant took notes. How many students took the course is not known, but probably around thirty (Caplovitz 1977:142). The only year for which there exists an exact number is 1950–

⁶ See note 26 for an elaboration of this point.

⁷ Merton has referred to the title of his course Soc 213–214 as “the odd-appearing but quite deliberate title” (Merton 1996b:353, 1994:33, 1995a:24). He chose the same title for one of the key chapters in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, which had originally appeared in a somewhat different form in 1945 in the *American Journal of Sociology* under the title of “Sociological Theory.” From the abstract that accompanies the 1945 article, it is however clear that Merton now wanted to emphasize a different aspect of theory in this article (later chapter) than in Soc 213–214. In the article and chapter, the focus was on “What is theory?”; and in the course on “How do you theorize?” The content in the 1945 article and in Soc 213–214 overlap at times but is for the most part different.

⁸ That the content of Soc 213–214 changed quite a bit over the years is clear from what remains of Merton’s lecture notes. As already mentioned, these notes are incomplete in nature, something that makes it difficult to follow the changes that the course underwent over the years. All the material that is cited in the rest of the paper comes from the classes in theorizing Merton taught during the academic years of 1949–1950 and 1950–1951. For these two years there exists quite a bit of material, including some of Merton’s outlines for his lectures as well as a set of detailed notes taken during Merton’s lectures by his teaching assistants Alice Rossi (formerly Kitt) and Hanan Selvin. More precisely, there exist notes from 16 lectures, out of something like 24 to 26. Alice Ross (1922–2009) got her PhD in sociology at Columbia University in 1957, and Hanan Selvin (1921–1989) in 1956.

1951, when fifty-five students were enrolled. Of these only a fifth were female, reflecting the fact that sociology at this time was very much a male-dominated enterprise.⁹

During the years that Merton taught Soc 213–214 his approach to theorizing was based on a small number of fundamental principles. First of all, Merton insisted that theorizing means that the researcher has to make a number of decisions about how to proceed when a study is conducted. For this reason Merton referred to his approach as “*theorizing as decision-making*”. He also argued very strongly that theorizing has to be based on systematic data. It was this feature, he said, that distinguished the new type of theorizing he himself advocated, from the kind of theorizing that earlier sociologists had engaged in. And finally, in Merton’s view you basically learn theorizing by doing, not by reading about it.

Core Idea # 1: Theorizing as Decision-Making

In one of his lectures Merton summarized his basic stance on theorizing as follows:

Social theorizing [is] simply a form of behavior. We shall examine the behavior that goes into theorizing; decisions made, grounds for these decisions, consequences for the product called theory. Virtues or faults of this approach – *theory as behavior rather than product* (Merton 1950:B436F8; *emphasis added*).

By describing his approach to theorizing as a special type of behavior, Merton wanted to emphasize the active and processual nature of theorizing. From this perspective, “theorizing [is] a set of instructions, not merely statements about behavior of human beings” (Merton 1950:B436F8). To first learn, and then follow, these instructions represents the first step in the process of turning data into sociology.

In casting theorizing as a number of instructions to be carried out, Merton also wanted to draw attention to the role that certain basic decisions play in theorizing. Sociologists, he argued, are usually not aware of the theoretical assumptions they make, and the extent to which these influence their research. The “scaffolding” of the research remains hidden in this way (Merton 1951:B436F8). “Implicit theorizing” consequently informs much research, Merton said (borrowing a term from Wassily Leontief 1937). What you first have to do when you carry out sociological research is therefore to realize that that you routinely make a number of decisions based on certain assumptions.

⁹ According to Mary Jo Deegan’s history of women in sociology, the years 1920–1965 constituted “the dark era of patriarchal ascendancy [in US sociology]” (Deegan 1991:18–21). Deegan also notes that “Robert Merton, Robert Lynd, and C. Wright Mills worked at Columbia, where they established a relatively open context for women in sociology” (Deegan 1991:20). Merton co-authored, for example, a series of studies with female sociologists (e.g. Merton and Kitt 1950; Merton, West and Jahoda 1951; Merton, Fisk and Kendall 1956). He was also the thesis adviser and/or teacher of several well-known female sociologists, including Alice Rossi, Patricia Kendall, Rose Laub Coser and Harriet Zuckerman. For some details about the difficulties of being a female sociologist in the 1950s at Columbia University, see the autobiography of Renée Fox (2011:102–03) and Annemette Sorensen, “Natalie Rogoff Ramsøy as a Female Pioneer in Sociology. Breaking Gender Barriers” (2003).

These assumptions concern topics such as the following: *facts, concepts, hypotheses, theory* and *sociological problems* (e.g. Merton 1950:B436F8, 1951:B436F7). Each sociologist has to decide, What is a fact? What is a concept? What is a hypothesis? Several lectures in the course were devoted to answering these questions.

“It’s a good thing that you know what you are doing,” Merton used to tell his students (e.g. Merton 1942:B436F8, 1950:B132F4, 1987:24). If you for example get stuck in your research, it is easy to go back and look at the decisions you have made, and in this way figure out what had gone wrong. Similarly, if your research is successful, you can study your decisions, and learn from what you had done right.

Merton also insisted that the different decisions on which theorizing is based are all interconnected, just like research itself consists of a series of interconnected acts. “Research and theorizing [are] essentially a series of interlocking decisions” (Merton 1951:B436F7). Facts, for example, are closely related to hypotheses; and hypotheses to a theory. Conscious decisions must not only be made about each of these elements, but also about the ways in which they are connected to one another.

It is absolutely crucial, Merton also told the students, to know how to formulate a sociological problem (e.g. Merton 1949a:B132F4). This will deeply influence the way that the research is conducted and the results. If new sociological problems are not continually formulated, sociologists are doomed to repeat what is already known. A few years later Merton would also add, in an article, that problem-finding is as important as problem-solving (Merton 1959).

It should be emphasized that since Merton wanted to teach the students how to theorize with empirical material, working with facts is part of the theorizing process. Theorizing, in brief, consists of more than theory: “fresh fact-finding and/or re-examination of facts is an important and integral part of the theorizing process” (Merton 1951:B436F7).

To theorize in sociology also means that you need to know what a fact is. Everything that exists is not a fact; facts are always “selected” (Merton 1950:B436F8, with a reference to Weber 1949:72–112). And the facts are selected according to the problem of the researcher. The problem also links the facts to a theory; and at this point Merton cited L.J. Henderson’s well-known definition of a fact as an “empirically verifiable statement about phenomena in terms of a conceptual scheme” (Henderson 1932:179; cf. Parsons 1937:28, 41).

In one of his lectures, Merton summed up his position as follows:

Facts = phenomena (we will never use it in this sense)

Facts = verifiable statements about phenomena in terms of a conceptual scheme.
(Merton 1950:B436F8)¹⁰

¹⁰ The students were also told about Bertrand Russell’s distinction between hard facts and soft facts (Russell 1914:70–1). While Merton referred approvingly to these terms, he basically invested them with his own meaning: “I mean by hard data in sociology: those which are relative precise, relatively adequate to being representative of what designated classes of human beings feel, believe, think or do; whereas soft data are those which are either loose, or upon reflection, clearly have no evidential value with regard to being characteristic or representative...” (Merton 1950:B436F8). As an example of a study based on soft data, Merton mentioned *The Protestant Ethic*. Merton also argued that some facts are better suited than others to test a theory. He would later name these “strategic research materials” or SRM (e.g. Merton 1987). He also noted that the relationship between fact and theory is complex; “what one takes as *data*...the other takes as *problematic*” (Merton 1943:B136F4).

Sociologists furthermore need to do some thinking about hypotheses, both to understand their general nature and how to handle them in actual research. Hypotheses are closely linked to facts; a fact is “a hypothesis repeatedly confirmed” (Merton 1951:B436F7). It is also important for sociologists to develop the skill to come up with a number of alternative hypotheses, not just one.

Sociologists similarly have a tendency to take the idea of how to handle concepts for granted; and also here it is important to replace implicit theorizing with explicit theorizing. “Concepts [are] a link between facts and problems” (Merton 1951:B436F7). When you engage in theorizing with systematic data, it is also important that the concepts are closely linked to the variables in the study. To develop a skill in handling concepts and variables is central to doing good research in sociology. New concepts should only be added when it is absolutely necessary. To Merton, it was imperative for sociology to develop a distinct core of insights; and a proliferation of concepts was a threat to this project (Merton 1950:B436F8).

In selecting which hypotheses to work with, Merton told the students, you are making a bet that your decision will result in a fruitful analysis (Merton 1950:B436F8). The reason for this is that it is impossible to know in advance which hypothesis will work out. All research is based on speculation or bets of this type:

You are simply making a bet as to what will turn out to be the most relevant. Difficult to get at this process because we are only exposed to final products, in sociological works – when the process of theorizing has been washed out. The fruitless bypaths are not reported. Both the mores and the finances of empirical research mitigate against these being reported. (Merton 1950:B436F8).

Core Idea # 2: Theorizing Should Be Done with Systematic Data

As already mentioned, it was central to the type of theorizing that Merton advocated that theory and empirical research should be closely related. This meant that theory should result in empirical research; and empirical research in theory. Sociology should neither be data-driven nor theory driven; there should instead be a regular “two-way traffic” between the two (e.g. Merton and Kitt 1950:40, 79; Merton 1968:279, 312).

There exist different types of theorizing, Merton also told the students in his class. One type can for example be found in a study like *The Protestant Ethic*. Since Weber did not use systematic data, however, the results of his study are only suggestive. There was also the type of theorizing that can be found in purely empirical studies, such as *The American Soldier* (1949–1950). Here the research was based on systematic data but it had been carried out without any guidance of theory.

A third way of theorizing was represented by the Chicago School, which Merton viewed as “a dead end” (e.g. Merton 1950:B436F7–8). Facts were used in an impressionistic way, similar to the way that journalists go about their work. The result was a disconnect between theory and data; the theoretical framework was sociological, but it was not based on reliable data.

Merton contrasted the Chicago way of theorizing to the type that had come to the forefront in American sociology during the 1930s. From this time

onwards, he said, theorizing was for the first time in the history of sociology carried out with the help of systematic data. This type of data, as mentioned earlier, was characterized by the fact that it was representative in nature and that proper sampling procedures had been used. According to Merton, the data was also often created by sociologists for their own purposes, and not just the result of some government survey or the like. In brief, systematic data was the kind of data that was being produced at Columbia by Lazarsfeld and the people around him in the 1950s.

Core Idea # 3: You Learn Theorizing by Doing, Not by Reading

Merton kept repeating to the students that knowing how to theorize is essential for doing research well. He also said that you cannot learn to theorize simply by reading about it; it is something you have to do, in order to learn it. Merton himself, as we know, tried to practice what he preached. While he had carried out some empirical research before coming to Columbia in 1941, most of this was so-called library research.¹¹ Under the influence of the dynamic Paul Lazarsfeld, however, Merton's research underwent an important change in an empirical direction; and he was soon involved in a number of concrete research projects (e.g. Hunt 1961). Some of these represented major undertakings, including a giant study of a housing project and a co-directed study of a medical school (Merton et al. 1951; Merton et al. 1957).

When Merton taught his class on theorizing he strongly emphasized, as we know, that "one learns by doing" (Merton 1942:B436F8). What this essentially meant was that Merton tried to teach the students how to theorize by example. During the fall term he did this by analyzing various sociological studies in his lectures. The students were then asked to try their own hand at this in a number of exercises. During the spring term Merton changed gear. His goal was now to teach the students how to acquire a general knowledge of theory, so that once they were involved in a concrete research project they would have some theoretical knowledge to fall back on. The brief exercises during the fall term were now replaced by a major research paper on a sociological concept.

¹¹ Merton's full description of himself when he arrived at Columbia University in 1941 was as a "confirmed social theorist albeit with something of an empirical bent" (Merton 1994:16). As a graduate student at Harvard Merton had interviewed homeless men during the summer of 1932: "I had had a fair amount of interviewing during my student days at Harvard, not, of course, as part of formal training in the Department of Sociology there which, being largely devoted to theory, did not teach such research procedures back then" (Merton 1998b:202 n.13). The interviewing, Merton continues, was conducted as part of a government program sponsored by Roosevelt; and he primarily did the interviews to make some money (Merton 1998b:203 n. 20; 1990b:xvi). At Tulane University, where Merton worked in 1939–1941 he administered a survey (Merton 1940). It can also be added that even if Merton eventually became good not only in handling theory but also methods and doing empirical research, he clearly favored theory. When once asked by a student why he did not test one of his theories, which was much debated, Merton answered:

how many people are capable of doing empirical tests; hundreds or thousands? How many people are capable of devising theory - only a handful. Testing this theory would not be a worthwhile expenditure of my time. (Cole 2004:835).

In his lectures on theorizing Merton taught the students a version of middle-range sociology. Ideas, he said, should be specific and closely linked to data, and not take the form of broad, unsubstantiated statements:

I believe that solidly based theory develops more effectively if it is centered about relatively limited problems – if it is a theory of the middle range – than if it is a total system of abstract conceptions from which one seeks to derive special theories. (Merton 1950:B436F7)

In discussing Merton's emphasis on "learning [theorizing] by doing", it should also be mentioned that many graduate students at Columbia got an education in how to carry out empirical research at Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research. While work at the Bureau was very helpful in this regard, both Lazarsfeld and Merton soon felt that it would be better if the students could be trained in a more systematic way, in theory as well as methods. With this in mind, they proposed in 1950 that an Institute for Training in Social Research should be established at Columbia University (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1972; Merton 1998b:188).

Even if Columbia University ultimately decided not to create an institute of this type, the proposal gives a good picture of how Merton and Lazarsfeld thought that modern sociologists should ideally be trained, in order to create the new kind of sociology that was now becoming possible thanks to the existence of systematic data. The basic thrust of the proposal was that the training the graduate students were currently getting at Columbia was not enough; a complementary type of education was needed. And this education should in the view of Merton and Lazarsfeld preferably take place in an institute, similar to the Bureau of Applied Social Research.

Merton, who viewed himself as a "lone scholar" rather than as a "managerial scholar" or an "organization man," was somewhat ambivalent to the proposal (Merton 1998b:184 ff.). He nonetheless put his name behind the project; he also introduced a strong emphasis on the interaction between theory and research into the proposal. Several of Merton's suggestions were very close to what he was lecturing on in Soc 213–214. Students in the Institute should, for example, learn how to develop new ideas by working on existing sociological studies (e.g. Lazarsfeld and Merton 1972:372). They were also to be trained in how to ground their own theoretical approach in the existing sociological literature, again something that Merton was teaching in his class (e.g. Lazarsfeld and Merton 1972:384).

The First Part of the Course in Theorizing (Soc 213): "Theoretical Operations"

Merton's main ambition in Soc 213–214 was to teach the students how to theorize themselves. In the fall term he primarily went about this by presenting a number of techniques or what he called "theoretical operations" that could be used in the process of dealing with empirical data. Merton lectured on these techniques, and also assigned a number of exercises through which the students were to train themselves in how to use all of these techniques.

Merton illustrated how to use these techniques by applying them to existing sociological studies and the data these were based on. His umbrella term for this type of work was *re-analysis*.¹² But there also existed another motive for using existing sociological studies. By proceeding in this way, he said, past sociological studies would be linked to new sociological studies. This meant that the core of sociology was strengthened and that continuity was assured, both of which Merton viewed as absolutely essential for the development of sociology as a science. Sociology would only mature into an advanced science if old sociological insights were further developed, and cumulation in this way assured (e.g. Nichols 1996).

The texts that Merton chose to re-analyze in his class on theorizing included *The Protestant Ethic* by Weber and *Suicide* by Durkheim. Like other sociologists at Columbia University, he viewed *Suicide* as an exemplary study because the organic way in which data and theory were integrated (e.g. Selvin 1958). *The Protestant Ethic*, in contrast, contained a well developed theory but was not based on systematic data.

The two works that Merton spent the most time on in his re-analyses, however, were not *Suicide* and *The Protestant Ethic*, but the sociological essays by Georg Simmel and *The American Soldier* by Samuel Stouffer et al. (1949–1950). When Merton lectured on Simmel in Soc 213–214 he praised Simmel’s wealth of ideas and his capacity to zoom in on hidden aspects of familiar topics. In Merton’s view, Simmel had an uncanny talent for detecting “strategic new variables”, and also for showing how these could lead to new and interesting insights (e.g. Merton 1950:B436F8).

The American Soldier was very useful as well but in a different way from Simmel’s essays. Its 1500 pages contained an enormous amount of data but very little theory, something that made *The American Soldier* ideal for showing how data in an existing study can be given a new sociological interpretation with the help of theory. Post-factum analysis might have its drawbacks, Merton said, but could also be a useful way of proceeding. After-the-fact interpretations are also useful in that they “are typically the new links to succeeding studies,” thereby creating “continuity” in sociological research (Merton 1949a:12).

In showing the students how to carry out re-analyses Merton taught them a number of theorizing skills. One of these was *how to spot empirical generalizations*, and to work on these so that they could be turned into sociology, with the help of theory. Merton’s term for this type of procedure was *re-formulation*.¹³

Much sociological research, Merton told the students, ends up by establishing some empirical generalization and little more. What is lacking in this type of research is a theory that can make sense of the generalization, and in this way also integrate it into the existing body of sociological knowledge. Without theory, you end up with “methodological empiricism,” and this is unacceptable (e.g. Merton 1948c:163–71,

¹² Merton’s terminology is sometimes unstable, in his lectures as well as in his published writings. Instead of “re-analysis,” for example, “re-examination” is occasionally used (e.g. Merton and Kitt 1950:41). In this article I will use the term that Merton used most often in his lectures.

¹³ Soc 213–214 was, as we know, primarily devoted to teaching the students about the use of theory in doing research. The technique of re-formulation is, however, also used when research impacts existing theory. In this case the re-formulation is driven by a “hitherto neglected but relevant fact which presses for an extension of the conceptual scheme” (Merton 1948a:509, 1968:162). More generally, research can influence theory, according to Merton, in the following four ways: “it *initiates*, it *reformulates*, it *deflects* and it *clarifies* theory” (Merton 1948:506, 1968:157).

1950:B436F8). “*The methodological tail will wag the sociological dog, and this is neither natural nor pretty*” (Merton 1950:B436F7; emphasis added).

What Merton called re-formulation represents one way to counter methodological empiricism; and it consists of two moves. You first try to make the empirical generalization more abstract; and there are two reasons for this. First, the generalization becomes in this way broader in scope and can cover more phenomena. It also facilitates the next move, which is to transform the generalization into a set of propositions, contributing in this way to a “theoretical re-definition of the problem” (e.g. Merton 1951:B436F7).

In carrying out the second move, Merton told the students, it is important to realize that generalizations are based on a number of assumptions, and that these can be recast as propositions. Once you have done this, you work with the propositions, and try to link them together in the form of a theory. A sociological theory, in Merton’s well-known formulation, is defined as a number of propositions that are logically linked together and from which empirical uniformities can be derived (e.g. Merton 1951:B436F7).¹⁴

Merton used several well-known examples from sociology in Soc 213 to show the students how to carry out a re-formulation along these lines. One of these was *Suicide* by Durkheim. You here start with the finding or the empirical generalization that suicide was more common among Protestants than among Catholics in various parts of Europe during the second half of the 1800s. This is then made more abstract by restating it in the following way: members of some religious groups commit more suicide than members of other religious groups. You then try to spell out the assumptions on which this statement is based; and when this has been done, you transform them into a set of interrelated propositions.

In the case of *Suicide*, one of these assumptions is that people with a high level of stress and anxiety run the risk of committing suicide. Another is that the cohesion of a group tends to lower this stress and anxiety; and a third that the level of group cohesion is stronger among Catholics than Protestants (for a formal rendering, see Merton 1968:151).¹⁵ Together these propositions can be linked into a theory that can be tested against systematic data.

¹⁴ Or to cite the classical formulation in *Social Theory and Social Structure*: “The term *sociological theory* refers to logically interconnected sets of propositions from which empirical uniformities can be derived” (Merton 1968:39, 66). (A “uniformity” is an empirical generalization that has become part of a theory; and the reason for using this special term is that only a “conceptual term” can be part of a theory, according to Henderson 1932). It can be added that Merton’s definition of sociological theory is in accordance with Hempel’s deductive-nomological model which emphasizes that you go from the general to the specific; more precisely, you use the general to explain the specific through subordination. If Merton had chosen to define sociological theory from the way that he taught the course in theorizing, he would also have wanted to include the reverse movement, from the specific to the general (sociological theory consists of empirical generalities elevated into a set of logically interconnected set of propositions). As opposed to Hempel, finally, Merton does not single out the role of explanation; it is instead built into the way that the propositions are related.

¹⁵ Merton writes as follows:

1. Social cohesion provides psychic support to group members subjected to acute stresses and anxieties.
2. Suicide rates are functions of *unrelieved* anxieties and stresses to which persons are subjected.
3. Catholics have greater social cohesion than Protestants.
4. Therefore, lower suicide rates should be anticipated among Catholics than among Protestants. (Merton 1968:15).

Or take *The Protestant Ethic*. The empirical finding that Protestants are more successful economically than Catholics can similarly be reformulated as a set of interrelated propositions, from which empirical uniformities can be derived.¹⁶ And so can various empirical generalizations in *The American Soldier* and in other studies, as Merton showed the students in Soc 213.

The theoretical operation that has just been discussed – trying to theorize an empirical generalization, by transforming it into a set of interlinked and explicitly stated propositions – was central to the kind of theorizing that Merton wanted to teach the students. So were three other theoretical operations that Merton had invented and lectured on in Soc 213: *respecification*, *reconceptualization* and *levels analysis*. All of these were to be used by the students, both when they re-analyzed existing studies and in their own empirical research. In this way theory would help them in their attempts to turn data into sociology.

While Merton often referred to these three procedures in Soc 213–214, he did not discuss them in his published work.¹⁷ They remained what he would later call “oral publications,” but unlike successful publications of this type they did not result in articles or books.¹⁸ This makes it important to describe the three procedures in some detail in this article. In respecification you essentially take a variable, dissect it, and put the pieces back together after having discarded some non-essential part of the variable in the process. The general purpose of this procedure is to recast some part of the empirical material, typically in the form of a variable, in such a way that it becomes more precise and in this way can help to improve the sociological analysis.

Proceeding in this way can eventually also lead to a change in a concept or a theory – what Merton calls reconceptualization. This, however, does not have to be the case. While respecification and reconceptualization sometimes meld into each other, they constitute in principle two different theoretical operations.

People who have met Merton know that he would sometimes urge you to “Specify! Specify!” when some issue was discussed. The idea of specification was also central to many of the topics he lectured on in the course on theorizing. By describing a phenomenon in a more precise way, you get a better handle on it. It also makes it easier to transform the analysis into sociology.

Through what he termed a “progressive specification of the variables” the analysis would become more precise; and the research improved (Merton 1951:B436F7). While Merton in this way advocated and encouraged precision, he also warned against

¹⁶ The translation of Weber’s analysis into propositions might look as follows:

1. Methodical work helps group members to be economically successful.
2. Economic success is a function of working hard.
3. Protestantism emphasizes a methodical attitude more than Catholicism.
4. Therefore Protestants can be expected to be more successful economically than Catholics.

¹⁷ “I had largely confined those analyses of ‘respecification’ and ‘reconceptualization’ to oral publication rather than putting them into print” (Merton 1998b:176). None of these terms (or that of levels analysis) can, for example, be found in the indices to the three editions of *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Merton 1949a, b, c, 1957, 1968).

¹⁸ During his life as a scholar Merton cultivated the process of developing ideas during his lectures and then working on these till they were ready for publication. Towards the end of his life he said that this was how most of his articles and books had come into being; and that the process from the first oral publication till the publication in print took about 12 years (Merton 1998a:317).

“premature precision” (Merton 1951:B436F7). What you want is “sufficient precision” for the purpose at hand, which is ultimately to turn the empirical data into sociology.

While Merton did not provide a formal definition of respecification in his lectures, it is possible to piece one together from his various statements. Respecification, in brief, is a theoretical operation that can be used in especially two situations: when you are about to conduct a study and want to get all the variables right from the beginning; and when you are trying to figure out if the data you are working with can be used to say something new. Existing variables are often taken for granted by sociologists, according to Merton; and to counter this he wanted to draw attention to “the unanalyzed variable” so that it could be specified and improved (Merton 1951:B436F7).

The type of respecification that was discussed in Soc 213–214 was of the latter type, that is, it was to be used on existing data. The data should ideally have been collected in a systematic manner. Also, the more detailed it was, the better: “the more the descriptive details [there are] in a study the greater the chance for the theorist to translate it to a higher order” (Merton 1950:B436F8).

Merton sometimes illustrated the general utility of respecification by telling the students about a tale by essayist Charles Lamb, called “A Dissertation upon Roast Pig” (e.g. Merton 1951:B436F7; Lamb 1823). The story is about a man who owned a number of lambs who all died when his house burned down. After the fire, the unhappy owner accidentally tasted the roasted meat of one of his lambs – and found it delicious. From now on, whenever he wanted to experience this culinary experience again, he set his house on fire. Sociologists, according to Merton, should in other words try to improve on the crude analyses of the past - and in this way say something new.

The best example of how to use respecification can perhaps be found in an article Merton wrote together with his assistant in Soc 213, Alice Rossi (Merton and Kitt 1950; Merton 1968:279–334). This article holds a special place in modern sociology in that the reader is not only presented with a new and interesting theory, but also gets to follow the authors’ reasoning step by step as they develop their theory from data.

The name of the article is “Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behavior” and the authors proceed as follows (Merton and Kitt 1950). They first locate a number of statements by soldiers in *The American Soldier* that show that what each soldier individually felt was based not only on their own individual reactions, but also on their view of what others feel. Soldiers who were married, for example, would often compare themselves to soldiers who were not married, and who had not had to give up as much when they joined the army. This type of phenomenon was given the name of relative deprivation by Samuel Stouffer and his co-authors.

Merton and Rossi then suggest that you can go one step further in the analysis, by better specifying the relevant variable. More precisely, you can divide the groups with which soldiers compared themselves into two different kinds. On the one hand, there are the kind of groups to which the soldiers themselves belong (ingroups); and on the other, the kind of groups to which they do not belong (outgroups).

In the cases where the soldiers’ attitudes were oriented towards people in an outgroup, this other group operated as a so-called reference group, according to Merton and Rossi. The term itself was not new; it had been coined a few years earlier by Herbert Hyman (1942:15). But there existed no fully developed theory of reference groups at the time; and it was exactly such a theory that Merton and Rossi wanted to create.

In working out the theory of reference groups, Merton and Rossi also argued that the procedure of respecification allows you to formulate many new sociological hypotheses. The value of these hypotheses, they emphasized, naturally depends on what happens when they are confronted with systematic data. “Nor is it assumed, of course, that each and all of the extensions of reference group theory here proposed will in fact turn out to be sound; like any other form of human activity, theorizing has its quota of risk” (Merton and Kitt 1950:281).

In the case of Merton and Rossi’s essay, the use of respecification helped its two authors to develop a new theory with the help of the existing data in *The American Soldier*. In other words, what began as a respecification ended up as a radical form of reconceptualization. Again, this shows that the line between respecification and reconceptualization is fluid; and that it can be hard to see where one ends and the other begins.

The difference between the two, however, is clear in principle. Respecification is a theoretical operation conducted on a variable, according to Merton. You remove something that is not essential from a variable, in an effort to make it more precise. In reconceptualization, on the other hand, you make a change to a concept or a theory.¹⁹

Several years after Merton had stopped giving his class in theorizing, he provided a formal definition of reconceptualization in one of his writings. What is meant by this term, he then wrote, is “a second or fresh [sociological] conceptualization” (Merton 1995a:24 n. 47). For example, when you engage in reconceptualization “established terms and concepts are re-analyzed in an effort to detect pertinent but previously implicit meanings that guide the observation of significant aspects of the phenomenon” (Merton 1963:xxvii). You may also, say, tweak a psychological concept and turn it into a sociological one (e.g. Merton and Barber 2004:257–61).

Before leaving the idea of reconceptualization, something should also be said about its close relative, the clarification of concepts.²⁰ The two differ in that reconceptualization results in a concept that is new in some important respect, while a clarification of a concept means that its current meaning is made more transparent (Merton 1968:144–45, Merton 1998b:171–73). Clarification of concepts was common in US sociology before Merton, while the procedure of reconceptualization was invented by Merton at Columbia, in the sense that he made it explicit, discussed it, and gave it a name.

Merton also used *The Protestant Ethic* as an example of reconceptualization in his lectures. Weber, he said, took Marx’s concept of capitalism and changed it so that it could be used for his own argument, namely that religion had played an important role in the development of modern capitalism. Out of Marx’s undifferentiated concept of capitalism (“blanket concept,” as Merton called it), Weber developed the sociological concept of modern Western capitalism with its rational spirit (Merton 1950: B436F8).

In his discussion of *The Protestant Ethic*, Merton also pointed out that Weber had written his study in such a way that the reader was unable to follow how he proceeded when he reconceptualized Marx’s concept of capitalism. Presumably it was a desire to

¹⁹ Again, Merton muddied the waters by for example speaking of “reconceptualization” and “respecification of a concept” as synonymous (e.g. Merton 1951:B132F4, 1963:xxvii, 1968:307 n. 28).

²⁰ In a similar vein Merton has argued that “a good part of the work called ‘theorizing’ is taken up with the clarification of concepts – and rightly so” (Merton 1948a:513, 1968:168).

avoid this way of writing, and to show how a reconceptualization actually takes place, that had inspired Merton and Rossi in their article on *The American Soldier*.

Besides re-analysis in the form of respecification and reconceptualization, Merton also taught his students in Soc 213–214 another theoretical operation which was useful when you try to turn empirical data into sociology. His name for this was *levels analysis*; and it was a topic that he also addressed in his famous course on social structure, Soc 215–216 (Merton 1943–1954:B365F4–5; for a detailed description of Soc 215–216, see Marsh 2010).

While re-analysis often meant that the analyst worked directly on an existing study, in an attempt to use the data in a new way, this was not the case with levels analysis. This type of theoretical operation can instead be described as providing the researcher with a sociological standard, against which any given study can be measured. Does or does not a study analyze all the relevant levels? Levels analysis can also be used for the same purpose as reconceptualization, namely to get a better analytical handle on the analysis, and in this way improve it.

In levels analysis social reality is conceptualized as having different levels which are related to each other in specific ways. So far there was little that was new to Merton's approach; several other sociologists had suggested the same thing (e.g. Edel 1959). The way he proceeded from this point on, however, is what made levels analysis into a unique product of Merton as well as a useful tool for theorizing in sociology.

Let us assume, Merton said, that there are four levels to social reality, and that each of these has its own set of variables. The first level is that of the individual with a focus on his or her psychology (Level 1); and the second is that of social positions (Level 2). The next level is that of social structure (Level 3), which is followed by the way individuals perceive their social position (Level 4). The first level can be represented by the question “What do I want to do?” and that of the social structure, “What am I able to do?” (Level 3). At Level 4 the individual asks, “What should I do?” (Merton 1950:B436F8).²¹

By the individual level, Merton meant people as they are biologically constituted, including their individual psychology (Level 1). Social positions include such items as status, rank and age status (Level 2). When these positions are related to each other, they form a social structure in the form of a social system or institution (Level 3). As examples of Level 3 Merton mentioned societies with closed or open mobility and kinship structures which are tightly or loosely knit.

In discussing how to establish Level 4 (how individuals view their social position), Merton referred to the notion of the definition of the situation. The way that people look at the position they are in, he argued, differs depending on such factors as consistency, fixity, change and compartmentalization. It was especially important to try to understand the “standardized definitions which are modal by some specified group” (Merton 1950:B436F8).

²¹ While Merton only seems to have presented one version of his levels analysis in Soc 213–214, he presented several in his course on social structure, Soc 215–216 (Merton 1943–1954:B365F4–5). In one of these the levels are as follows: individual actor (Level 1); status, position (Level 2); organization, structure (Level 3); and society (Level 4). In another: opinions (Level 1); positions (Level 2); group cohesion (Level 3); and values, cultural assumptions (Level 4). Merton also emphasized the importance of the order in which the different levels were analyzed.

Merton found the notion of the definition of the situation very useful and regarded it as one of the central ideas in sociology (e.g. Merton et al. 1956:3–4; Merton 1950:B132F4, Merton 1995b). It had not, however, in his view been much developed in the work of the Chicago School, and was better characterized as a fertile sociological idea than as a theory in its original formulation. It sensitized you to certain phenomena, but it was not very specific (Merton n.d.: B436F8). In brief, it fell into the category of what Merton called a “general sociological orientation.”²²

According to levels analysis, in brief, people differ in their individual psychology but have to adjust their behavior to what is demanded of them, depending on the social position they occupy. How these positions affect people’s behavior depends both on the formal structure of these positions and how people view their situation (definition of the situation). There also exist distinct limits to what can be done in a specific position; and these are set by the broader social structure.

Merton told his students that when you want to evaluate a study in sociology levels analysis comes in very handy. It can, for example, be used to see what is missing from an analysis. “Polling and survey approaches”, he noted, rarely cover all four levels (Merton 1950:B436F8). He also pointed out that sociologists tend to focus mainly on the level of social position, something that Merton considered a mistake (“the core and bane of sociology” - Merton 1950:B436F8). The levels of the social structure (Level 3) and the definition of the situation (Level 4) were in contrast relatively unexplored. When you carry out your own research, Merton told the students, it is often important to try to cover all four levels.

Besides listening to Merton’s lectures, and in this way learn to theorize, the students also had to hand in a few pages of writing every week. When Merton lectured on what constitutes a sociological problem, for example, the students were asked to locate a few problems in the literature and to “set out, tentatively, the components and structure of the statement of a problem” (Merton 1949a, b, c:B132F4; for the full text of this and two other weekly assignments, see Appendix 1). In 1952, when *The Social System* by Parsons had just appeared, James Coleman describes how Merton “asked us [students] to go through the early chapters and to note each theoretical sentence, labelling it according to type: was it a *definition*, an *empirical generalization*, a *reconceptualization*, a *respecification* of a lower level empirical generalization?” (Coleman 1990b:29, 1990c:83). In carrying out this assignment, Coleman adds, he quickly came to realize that Parsons’ work was full of definitions but contained nearly no empirical generalizations.

Similarly when the topic was levels analysis, the students were asked to identify the levels in a study and to answer questions like, “What happens when a theorist or researcher remains on one level? What happens when a level shift occurs? Raise the question to yourself: what difference would it make to introduce variables from a different level?” (Merton 1950: B436F8; for the full assignment, see Appendix 2).

²² A general sociological orientation does not qualify as a theory but can be helpful as an inspiration; it may also draw the sociologist’s attention to certain empirical phenomena (Merton 1945:464–65, 1968:149–50). Merton did not regard the works of Simmel and Weber as containing theory properly speaking – but they were full of useful general orientations.

The Second Part of the Course (Soc 214): “Systematic Theorizing”

So far in this article the focus has been on the topics that Merton lectured on during the fall term of his course in theorizing, Soc 213. The students were told what theorizing is; how to pay attention to the presuppositions of their analyses; and what theoretical operations they should use, in order to turn empirical data into sociology. They were, however, not told what sociology is; this was mainly implied, with the exception of levels analysis. In this type of approach. Sociology was loosely conceived as the study of individuals in social positions which are part of social structures.

When Merton discussed other theoretical operations, however, the nature of sociology was basically taken for granted. Still, the problem remained: what exactly constitutes sociology; and how could the students be sure that what they ended up with was sociology, and not just some common sense description of social reality?

Merton’s answer to this question was as follows. From the perspective of theorizing, he suggested, you have to approach sociological theory in a way that differs from the way that theory is usually conceptualized in sociology, namely as a set of interrelated propositions that are used to generate testable hypotheses (Merton 1968:39, 66). You now need to look at theory as something that is collective rather than individual in nature, and that draws on a type of thinking that has developed since the early beginning of the discipline, of how to analyze social structures and social patterns. By virtue of its focus on trans-generational insights, this approach consequently goes beyond the type of theory that can be found in single studies of the type that Merton had used in the first half of the course (e.g. Nichols 1996). In brief, sociological theory from a theorizing perspective was best seen as *live and evolving bodies of sociological thinking* that it was imperative to try to incorporate into one’s thinking (e.g. Merton 1950:B436F8).

In the opening lecture of Soc 214 in February 1950 Merton formulated the point of departure for the second half of the course as follows:

Thus far [I] have treated *studies as separate and discrete*

- may well be that be that something is lost in *treating each study as a thing apart*
- one thing that is lost in this *atomistic separation of studies: the review of the development of a body of theory*
- *No single inquiry produces a theory: theory is built up of numerous related observations and findings, relating to one, then another; and then still other facets of the initial theory*
- *Consists in drawing out numerous implications of the original theory and of successively subjecting them to empirical inquiry*
- *Continuity and follow-up*
- A phrase, a sentence, a tacit assumption in the original formulation [is] now made the basis for [a] new inquiry (Merton 1950:B437F4; emphasis in text).

Merton’s term for the kind of theorizing that helps you to create sociological theory as carried out in empirical research was “*systematic theorizing*” (e.g. Merton

1951:B436F8, B437F4; emphasis added). He was well aware that this type of theorizing was different from the kind of theorizing he had lectured on during the first half of the course:

the present discussion seems remote from the theorizing used in current researches. The researcher is usually too pre-occupied with his immediate problems to attempt systematic links to the past. The process of incorporating systematic theory into research may be this: when *not* engaged in research we attempt to make the assumptions of systematic theory part of our implicit thinking. This avoids the necessity of rewriting a large part of sociology in each empirical study. (Merton 1951:B436F8)

It is in other words very important for the individual scholar to learn about the systematic kind of theorizing during periods when he or she is *not* involved in a concrete research project. The reason for this is that when you are conducting a study you do not have the time to immerse yourself in a huge and complex body of theory. So, in order to theorize well in a concrete research project, you need to have done some systematic theorizing in the past.

One reason for looking at theory in the long stretch, so to speak, was that Merton believed that sociological concepts and ideas tend to converge over time because of the pressure of facts. In one of his lectures in Soc 214 he stated that

theories are not mere matters of taste, but that, irrespectively of starting point, if scientific method is used, would be forced toward compatible theories by pressure of facts (cf. Peirce, *How to Make Ideas Clear...*) (Merton n.d.:B437F4, Peirce 1992)

This supposed convergence takes place even if the researchers involved come from different countries and work in different social science disciplines. The way that a theory has developed chronologically over time is also irrelevant; what matters are the basic theoretical problems and how these have been gradually redefined and solved.

Note also that according to Merton, the development of a theory or a concept is always a gamble. A body of theory may first develop in one direction, then encounter an obstacle and come to a stop. Among the “possible patterns” that a body of sociological thought can display are the following: “dead end, convergence (conscious and unconscious), divergence, cumulation” (Merton 1951:B436F8).

Most of the second half of Merton’s course in theorizing during the years 1950–1952 was devoted to an analysis of the concept of social control. While this concept is not used very much today, Merton considered it absolutely central to sociology. In his view it dealt with one of the most basic problems of sociology, namely, how does a group or society create conformity among its members?

The answer to this question was delivered by Merton in a series of lectures during the spring, consisting of detailed presentations and discussions of various thinkers. The pioneer in addressing the issue of social control, according to Merton, was Durkheim, with his ideas on how the individual is subordinate to society. Durkheim, however, had done little more than pose the problem; and much work remained to be done before a full theory of social control could emerge.

After having discussed Durkheim, Merton addressed the topic of cumulation in systematic theorizing:

With cumulated theory, find that

- not only new theoretical ‘answers’ to initial questions (problems), but find that questions (problems) themselves undergo reformulation – more exacting, detailed, formulations...
- what is caught up in an undifferentiated way in Durkheim’s original formulation becomes successively differentiated, and component problems dealt with on their own ground
- this is what is meant by ‘theoretic *analysis*’ – breaking up a legitimate, but operationally not clearly formulated, problem into its components *and* then the problem of formulating the relations between these components. (Merton 1950:B437F4)

What Merton proceeded to do, during the rest of the term, was to show how a full body of theory had gradually emerged, following Durkheim’s initial formulation of the problem. Durkheim, for example, had paid no attention to individual psychology; and on this point his work could be complemented by that of Freud.

But even if this was the case, much was still missing from a full theory of social control. Neither Durkheim nor Freud understood, for example, how social change affects the structure of social control. On this point, however, the work of Marx was very helpful.

After having brought in Marx, Merton turned to Malinowski. What Malinowski had shown was that what matters in a family is not who is the biological mother or father, but who is in charge of the child. Merton ended his account of the concept of social control by discussing the studies of Erich Fromm and Abram Kardiner, both of whom had helped to work out the social dimensions of the individual’s psychology.

From this account of how Merton lectured on social control, we can conclude that in order to theorize well, sociologists need in his view to have a profound grasp of the work of the major social scientists in their area of expertise. Only when this is the case will they be able to play around with sociological ideas in their mind – and in this way say something new in their studies.

That someone like Merton could carry out theorizing of this type is clear; but what about the students in his class? Would they understand what Merton meant with systematic theorizing by listening to his lectures on Durkheim and others? Also, would it not take years of reading for them to be able to master the literature along the lines of Merton?

On the whole we do not know what the students made of Merton’s lectures on systematic theorizing. All that is currently known about their reaction to Soc 214 comes from one source; and it focuses more on Merton’s brilliance than on how well he was able to teach the students systematic theorizing:

Sociology 213-214 was a brilliant course organized as a theory of social control. RKM took all the giants of the discipline and showed how the work of each complemented that of the others and how the whole constituted a theory of social control. (Caplovitz 1977:142)

There also exists some information about the main requirement for getting a grade in Soc 214, besides attending the lectures. The main task for the students was to produce a full-scale paper on a sociological concept, such as anomie, life chances, social isolation and so on. The early history of the concept should be included, but the main focus of the paper should be on the way that the concept had developed through an interplay between theory and data. According to Merton's instructions, the students should also include "an indication of the present status of the concept and the respects in which further research and theoretical analysis is, in your judgment, called for" (Merton 1951:B132F4; for the full instructions, see Appendix 3).

Only one student paper of this type has survived – a thirty-nine pages long paper by James Coleman on the concept of isolation (Coleman 1953). Merton saved the paper, presumably because he thought it was very good. Coleman himself, however, had a more ambivalent attitude to it. On the one hand, he considered the paper to be "the theoretical piece of which I was most proud during my days in graduate school" (Coleman 1990b:31). On the other, he was uncertain about the very purpose of the paper. What was it supposed to accomplish? He knew that he wanted to impress Merton by writing an extra good paper, but beyond that, what? Coleman did not know, and eventually he gave up thinking about the paper ("it languished until I lost it" – Coleman 1990b:31–2).

Discussion

Is the kind of theorizing we are now engaged in going to come to a standstill, or enable future building?

- Merton, Opening lecture in Soc 213 in 1950²³

At the beginning of this article, it was suggested that knowledge about Merton's course on theorizing is primarily of interest for what it can contribute to our knowledge of how to understand and teach theorizing in sociology today. It was also noted that this knowledge can add to a better understanding of Merton's own work and to the history of theorizing in sociology.

The material on Soc 213–214 that has been presented in this article shows that Merton was deeply interested in the topic of theorizing, something that was not previously known. This interest, it can be added, was expressed by Merton before his arrival to Columbia in 1941. Merton himself dated it to his doctoral dissertation from 1936 (Merton 1978:B372F2, 1991:xxi-xxii, 1996a:27; see also Merton 1970:220). When he started to teach theorizing for the first time at Columbia, he had in other words spent a few years

²³ Merton 1950:B436F8.

thinking about it. Still, it was at Columbia that he fully developed his ideas on this topic and tried to teach theorizing to students.

What Merton lectured on in Soc 213–214 complements and also throws some new light on what he has to say on sociological theory as well as the history of sociological thought. All in all, it would seem that Merton felt that graduate students need a minimum of four terms of instruction in sociological theory, in order to become a good sociologist: two terms in contemporary theory and two in theorizing (Soc 213–214). By way of contrast, it can be mentioned that today's students are at the most required to spend one term in studying some form of theory (and none in theorizing).²⁴

The material from Merton's course also increases our knowledge of Merton as a lecturer and shows that he produced many insights during his teaching that were never published. According to David Caplovitz, "more than perhaps any other sociologist, Merton's theoretical ideas live in his lectures rather than in his writings" (Caplovitz 1977:143; see also Cole 2010). While this may sound like a bit of hyperbole from a former student, it is clear that Merton during his career at Columbia both enjoyed and tried to cultivate his capacity to come up with new ideas as he lectured.

Soc 213–214 also adds to our knowledge of the history of theorizing in sociology, which is currently very sketchy. We know today something about the work on theorizing by people such as James March, Arthur Stinchcombe and Karl Weick; there also exist some information on theory construction in sociology (e.g. Stinchcombe 1968, Lave and March 1975, Cohen 1980, Zhao 1996, Markovsky 2008, Weick 2005, Levine 2014:355, 369–72, Madsen and Hansen *forthcoming*, Swedberg *forthcoming*).²⁵ But that is about all; and nothing has so far been known about Merton's contribution.

The material on Soc 213–214 represents by far the richest source that we have today on theorizing by a major sociologist. It should also be emphasized

²⁴ Merton taught three classes on theory at Columbia: "Analysis of Social Structures, Soc 215–216" (1942–1979), "Social Theory Applied to Social Research, Soc 213–214" (1942–1953), and "History of Sociological Theory, Soc 150" (1958–1968). From the dates of these, it is possible to argue that Merton may have replaced the course in theorizing with the one in the history of sociological theory. In 1957–1958 Merton co-taught a course with Paul Lazarsfeld called "Selected Problems in the Relations between Sociological Theory and Methods of Research (Soc 319)" (for all of Merton's classes, see the online finding aid to the Merton collection at Columbia). As opposed to his course on theorizing, Merton's famous course on contemporary theory had a strong focus on structural-functionalism (for a detailed description, see Marsh 2010). The reader who is interested in Merton's take on theory may also want to consult his last major article in this genre, "Three Fragments from a Sociologist's Notebooks," which contains much material on theorizing (Merton 1987).

²⁵ Merton's work may also have been the inspiration for the work on theory construction that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Zhao 1996). As to the terminology of "theorizing" versus "theory construction," the following can be said. While Merton repeatedly used the term "theorizing" in his lectures in Soc 213–214, he never used "theory construction." While the two terms are overlapping to quite some extent, there are also some key differences. The emphasis in theory construction, as used by sociologists, is primarily on the parts that make up a theory (proposition, type, explanation, and so on). This is also often accompanied by a focus on the need for formalization. Theory construction differs in this sense from theorizing, which is considerably broader in scope and includes e.g. the dead ends, mistakes, early attempts at explanation, and so on, that are part of the process that precedes the presentation of a study in public (see also Merton 1968:140–41). In theorizing there is also more of an emphasis on how to develop practical rules for how to proceed.

that Merton appears to have been the first sociologist to teach and single out theorizing as a distinct topic in its own right.²⁶ Merton does not make this claim himself. Still, he repeatedly stated that he could find no material on the topic when he taught it in Soc 213. It was, as he put it in 1950, “*a new kind of ‘beast’*” (e.g. Merton 1950: B436F8; emphasis added).

What effect did Merton’s course in theorizing have on the students? We know, for example, that a number of the most famous Columbia-educated sociologists took Soc 213–214, such as James Coleman, Lewis Coser, Rose Laub Coser, Juan Linz and Alice Rossi.²⁷ It is difficult to say much more with some degree of certainty, not least because most of Merton’s graduate students also took his famous course on social structures.

There does however exist one exception. This is that there exists a clear link of influence between Merton’s teaching of Soc 213–214 and a classic in theorizing, Arthur Stinchcombe’s *Constructing Social Theories* (1968). In his capacity as the sociology editor of Harcourt, Brace and World, Merton read the first version of Stinchcombe’s manuscript in the summer of 1967. He liked what Stinchcombe had written a lot and wrote to him:

Part of my enthusiasm for the book has a biographical source. Fifteen to 20 years ago, I tried my hand at this sort of thing in a course with the seemingly odd-sounding title: *Social Theory Applied to Sociology*. (As a matter of fact, Jim Coleman was my assistant in this course for a year or so.) What I tried to do there in a then-primitive way you have caught up in a more interesting, disciplined and significant treatment. And I know from past experience that students respond avidly to this kind of teaching just how sociological theorizing is done. (Merton 1967:B88F1)

In his reply, Stinchcombe wrote

Though I didn’t trace the intellectual history of the book in the preface, I knew that its origin was ultimately in courses of yours. I sat in Jim Coleman’s course

²⁶ Some might argue that Merton was at the most a pioneer among sociologists in theorizing *with empirical material*, on the ground that many other sociologists have theorized before Merton (such as Weber, Simmel and Parsons, just to mention three sociologists who, according to Merton himself in Soc 213–214, had theorized). This argument, however, detracts from Merton’s accomplishment in my view. While all sociologists can be said to have theorized, if this term is equated with the production of theory, what Merton did, I argue, was to draw attention to the practical side of this activity, with all its ups and downs, false leads and failed attempts. He also singled out theorizing as a set of practical skills to be learned and taught. To my knowledge, this is something that no other sociologist had done before Merton (and not to be confused with philosophy of science). The reader may also want to compare Merton’s views on theorizing with those of Talcott Parsons. The latter tried to outline what theorizing is, as part of the so-called Carnegie project on theory (1949–1951). Parsons views, however, does not seem to have gone beyond insights of the type “try to think as hard as you can” and “you can get inspiration by working with others” (Isaac 2010; see also Isaac 2009).

²⁷ It is not clear how many students took Merton’s course in theorizing during 1942–1954. As earlier mentioned 55 students were enrolled in 1950–1951 and some 30 students took the course every year, according to one source (Caplovitz 1977:142). How these figure square with the official statistics that only 152 students were awarded a PhD in sociology at Columbia University during the years 1943–1959 (that is, about nine per year) is not clear (Rosenhaupt 1958:6, Sibley 1963:65–6).

designed along the lines you describe, and felt sufficiently indebted to threaten to make him co-author. My first real exposure to theorizing was by another student of yours, Phil Selznick. (Stinchcombe in Merton 1967:B88F1)

To turn to the next question of this article: Does what we know about Merton's ideas on theorizing also give us privileged access to his own work, in the sense that it helps to understand it better? To some extent this may be true, especially when it comes to those of his studies that were based on systematic empirical material. Examples of this would be the housing study, his analysis of the war bond drive, and some of the studies he produced as part of his work for the Bureau of Applied Social Research (e.g. Merton 1943, 1946; Merton et al. 1951).

But quite a bit of Merton's most important work in sociology was *not* produced by following the guidelines for how to theorize, as these were presented in Soc 213–214. One of his favorite terms may have been “disciplined research”, but many of his most important writings are not based on systematic data (Lazarsfeld 1975:59). Instead, they often display a theoretical playfulness and sensitivity to language that Merton did not even mention, let alone lecture about, in Soc 213–214.²⁸ As examples of this one can cite his essays on unintended consequences and self-fulfilling prophecy, his many theorems and sociological parables, and even whole books such as *On the Shoulders of Giants* and (with Eleanor Barber) *The Travels of Serendipity* (Merton 1936, 1948b, 1965, 1984:282, 1987; Merton and Barber 2004; for Merton's sociological parables, see Jaworski 1990). Merton's personal preference for the essay over the scientific article can also be mentioned in this context.

Having argued that some parts of Merton's production were definitely not produced by following the guidelines for theorizing that he advocated in Soc 213–214, it seems natural to take one step further and ask, Had perhaps Merton ended up teaching a course that was more of an attempt to contribute to the new type of sociology that was emerging at Columbia after World War II, than to develop the kind of sociology that he himself was interested in? If that is the case, can it also help to explain why Merton never published anything on theorizing and why he stopped teaching the course in the mid-1950s?

It should be noted that around this time statistics was becoming increasingly central to the kind of sociology that was practiced at Columbia; and this was a topic that was largely outside of Merton's expertise. In the early 1950s Paul Lazarsfeld and Herbert Simon were, for example, battling out what type of statistics to use; and it is not known what Merton made of their arguments, from the perspective of theorizing (Turner 2009:197–209). Some years later, new and more advanced forms of statistics would replace Lazarsfeld's type of statistics, which was centered around fairly simple cross-tabulations and latent structure analysis (e.g. Raftery 2005, Calhoun and VanAntwerpen 2007:396 ff.). Merton seems to have been ambivalent about the way that statistics was now beginning to take

²⁸ In an interview from 1995, Merton referred to what he called his own “tacit theorizing” in the following way:

It's a strange phenomenon, this tacit theorizing about aspects of social reality before you know what it is that you are looking for. It starts as a vague notion and sometimes ends in nothing. But every so often, the tacit becomes explicit and leads to new problems worth pursuing. (Duncan 1995).

over sociology and replace it with difficult to understand and often non-sociological types of analysis, even if he kept his thoughts on this topic to himself.²⁹

Note also that while Merton, the confirmed theorist, had made a huge attempt to teach himself a number of research methods when he arrived to Columbia, Lazarsfeld was unable to reciprocate since he had little understanding of theory.³⁰ Merton, in other words, could not get much help from Lazarsfeld with understanding what the many new statistical methods meant for the way that theorizing should be carried out. By the early 1960s Merton also began to withdraw from his work on general sociology and

²⁹ In the early 1980s Merton wrote the following parable about the use of statistics in sociology, which he sent to Pat Kendall, the wife of Paul Lazarsfeld (Merton 1984:B47F9):

Transcription of a Dream

For lo these many years the People were dwelling in the Land of Columbia with their wives and camels and computers. But the zero order correlations came upon them and the People were sore afraid. So they spoke unto the prophet Paul saying "Canst thou relieve us of this plague of zero order correlations?" And the Prophet Paul told them to buildeth tables of percentages and the correlations would go away. And the people did as he said and they builded many tables (and verily some obtained chairs) and some of the correlations went away. And the people of Columbia waxed fat and had many wives and many concubines.

And it came to pass that the prophet Dudley arriveth from the sands of Oklahoma. And the Prophet Dudley spake unto the people saying, "Repent, ye sinners! Thou worshipeth false Gods!" And he told the People they should follow him down the recursive path, nigh unto the land of Econometrica, whence he had been before them. And the People packed up their wives and camels and computers and followed him (as best they could) and the assistant professors found that many books could be written elucidating the miracle that Education is correlated with Occupational Prestige (when Prestige is estimated from Education) and the assistant professors became full professors, and the residual variance waxed while the man and maidservants decomposed covariances, and the journals were filled with graven images of what appeared to be the road to Bulgaria. But the people cried out, "We know not what this Sociology is and can not read our journals nor yet find any information about society." But the prophet and his disciples said, "Oh, ye of little faith, trust us." So the people stopped reading the journals and devoted themselves to Marxist agitation and all was well in the Land. But the remnant who tarried in Columbia were punished and the Lord smote the Bureau of Applied Social Research to show he/she wasn't kidding.

And it came to pass that the Prophet Leo came down from the clouds and saith, "Moses gave you tablets of clay, but I giveth unto you Tables of Counts plus plenteous notation." And the prophet Dudley was moved, and he spoke unto the People saying "Repent, ye sinners! Thou worshipeth false Gods!" and "Abandon ye those comfortable interval scales and follow me on the road back to tables." And the people despaired and they cried out, "Hey, we just came from there and it was a long walk." But the prophet Dudley said, "Ye speaketh of tables builded from percentages; I speaketh unto you of tables builded from Logs, as told to me by the Wizard of Odds." And the people said, "Oh, I see, I guess" and they packed up their wives and camels and computers and they followed him (as best they could) back to the land of tables. And somewhat fewer assistant professors became full professors because it was a time of drought, and many fewer of the People could read the journals nor [understand them]. (Merton 1984?:B47F10)

³⁰ While Merton excelled as a theorist as well as a methodologist and a researcher (Sorensen 1991), this was not the case with Lazarsfeld who lacked a talent for theory and was not interested in testing theoretical ideas. According to Merton, Lazarsfeld was always asking, "What is sociology?" (Rogers 1997:247). He also said: "Paul never believed there was such a subject as sociology" (Rogers 1997:247). According to Coleman, "Lazarsfeld had a difficult time understanding sociological theory"; he also "did not know [theory]" (Coleman 1980:171, 1990d:89; see also (Coleman 1990b:28–9, 1990c:89). According to Bernard Barber, "Lazarsfeld... never understood the basic nature of theory" (Clark 1998:338). Lazarsfeld said himself that he did not view himself as "a 'real' sociologist;" and according to Stephen Turner and Jonathan Turner, he used a kind of "'folk psychology' for...theory" (Lazarsfeld 1975:56, Turner and Turner 1990:105).

devote most of his intellectual energy to the sociology of science (e.g. Merton 1964:B365F4, Cole 2004: 836).

While it is interesting to speculate why Merton stopped teaching his course on theorizing, and if the increasingly advanced methods in statistics may have played a role in this, there does exist a more important question that needs to be addressed. It is the following, What is still live and worth teaching to today's students of Merton's material in Soc 213–214? What should be kept and what can be forgotten of his work on theorizing?

In my own view, there is quite a bit of what Merton has to say about theorizing that is valuable and still worth teaching students today. But there also exist some aspects of Merton's take on theorizing that need some critical discussion:

– *The Term Theorizing as Decision-making*

This terminology is helpful in that it draws attention to the fact that when you theorize you need to pay careful attention to a number of issues that are often taken for granted. What constitutes a fact? How do you come up with a sociological problem? But does not also the term decision-making imply that theorizing is basically a cognitive enterprise? One may therefore want to complement Merton's ideas by also taking non-cognitive factors into account, such as emotions, intuition, and the subconscious.

– *The Role of Systematic Data in Theorizing*

Contrary to what Merton argued, systematic data are not always needed in sociology. Beyond what has just been said about studies like *On the Shoulders of Giants*, it can also be noted that Merton now and then engaged in exploratory research (e.g. Merton 1943, 1949c). The idea of tying theorizing so closely to systematic data was a gamble of sorts, as he was well aware of. As Merton said in one of his lectures: "it is...an open question whether empirical research has a greater stimulating value for developing theory than other types of observation" (Merton 1950:B436F8).

– *The Exclusive Focus on Variables*

Merton had a tendency to cast too much of the sociological analysis in terms of the language of variables. Concepts and variables are, for example, sometimes equated; and every type of data is referred to as "variables." Merton's focus on variables also led him to say very little about the nature of explanation in Soc 213–214. Related to this, he said nothing about social mechanisms. In brief, some of the criticism that has been directed at so-called variable analysis may also be directed at the kind of theorizing Merton taught in Soc 213–214 (e.g. Abbott 1992; Manzo 2007).

One would also like to know how well Merton's tools for theorizing hold up today? Should students be taught these as part of their training? In general, my sense is that Merton should be praised for trying to develop specific ways in which empirical

material can be transformed into sociology, and in this way advance sociology as a science. Having said this, it is true that some of the theoretical operations that Merton advocated are more useful than others. The idea of teaching the students to spot empirical generalizations and work with these, strikes me as important and useful. This also goes for what Merton has to say about making generalizations more abstract and transforming them into social theory.

Respecification and reconceptualization are related to the idea of re-analysis, and represent two useful ways of dealing with empirical material. A point on which Merton's ideas on respecification can be perhaps improved, as I see it, would be to extend the focus from variables to observation more generally. This would also allow respecification to be used more easily in qualitative studies, a topic which Merton was very positive to.³¹ It might also be useful to bring in Durkheim's notion of everyday preconceptions (*prénotions*) in this context. According to *Rules of Sociological Method*, the sociologist must break with people's preconceptions and focus the analysis on social facts (Durkheim 1964:31). In a similar vein, respecification can be seen as a call to sociologists to try to break with existing *sociological definitions and conceptions of various phenomena*, in an attempt to say something new about them.

The concept of reconceptualization reminds us that it is not only existing facts and variables that need to be recast and reevaluated, but also existing concepts and whole theories. To do so is also very useful in that it strengthens the element of continuity in the sociological enterprise, something that was very important to Merton. Similarly, new research findings need to be conceptualized and positioned in such a way that they can become part of the sociological tradition.

Also levels analysis strikes me as a handy tool for sociologists today, well worth knowing. Conceptualizing social reality in terms of levels has proven quite helpful, as

³¹ In an article from the 1980s, Merton describes himself as "a longtime qualitative researcher" (Merton 1987:559, 1990a:xxiv). And according to a student who took his class on social structure (Soc 215–216):

In the Sociology 215–216 course, as elsewhere, Merton was much more qualitative than quantitative. He advised us that journals like the *British Journal of Sociology and Psychiatry* were sympathetic to qualitative, intellectual essay-type articles and were therefore a good outlet for publications. (Marsh 2010:112).

Note, however, that both of these descriptions are retrospective in nature. During the peak of Columbia sociology in the 1950s, a better characterization of Merton would perhaps be as an empirical researcher who insisted that *all* types of solid knowledge should be used. In 1950, for example, he describes his view on different types of data as follows:

I believe that *different* methods of systematically collecting and analyzing sociological data need to be brought together and meshed. For if sociologists confine themselves to one type of data – whether this be brief interviews with cross-sections of a population, *or* governmentally collected demographic data, *or* historical reconstructions – they will come to limit themselves to those problems which can be studied by means of such data. The methodological tail will wag the sociological dog, and this is neither natural nor pretty. As the theoretical problem is defined, method appropriate for studying this problem will be developed. (Merton 1950:B436F7)

shown e.g. by Coleman's ideas on macro-to-micro analysis (Coleman 1986, 1990a). But also Merton's own version of levels analysis can be helpful. When you reanalyze other people's research, or when you conduct your own, checking out if all four levels have been included, allows you to spot very quickly what may be missing from an analysis.

In the second half of the class, Merton's focus was on what he termed systematic theorizing. This type of theorizing should be used, he argued, when you train yourself or others in how to handle the basic theoretical approach you want to use in a research project. You should not be training yourself in this type of theorizing when you are in the midst of a study; it has to be done before. It is also crucial to realize that when you engage in systematic theorizing you are dealing with a living body of thought that has developed over a long period of time, not just with single ideas by single authors.

As noted earlier, it is not clear how you teach yourself and others systematic theorizing. How, for example, can students become so knowledgeable that they can deal with a full body of theory as opposed to a few pieces of single theory? Should they dive deeply into the literature of their special area of interest; or is it rather a question of how you look at sociological theory in general? In any case, how do you learn this and how do you teach it?

Was Merton effective in making the students in Soc 213–214 understand and use his ideas and tools of theorizing? It seems to me that Merton's idea of having the students train themselves in theorizing, by working on existing sociological studies, is useful. The traditional approach to studying sociological theory, which is mainly by reading about it, was definitely challenged by his teaching of theorizing. On this point Merton was something of a pioneer, and his ideas deserve praise. He was also the first sociologist, according to what is known today, who singled out the topic of theorizing as a distinct area of knowledge, of study, and of teaching.

Still, one may ask why Merton did not let the students carry out concrete research themselves and use their newly acquired theorizing tools in these? Some of the exercises in Soc 213 could, for example, have included a small piece of exploratory research, a genre we know that Merton used himself. It could also have been possible for the students to complement the paper on the development of a sociological concept in Soc 214 with some minor piece of research, say drawing on the insights of the paper.

Conducting their own research might have made the students in Merton's class better understand what Merton was trying to teach them. You also remember something much better if you do it yourself. Merton was generally considered a brilliant lecturer – “mesmerizing,” “dazzling,” “sometimes almost hypnotic” (Cole 2010, Marsh 2010:112, Coleman 1990c:171; see also e.g. Lipset 1998:262, Stein 2011:134). One of his younger colleagues at Columbia, Hans Zetterberg, has given the following picture of Merton as a lecturer in the 1950s: “He entered [the lecture hall] in a tweed jacket, pipe in the mouth; and then began a brilliant lecture, without any interruptions. He was totally fascinating” (Zetterberg 1995).

But, as Merton was well aware of, being a great lecturer is not the same as being a great teacher. He would later refer to this as the Machlup Paradox; and he wrote at one point, perhaps with himself in mind:

On this view, a good teacher can achieve such lucidity of exposition that students fail to recognize the complexities of the subject, develop a premature sense of having mastered it, and therefore neglect the further intensive study that would have brought them further along. (Merton 1990b:30; Machlup 1979)

It would seem that Merton's preference for the well spoken word sometimes made things *too easy* for his audience. Hans Zetterberg, for example, was, as we just saw, enthusiastic about Merton as a lecturer. But he also felt that once the lecture was over, you wondered what exactly it was that Merton had said: "Some of us – not only students but also faculty – sometimes left [Merton's lectures] and wondered what it was that we had been hearing. They seemed such unbelievably simple things" (Zetterberg 1995).

David Caplovitz, who took Soc 213–214 around 1950, made a similar observation:

I was a notorious late sleeper and missed a number of RKM's lectures. On these occasions, I would arrive just as the class was breaking so that I could find out from my friends what I had missed. The students would burst from the room chatting excitedly, engaged in debates and arguments. I would grab my friends, interrupt their dialogues and shout, "What did he say, what did he say?" They would look at me and exclaim it was the greatest lecture they had ever heard and more impatiently, I would shake them and ask, "What did he say, what did he say?" They would look at me startled and one would finally say something like, "Oh, he said people play social roles." (Caplovitz 1977:142)

Finally, what does the material on theorizing in Soc 213–214 mean for Merton's notion of middle-range sociology? Given that middle-range theory is often viewed as his most important contribution to modern sociology, this represents an important question. One answer is that what Merton has to say on theoretical operations and the need to become aware of one's presuppositions, is very helpful, both in carrying out research of the middle-range kind and when you teach students how to do this. In brief, what Merton was lecturing on in Soc 213–214 adds some body to the notion of middle-range sociology, which is generally seen as being rather thin, very much defined by its opposition to systematic theory (e.g. Hedström and Udehn 2009:27–8).

But there may be more to Merton's course on theorizing than so. The way that Merton approached theorizing also expresses a very interesting view of the role of theory in modern data-based sociology. Merton, to recall, was trying to develop a strategy for what role theory should play in the new type of sociology that was emerging at Columbia University. What characterized this type of sociology were first and foremost the new methods that Lazarsfeld et al. were introducing, and the systematic data that was produced with their help. So from Merton's perspective, the

key question became, as we know: What should be the role of theory in this new type of data-based sociology?

Much of Merton's answer to this question can be found in what he taught in Soc 213–214. The basic goal of this course, to recall, was embodied in its title, which according to Merton had been carefully crafted: "Social Theory Applied to Social Research." The students, as the title indicates, were to learn how to use sociological theory by applying it to empirical data.

During the fall term, as we know, the students were taught how to handle empirical material, with the help of a number of theoretical operations; and in this way start its transformation into sociology. You can, for example, take an empirical generalization, make it more abstract, and then cast its presuppositions in the form of propositions – and by this point you have the beginnings of a sociological theory.

One crucial element, however, was still missing from the fall course, and that was the sociological part: how do you create a *sociological* theory? To remedy this, the focus of Merton's course was shifted from theoretical operations to the nature of sociology during the spring term. If you are also well versed in this type of knowledge, you will be in a position to create sociological theory. Merton, as we know, had a special way of teaching the students what sociology is. The basic ideas in sociology – such as the notion of a group, social structure, social control, and so on – were in his view to be regarded as living bodies of knowledge that the students must engage with in a serious way, in order to absorb and fully master. If they succeeded in doing this, they would be able to draw on sociological ideas in an intuitive way in their research.

During the spring term, with its focus on the nature of sociology, the students received the last part of their education in how to use theory when you confront data. After this, they would in Merton's view be ready to do research on their own; and in this way help to move sociology forward. The role that theory plays now emerges with more clarity than in Merton's own formulations. Its mission was a crucial one. Without theory, Merton was suggesting, you simply do not have sociology. Or to put it differently: *Theory is what turns data into sociology.*

Appendix 1. Three Weekly Assignments in Soc 213, 1949

4910:25 (for following week):

1. List five empirical generalizations drawn from sociology, social psychology, or social anthropology.
2. Write an analysis of the methodological and theoretic status of one of these generalizations, in terms of the questions and considerations raised in the course to date.

4911:01 (for the following week)

1. List three cases of 'sociological problem formation' from the literature.
2. Try to characterize in formal, logical terms, just what is entailed in the statement of a problem. That is, from these cases seek to set out, tentatively,

the components and structures of the statement of a problem. (Be prepared to find that there are ‘types’ of problems, and that they may not all have precisely the same organization).

4911:08

1. List some examples (at least five) of social science ‘tools’ or instruments of research.
2. Indicate some researches in which each of these was used.
3. Consider any one of these tools, and attempt to indicate, with reference to existing researches, what impact, if any, the instrument had upon the empirical and interpretive content of these researches.

Appendix 2. An Assignment in Levels Analysis from Soc 213, 1950

1. Select one of two types of items for analysis:
 - an entire brief journal article, either theoretical or empirical.
 - a brief section (5–10 pages) from any sociological, psychological or anthropological work you wish, whether from our reading lists in this course or any other in which you are doing work.
2. As a first step, underscore and itemize the levels of the variable which appear in your selection. Get a feel for the scope; note if there is a difference between the level of the variables between which empirical relationships are established and the level of the variables introduced to account for the relationship. What happens when a theorist or researcher remains on one level? What happens when a level shift occurs? Raise the question to yourself: what difference would it make to introduce variables from a different level?
3. Then append a few words of comment on to what extent, if any, the use of levels analysis is deemed helpful in such analysis of other people’s work.
4. A note of caution: there is frequently a tendency to use levels as merely a filing system of variables. This should be completely construed as a first step. If it has any merit, it must lie in what happens to your re-interpretation of a study, once the gaps are noted and you attempt to introduce variables from another level.

This is the case just as much in re-working a completed research, as using levels in setting up our own research. For one function of levels analysis, which was not stressed in our list of ‘purposes’ is an important one: that levels analysis may serve as a guidepost in instituting an intellectual problem, – introducing some help at precisely the point when a problem is most unstructured (if the canvas is large) or overly confining (if the study is too narrowly conceived).

Appendix 3. Instructions for the Term Paper in Soc 214, 1951

1. The chief objective is to provide an occasion for each member of the group to work out a systematic and detailed statement of the theoretical and empirical place of an important concept (or conception) in sociological theory.
2. There are many near-prototypes available for the kind of paper here contemplated. Perhaps the most accessible near-counterpart will be found in the separate articles in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, dealing with such concepts, for example, as conformity, consensus, cults, ethnocentrism, folkways, imitation, isolation, social mobility, nepotism, social sanction, status, and so on.
3. Other near-parallels will be found in those social science symposia in which each chapter is devoted to the review and analysis of major concepts or groups of concepts utilized in a subdivision of a field of inquiry (e.g. Twentieth Century Sociology [1945], or the analytical bibliographic articles in the Psychological Bulletin).
4. However, these are only approximations to the types of discussion called for in these papers. They either cover too wide a variety of related conceptions in a relatively sketchy fashion; or focus on very extensive bibliographic summaries, or involve comparatively little theoretical analysis of the concepts under review.
5. Without exaggerating the need for uniformity among the various papers, the limits and content of the course-paper can perhaps be best understood by imagining yourself in the following 'real-life situation':
 - a. You are asked by the editor of the new and revised edition of the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences to contribute an article on one of these subjects (you being free to select the subject).
 - b. There is no fixed limit to the length of the paper – that will depend largely on your estimate of what is required to develop the major theoretical and empirical considerations on the subject. However, it is assumed that, in general, your account will not run beyond 15,000 words.
 - c. You are to assume that your audience is comprised by professional sociologists who will want to turn to your account for an authoritative and critical statement of the given sociological conception, in order to learn (or refresh their knowledge of) the following aspects of it:
 - (1) the emergence of the concept (which may long antedate the emergence of sociology as an academic discipline).
 - (2) the development of the concept as it became incorporated into sociological theory with reference to its changing definition (re-specification of the initial variable). Its linkage with other concepts, continuity and discontinuity in the use of the concept by sociologists.
 - (3) the utilization of the concept in social research of various kinds (those using historical data, comparative sociological data, field materials, etc).
 - (4) your analysis of the interplay between the concept (and other theoretical concepts with which it has been closely associated) and the empirical studies in which it has been put to use, so that your account is not merely a chronological review of its changing meanings, but an analysis of the logical and empirical considerations which apparently led to these changes.

- (5) an indication of the present status of the concept and the respects in which further research and theoretical analysis is, in your judgment, called for.
- d. Throughout it is assumed you will document the foregoing points, and will perhaps end your paper with an annotated bibliography of what you have found to be the major contributions to the subject.
6. It will probably be helpful to draft a fairly detailed outline of your proposed article within four to 6 weeks, the outline to be based on the preliminary work done during this interval. This outline will be discussed with the instructor in the hope that the discussion will sometimes prove useful.
7. The intent of this term-assignment is to provide an opportunity for you to work through a body of literature to determine for yourself the present status of a major sociological conception. As Raymond Pearl³² has said in another though related connection, this kind of work should enable the student to become “really initiated into the realm of scholarship and [to] make contact with the minds that have built the structure whose architecture he must know before he can add his bit to it.”

There is some reason to suppose that this procedure will enable many of you to learn more about the selected concept than the generality of sociologists now know and certainly more than is known by the instructor in the course. Yet despite the concentration of work, the paper is unlike the brief assignments of the first semester which were intended as narrowly defined, technical exercises in sociological theory. The scope of this paper can be comparatively wide within the limits set by time, energy, and the need for thorough and documented analysis of the place of the concept in sociological research and theory.

Sample List of Subjects

The following concepts and subjects are only illustrative. Selection of a subject should be based on your own basic interests in sociology and so far as possible should be linked with some part of your current work (e.g. dissertation, other course papers, current researches). Should you be considering a subject not on this illustrative list, it would be helpful to have you notify Mr. Merton or [course assistant] Mr. Selvin.

- Social isolation.
- Social roles.
- Social relativism of thought.
- Primary and secondary social relationships.
- Social ‘manipulation’ of others.
- Social foundations of mutual trust and distrust (vs integration into group) – pseudo-gemeinschaft.
- Social images.
- The stranger as a social type.
- In-group and out-group formations.
- Division of labor – sociological analysis of.
- Expert and laity relationships.
- Marginal man.
- Divided loyalties, cross-pressures, conflicting roles, multiple group membership.

³² Raymond Pearl (1879–1940), American biologist.

Self-images.
Sociological analysis of a “calling”.
Group solidarity.
Interplay of institutional norms and motivation.
Alienation and estrangement.
The concept of ethos.
Institutionalized evasions of institutional norms: mores and counter-mores.
Interplay of formal structure and informal structure.
Reference groups.
Systems of social theory and theories of the middle range.
The concept of social dysfunction.
Conventionalization (the etiquette of social relations).
Cultural lag.
Self-interested and disinterested behavior.
“Human nature”.
Cultural consistency and inconsistency.
Authority.
Social cohesion.
Anomie.
Organizational needs.
Residential mobility.
Social equilibrium.
Life-chances.
Age stratification.
“The strainer” (“climber”, mobility-oriented).
Social distance.
Group morale.
Definition of the situation (humanistic coefficient).
False consciousness.
Social perception.
Secularization.
Unanticipated consequences of organized social action.
Wertbeziehung [value relevance] (in connection with selection of research problems).

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