

Theory as text or theory as activities?

Abstract

In this article, which was delivered as a keynote address at the annual meeting of the Swedish Sociological Association on March 16, 2022 in Uppsala, the following argument is made. Two different approaches to theory in sociology are presented and discussed: *theory as text* and *theory as activities*. In the former, theory is seen as embodied in a text, and the focus is squarely on its content. Little attempt is made in the text to discuss how the theory was actually developed and how to use it. In theory as activities, in contrast, the main focus is on how to work with a theory in a concrete manner. The basic unit of analysis is here not just the theory, but the theory as part of the research process. Theory, method and facts are all linked together in this process and partly overlap. A number of activities that *precede* the publication of a theory as well as *come after* are also explored. The concluding pages contain a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages that come with working with each of the two views of theory.

Keywords: theory, activity, text, theorizing, fact-laden, writing, printing

THE WAY THAT theory is understood and used in sociology has been much criticized over the years. One common critique is that the term theory has several different meanings, another that there exists a huge gap between theory and facts (e.g. Merton 1945, 1968; Goldthorpe 1997; Abend 2008). The point of departure for the discussion in this paper is different. It starts from an elementary and somewhat trivial fact, namely that when sociologists refer to theory, they often have a written statement in mind, in the form of an article or a book. The text in these is treated as the very embodiment of the theory, not so different from the way that a literary text represents the goal and end product of the work by an author. This way of looking at theory, which will be referred to as *theory as text*, is problematic in several respects; and it is contrasted to the view of theory as sets of interconnected activities or, in short, *theory as activities*. The main focus here is on the practical ways in which theory is used and how it can be used, with the primary unit being the research process. This approach emphasizes the importance of helping the analyst to handle a theory so it can be used more effectively in research. From this perspective, there exist no sharp boundaries between theory, method and facts; these are instead seen as overlapping and to some extent also as part of one another.

The perspective of theory as activities has as its primary goal to be useful and prac-

tical. The notion of theory in this approach includes not only what Gilbert Ryle calls *knowledge-that* but also *knowledge-how* or, to use the terminology of cognitive science, not only *declarative knowledge* but also *procedural knowledge* (Ryle 2009[1949]; Pavese 2021).¹ The approach of theory as text, in contrast, is squarely focused on *knowledge-that* or *declarative knowledge*.

Theory as text

It is not clear what the term theory exactly refers to in modern sociology. *Suicide* by Durkheim, is for example often regarded as a suitable text for a theory class (Durkheim 2002[1897]). Other works with interesting theories are, say, *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* by Weber (2001[1905]) and *Distinction* by Pierre Bourdieu (1986[1979]). Or, to mention a few articles that may be used in a theory class: “Culture in action” by Ann Swidler (1986) and “How population structure shapes neighborhood segregation” by Elizabeth Bruch (2014).² There also exist a number of popular readers and textbooks in theory (e.g. Coser 1977; Benzecry, Krause & Reed 2017; Ritzer & Stepinsky 2018; Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody *et al.* 2022).

Even if works in theory are of many different types, they nonetheless all have one thing in common; and that is that they all take the form of *written and published statements*. Theory is embodied or incarnated in a published text; and it usually comes to its most clear and full expression towards the end of the work. In the approach of theory as text, what counts is what is in the text.

What can be found in a text and what is excluded from a text has, however, much to do with the development of two crucial technologies, *writing* and *printing*; and it is therefore helpful to start with a brief discussion of these. Since the shape and content of sociological theory has also been influenced by various norms for what a scientific article or book should look like, this needs to be discussed as well.

For a brief presentation of the technologies of writing and printing, a short historical detour is needed. This detour takes its beginning in Greece in the 8th century BC, when the modern alphabet was introduced which made it possible to read and write in an easy manner. The invention of printing took place in the 1400s, something that helped reading and writing to spread much more widely in society. It also led to several

1 From an epistemological viewpoint, the main perspective in this paper is that of sociologists in the act of doing research, including working with theory. An interesting discussion of the differences between practice, on one hand, and the theory of practice, on the other, can be found in *The logic of practice* by Pierre Bourdieu (1990[1980]:80–97; see also Bourdieu 1987). It is here argued that “all practical logic can only be grasped in action”, and that “the practical relation to practice” differs from “the theoretical view of practice” (Bourdieu 1990[1980]:81, 92).

2 It is not clear if it is more common for discussions of theory in sociology to take the form of articles or books. In sociology as a whole, articles are considerably more common than books (the ratio for books to articles, as recorded in the Web of Science during 2000–2015, was 0.61; see Qian 2015). For a discussion of the different ways in which a book versus an article gets accepted and published, see e.g. Clemens, Powell, McIlwaine *et al.* 1995; Stark 2019.

other important changes in people's ways of reading, writing and thinking. In short, even if sociology did not emerge until the 1800s, the form that it took at this time was deeply influenced by events that had taken place several centuries earlier.

By the 8th century BC the modern alphabet or the so-called Greek alphabet had just been invented and was beginning to be used. Its appearance represents a momentous event in human history, which has been much investigated and discussed by philosophers, anthropologists and literary scholars, but not by sociologists (e.g. Goody & Watt 1963; Eisenstein 1979; Ong 1982; Goody 1987; Olson 1994). The idea of having a letter stand for a sound led to a simple and precise way of writing and reading, compared to, say, using symbols that stand for objects and events. And when the Greeks came up with the idea of adding the notion of vowels to an earlier form of a letter-based alphabet, an alphabet that was very easy to use became for the first time available.

That people from now on could use written words, and not have to exclusively rely on spoken utterances, was to be of enormous importance for the development of Western culture and society. The technology of writing deeply affected people's memory, their way of communication, and their capacity to manipulate and work with the content of written texts. Habits of thinking were also influenced. All of this, it can be added, would be of great importance for the development of science, including the social sciences, many centuries later.

The capacity to remember increased in a dramatic way with the invention of writing. Precise records could now be kept that were easily consulted in areas such as commerce, legal affairs, philosophy and more. Writing also made it possible to know more about the past and to produce historical accounts. Communication between people changed dramatically as well. You could from now on "talk" to people who were further away than your voice carried; you could even address people who were not yet born. And when you were dead, what you had written would still be alive.

Another seminal effect of writing was that it allowed the reader to carefully inspect what had been written and work on it. This made it easier to carry out much more complex analyses than had been possible in an oral culture, to further develop logic, and to work with concepts. In *Orality and literacy*, which is a standard work on the transition from an oral culture to a script culture, Walter Ong writes as follows,

All thought, including that in primary oral cultures, is to some degree analytic: it breaks its materials into various components. But abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths is impossible without writing and reading. Human beings in primary oral cultures, those untouched by writing in any form, learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not "study". (Ong 1982:8–9)

The positive effects of the technology of writing that now came into existence were clearly immense. But there were also those who pointed to the drawbacks that come with writing; and they included Plato and Socrates. In *Phaedrus* several arguments against writing are presented by Socrates (Plato 1997a:551–553/275–276; see also Plato

1997b:1658–1660/340–341; Havelock 1963). One of these has to do with the negative effect of writing on your memory. It was no longer necessary to remember everything you considered important; you could just write it down and access it when needed. But as Socrates pointed out, what is not in your mind, is not available to think about.

Socrates also likened a text to a painting which you can look at but which cannot talk back. While you can have a dialogue with a person, this is not possible with a text; a piece of writing is and remains silent. Finally, Socrates noted that it is difficult to give directions in writing for how to do things. If you want to learn something really well, say a craft, you need to interact with people, study how they do things, ask them questions, and so on.

Writing and reading were very slow to spread throughout society; and they did not start to do so on a major scale until some time after the invention of the printing press in the 15th century. The pioneering work on the huge impact of printing on Western culture is *The printing press as an agent of change* by historian Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979; see also e.g. Eisenstein 2005; Cavallo & Chartier 1997; Hudson 2002; Burke 2015:89–91). Just as sociologists have shown little interest in the transition from an oral culture to a script culture, however, they have not paid much attention to the transition from a script culture to a print culture (but see e.g. Merton 1965a, 1980:2–4; Leed 1982). The reason for this is presumably the same, namely it occurred several centuries before sociology came into being.

It seems that the invention of printing was nearly as momentous for the development of human culture as the invention of writing. Printed material now began to replace manuscripts as the main depository for thoughts and ideas. The kind of handwritten manuscripts that had been used up till now were both very expensive and only existed in a few copies. The text in each of these was also a bit different, since it was impossible to make a perfect copy of a text by hand.

While manuscripts were expensive and could only be found in monasteries, private collections and the like, printed books were both much cheaper and more accessible. That an author from now on could make money and gain status by publishing also led to a quick increase in the production of printed texts on traditional as well as new topics. The invention of intellectual property rights, which came some time later, shows the economic importance of certain printed material.

Scientists benefitted from printing in several ways. It made it possible for them to keep exact records of their observations; it also facilitated their access to the works of other scientists. Learning by reading grew in importance; and cross-references soon became common in scientific works. According to Eisenstein, “[p]owers of calculation and abstraction were sharpened by access to printed materials [and] new imaginative and sympathetic faculties were also brought into play” (Eisenstein 1979:150).

Many new words came into being after the invention of printing. The term “observation”, for example, started to be used by scientists in the 1600s (e.g. Pomata 2011). At around the same time the modern meaning of the term “theory” also emerged (e.g. Wootton 2015:394–399). While this term had earlier referred to the contemplation of truth, it now increasingly began to refer to the effort to investigate and understand

specific phenomena.³ Printing, in brief, played an important role in the development of the scientific revolution; and this goes both for its terminology and the new ways to do research that now emerged.

If we now leave the history of writing and printing, and return to today's social theory, we find that what happened in the change from an oral culture to a print culture, is also relevant for the way sociology and other social sciences developed. Some of these changes are institutional in nature, while others are of a different kind. As an example of the former, one can mention the transformations that the economy and education went through, and which are unthinkable without the technologies of writing and printing. It is often noted that sociology emerged together with the industrial revolution or, more precisely, with the social changes that it brought about. The history of sociology is also closely related to the emergence of the research university, which took place in the latter half of the 1800s.

Some of the changes that were caused by the invention of writing and printing have also had an effect on the ways in which sociologists work and carry out their analyses. Observation, for example, is central not only to the natural sciences but also to sociology; and it is deeply affected by what happens when the experiences of a person are expressed in written form. These experiences have now to be translated into words, according to the conventions of writing. This is true for impressions of the senses as well as for emotions, gestures and body language (e.g. Paul 2021). Tacit knowledge represents another serious challenge for a writer, not to mention the unconscious (e.g. Polanyi 1966).

The difficulty of getting all of these experiences onto paper without losing too much of their content, or adding too much new content, is obvious. This difficulty increases sharply when you not only attempt to translate what goes on in your own mind into a written form, but also what goes on in the mind of others, something that is common in sociological research. The same can be said for the element of meaning, which is hard both to conceptualize and record, and which is central to sociology (as in the concept of social action, defined as behavior invested with meaning; Weber 1978[1921]:4–24).

Beyond what has just been said about the general impact on sociology of writing as a technology, there also exists another factor that has deeply influenced the way in which theory is presented in a sociological text. This is that during the 1900s norms were developed for what a publishable text in sociology should look like, just as norms had earlier developed in this respect for scientific articles (e.g. Zuckerman & Merton 1971, Suppe 1998; see Table 1). Theory, methods and facts must according to these

3 In all brevity, the original Greek meaning of the term *theoria* emphasizes contemplation of reality and wisdom; there also existed an early institution with this name. In the notion of theory, as used by Bacon, Boyle and some others during the Scientific Revolution, the focus was more on the active search for knowledge. For the concept of theory in ancient Greece, see e.g. Nightingale 2004; and for the notion of theory that emerged with the Scientific Revolution, see e.g. Wootton 2015:394-99; Klein & Gigliani 2020.

norms be presented in a special way in a sociological article. To just present empirical facts is, for example, not accepted; these should be analyzed with the help of a theory and also be produced with the help of reliable methods in a documented way.

Table 1. The structure of a scientific article

- A. Abstract
- B. Introduction
- C. Theoretical Background
- D. Methods (Experimental or Observational Techniques, Samples, Data Analysis)
- E. Results or Observations
- F. Discussion
- G. Summary/Conclusions
- H. Acknowledgments
- I. References
- J. Appendices

Comment: While the scientific article has its origins in publications in the 1600s, such as *Journal des sçavans* (France) and *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (England), “it was in the hundred years following the French Revolution that scientific practitioners began to perceive the existence of a single, cohesive-enough genre – the scientific paper – as the chief avenue by which to make the results of their research into public knowledge claims” (Csiszar 2018:4; see also e.g. Zuckerman & Merton 1971). Source: Suppe (1998:383).

To cast the result of sociological research, including its theoretical part, in the form of a text for a scientific journal can be both difficult and painful, as indicated by the existence of manuals on how to write for sociology students (e.g. Becker 2007[1986]; Abbott 2014:201–218; Edwards 2015; Smith-Lovin & Moskovitz 2016; Collins 2019).

The process of writing can also be hard for professional sociologists. Weber, for example, complained bitterly about his “struggle to get [my ideas] onto paper” and basically experienced scholarly writing as a form of “torture” (Weber 2012:586; cf. Radkau 2008:15–16, 2009:98). It was in his view extra hard to write in moments of creativity, when it feels like “everything flows” (Weber 2012:586).

Something else also happens when you sit down to write a scientific article; and this is that quite a bit of what happened during the research must be left out. This has been known for a long time; and already in the 1930s Hans Reichenbach suggested that there is an important difference between what he termed the context of discovery and the context of justification (Reichenbach 1938). The former refers to the way in which a discovery is made, and the latter to the way in which you need to present your findings to your scholarly peers. This presentation, it can be added, is typically done in writing.

Since most studies do not result in a major discovery, it may be preferable in this paper to use the related but slightly different terminology of context of research and context of presentation. Merton writes, for example, in *Social theory and social structure*

that there is 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. [...] Typically, the scientific paper or monograph presents an immaculate appearance which reproduces little or nothing of the intuitive leaps, false starts, mistakes, loose ends, and happy accidents that actually cluttered up the inquiry” (Merton 1968:4).

That there exists a clear difference between the way in which research is presented in a publication, and how it takes place in reality, has also been noted by researchers in several disciplines (e.g. Schickore 2008). If we stick to recent sociology, especially Bourdieu has drawn attention to this fact. Like Merton, he has pointed out that if you want to describe “*how research work is actually carried out*” you need to “include all the false starts, the wavering, the impasses, the renunciations, and so on” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:220; emphasis in text). This is usually not done in sociological writings; and as a result, Bourdieu notes, “there is something deceptive about finished texts” (Bourdieu 2002:193).

There also exist quite a few other activities that sociologists engage in but do not include in their texts, and which neither Merton nor Bourdieu mention. This is especially true for some of the more technical activities that are part of theorizing, such as attempts to make changes in concepts, work with categories, and try out different explanations. All references to creativity are also excluded from the standard article in sociology. One consequence of this is that readers are prevented from learning about the creativity that went into a study.

There also exist some other oddities about a printed text that are relevant for an understanding of the problems that come with seeing theory primarily as a text. One of these is that once a text has been published, it cannot be changed; it will continue to have exactly the same content whatever happens after publication. Writing, as Bourdieu has put it, is in this respect an “instrument of eternization” (Bourdieu 1990[1980]:83). A published text is so to speak frozen; it remains the same, word for word, section for section, and page for page. The author and the world, on the other hand, change as time goes by.

Usually many drafts are produced before a text is ready for publication; and their content can vary quite a bit. Some of the changes in the various drafts are made by the author on her own initiative, while others are the result of comments by reviewers, editors and publishers. As one draft replaces another, the earlier one is typically discarded and thereby lost for good. All of the material produced during the research is eventually disposed of and only one thing remains: the printed work.

Because of the high value that is placed on the version of the text that is finally published, as being the one and true version of what the author *really* wants to say, it should be pointed out that it can be somewhat arbitrary which version actually gets published. Several factors play a role in this process. Some scholars have, for example, great difficulty in deciding that a manuscript is ready for publication, while others are much too quick (e.g. Becker 2007[1986]:121–135). There is also the so-called itch to publish which has a dynamic of its own (Merton 1965b:83–85, 1976:46). And again, other actors than the author are involved in the decision when a paper or book

is accepted for publication. The version that ends up being chosen and “eternalized” through print is in other words often a bit of a patch work.

One can also use a stronger word and say with Bourdieu that a published article is to some extent deceptive (similarly Merton 1976:239–240). In the interview where he made this statement, Bourdieu says that to counter this, he has since 1980 tried *not* to have as a goal to produce a flawless version of a text before sending it off to press. Instead he has tried to preserve the character of a draft also in the version that goes into print:

The principal virtue of the logic of “the draft” [*brouillon*] is that it allows you to avoid the effect of closure that is characteristic of certain very worked-through texts. The latter makes all the traces of the work disappear and makes the text look definitive and finished. (Bourdieu 2002:197–198)

Bourdieu adds that as an editor of *Actes de la Recherche* he has tried to make the content of the articles follow “the logic of the draft” (Bourdieu 2002:198).

According to scholarly norms, articles cannot be changed once they have been published, while a new edition of a book is often a possibility. Giving the complexity of making changes in a long text, however, many authors make only a few changes or add a new preface. This also makes things easier for the publisher, whose role in producing an “eternalized text” should not be forgotten.

It is clear that there are several drawbacks to the version of a theory that appears in a printed text. One of these is that quite a bit of material from the research process have been left out, something that makes the theory harder to understand and make sense of. This tendency is strengthened by other factors, such as the general aura of finality, serenity and completeness that surrounds a printed text.

Because of the omitted material, the theory also becomes harder to use. The fact that a realistic picture has not been given of how the theory came into existence, makes it harder to see why its author ended up by focusing on some problems while others were avoided. The aura of finality that was just mentioned, can also have an intimidating effect; nothing more seems left to say on the topic. More generally, the current norms for how a theory should be presented, do not encourage a discussion of how to use a theory in practice.

The third negative effect of viewing theory as a text, is that it makes it harder to teach it to students. These are often just given a list of books and articles to read, without much instruction for how to proceed. To some extent this is bound to be a disorienting experience, not least since this way of learning theory is usually presented as perfectly natural. The fact that exercises are not used in most theory classes (as opposed to how methods are taught), also increases the difficulty for students to get a good grip on a theory so they can use it in their own thinking and research.

To exaggerate a bit, one can say that when sociological theory comes in a published form, it has been squeezed into a box and lost much of its natural form as well as vigor. The question that arises is then the following: can this be avoided and if so, how? If the alternative is to rely oral material and unpublished texts of different kinds, it is clearly worse. So what can be done?

How to get out of the box: Theory as activities?

An alternative to treating theory as text, which will now be presented, is to look at it as a number of special activities. From this viewpoint, theory is primarily understood as something that you do and not just as a statement in a text. At its core, theory is seen as part of the activities people engage in when they conduct research. In this sense theory is similar to methods and facts, which also they can be seen as activities that are embedded in the process of research. It is also collective in nature, even if research is conducted by individuals. Some people propose the theory, others check it, add to it, shoot it down and so on.

As the earlier account of the inventions of writing and printing has shown, sociology and the texts sociologists produce are also affected by activities that have taken place in the past. The notion of activities that will be used in this paper also includes activities that happen *after* a sociological theory has appeared. As will be discussed later in this paper, the type of research that sociologists produce after some work has appeared will affect the meaning of the theory as well as its importance.

The basic unit of analysis in the perspective of theory as activities is, to repeat, the research process. This has a number of consequences, one of which is the following. Just as it has been argued that facts are “theory-laden”, one can say that theory is “fact-laden” (Hansen 1958; see also e.g. Kuhn 1962:119 ff.; Cartwright 2020:278–280). That facts are theory-laden means that they are not just given, but that an element of interpretation is always involved when something is observed. The reason for saying that theory is “data-laden” is to point out that a theory is linked to facts in essential ways and cannot be conceptualized without their help. For one thing, a theory has its origin in certain facts; a theory is always about something. Fact of a different type also need to be collected and analyzed for a theory in sociology to keep its status as a useful theory.

To give an example, Marx’s theory of class struggle is linked in its origin to a certain type of facts, namely the social conflicts in 19th century Europe. When this theory is used in research, a method has also to be chosen that can locate and pull out the kind of facts that go with the category of “class” as well as “class struggle”. Since class consciousness is also part of Marx’s concept of class, the method in this particular case should also be able to pick out the kind of facts that make up this type of consciousness.

Theory in social science is from this perspective directly linked to method and facts or more precisely, these three overlap and are part of one another.⁴ This argument does

⁴ Methods can also be seen as activities in several other senses (e.g. Cartwright & Runhardt 2014). For one thing, they are the result of inventive activities, such as the ones that, say, Galton engaged in when he discovered regression analysis (for a history of sociology that emphasizes the innovative element in sociological methods, see e.g. Goldthorpe 2021). Once a method has been invented, it will be used; and this obviously constitutes another type of activity. For an account of some other activities that the use of a method may entail, see the helpful work of Erin Leahey (e.g. 2008).

not say that a theory text somehow consists of activities, beyond the activities that went into its creation. A text is decidedly not an activity. It does, however, suggest that it is helpful for the researcher to conceptualize a theory, in a text or not, as having a potential for engaging in certain activities.

The argument about potential activities is also supported by the fact that by virtue of being general in nature, a theory can be used to analyze a number of new situations (e.g. Braithwaite 1953:50–87; Blau 1997:xiv–xxiii). It should be pointed out that an element of uncertainty is also involved when it comes to this type of potential activities, since it is impossible to know in advance what will happen when a theory is applied to a new situation. The theory can be confirmed or refuted, but it may also end up by being improved in some way.

If we now leave the topic of potential activities and instead turn to concrete activities, it is clear that a published theory is also the result of some theoretical activities that are not spelled out in the published text, such as developing and working with concepts, categories, the explanation, and so on. This type of activities are usually quite complex and deserve more attention than they have so far received in sociology.

Take, for example, the very idea of a concept, which was discovered in ancient Greece and is the result of activities in the following sense (Weber 1917:141). When a word is spoken in a conversation, it is simply a sound in a stream of sounds that conveys a particular content, say the word “cat” in the statement “my cat is lying on the rug”. A word can however become a concept as the result of a specific activity, namely if the focus is redirected from being on the full (specific) statement to the general meaning of a particular sound or word (say “cat”).

A sociological concept is created through a similar kind of activity, with the difference being that the concept now also has to be grounded in sociological theory, say by being linked to the notion of social action. For some examples of how this can be done, see Chapter 1 in *Economy and society* by Weber (“Basic sociological terms” in Weber 1978[1921]:3–62, 2019[1921]:77–142).

It is, however, far more common to add to an existing sociological concept than to create a new one from scratch; and this represents another type of activity (reconceptualization). To simply use an existing concept in an analysis, as opposed to create a new one, or add to one, represents yet another type of activity. This can be done in different ways. You may for example simply use a concept as a first step in an analysis, to zoom in on some phenomenon, and in this way get a better handle on it. A sensitizing concept operates in this way; an ideal type can also be used for this purpose (e.g. Blumer 1954; Weber 1978[1921]:19–22).

The central notion in the alternative view of theory that is now being discussed is that of *activity*. This term refers approximately to an action that is mentally directed at some specific task and includes the element of meaning, being in this sense similar to the notion of action in Weber’s interpretive sociology. Some of our thoughts, in Descartes’ formulation, are “actions of the soul” (Descartes 1649:335). There is typically also a creative dimension to an activity since things are always a

little bit different and therefore demand a new response from the actor.⁵ Activities, it should be added, can either be manual or mental, and are often a bit of both.

The reason for saying that an activity *approximately* stands for a certain type of action, is simply to avoid presenting a formal definition, which can be helpful when a new term is introduced. A formal definition may give the reader a feeling that no more work is needed to specify the term; and this is not the case here. Nonetheless, a first sketch can be supplied.

The term activity as used in this paper is close to that of practice. The reason for not using the latter is that it is already well established in the social science literature, something that makes it less suitable for being used in a different context and for a different purpose (e.g. Bourdieu 1977[1972], 1990; Giddens 1984; for a critique see Turner 1994). Practice also tends to cover many different kinds of activities in one big swoop rather than single them out individually, which is preferable when you look at them from a theoretical-practical perspective.

The current notion of practice in social science is also often equated with the concept of rules; and has in addition difficulties to incorporate the notion of creativity (e.g. Pickering 1992; Lynch 1997; Knorr Cetina 2001; Soler, Zwart, Lynch *et al.* 2014). The failure to deal with creativity is important since one of the advantages with the idea of theory as activities is precisely that it assigns a central place to creativity. A theory is used to address a new situation and tie things together in a new way; it also makes it possible to understand a phenomenon in a new way. To cite Peter Blau, “[a]t the core of a theory [...] is a creative insight” (Blau 1979:107).

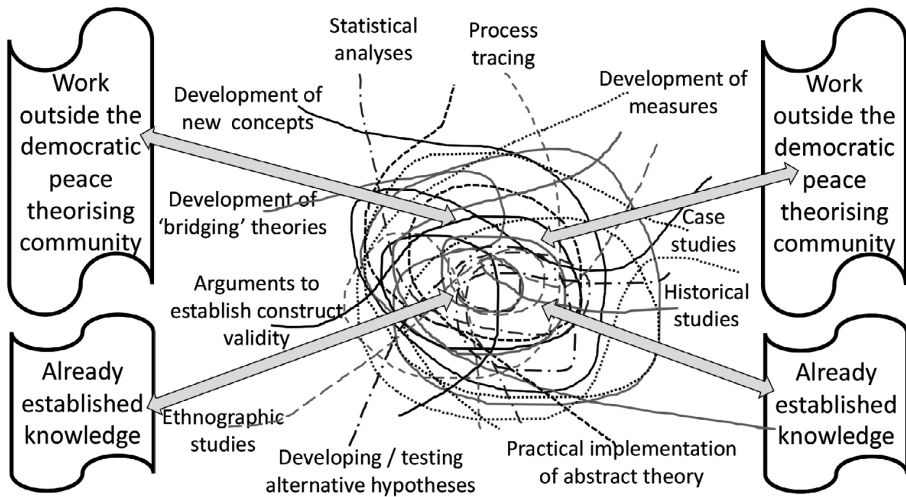
It is sometimes helpful to use a new name for a phenomenon that is very similar or even identical to some other phenomenon that already has a name. The reason for this, as Bourdieu points out, is the following: “by giving different names to an identical operation of institution, a number of obstacles to systematic thinking caused by the fact that each word operates in a separate semantic field can be eliminated; substituting one word for another is an important research technique that often leads to progress” (Bourdieu 2018:80).

Keeping what has just been said in mind, it is of course also possible to express the idea of theory as a set of activities by using the term practice, as long as it is properly specified. This can be illustrated by the work of Nancy Cartwright, a philosopher of science who for a long time has been interested in the nature of theory. In an important article on social science from 2020 she argues that “[t]heory is not a set of propositions, nor a set of models, nor anything of that ilk. It is [...] *a rich set of interlocking practices*. (Cartwright 2020:278; emphasis added).

5 I here follow the arguments of Descartes and Chomsky on the diversity of human action, as indicated by the individual’s use of language. What Descartes says on this point can be found in *Discourse on method*; and what Chomsky says, in *Cartesian linguistics* (Descartes 1637:73–74; Chomsky 1966:1–33). In Chomsky’s formulation, “the diversity of human behaviour, its appropriateness to new situations, and man’s capacity to innovate” is indicated by “the creative aspect of language use” (Chomsky 1966:6). The idea of linking creativity to situations (and actions) can also be found in *The creativity of action* by Hans Joas (1997). Joas, however, bases his argument squarely on sociology and does not refer on this point along the lines of Descartes and Chomsky.

As examples of such practices (or activities, in the terminology of this paper) Cartwright mentions “development of new concepts”, “development of measures for these concepts”, “testing of alternative hypotheses”, “process tracing”, and quite a bit more (Cartwright 2020:312–313).⁶ She also argues that when work on some topic has developed over a period of time, the practices involved form into “a thick tangle” (see Figure 1). With this term Cartwright also gives an expression to the collective dimension of the notion of theory as practices.

Figure 1. Theory as interconnected sets of practices (Nancy Cartwright)



Comment: To illustrate her argument that theory can be conceptualized as sets of interconnected practices, Nancy Cartwright uses the example of democratic peace theory (DPT) or the notion that democracies do not go to war with each other. Source: Cartwright (2020:312–319), reprinted in accordance with the licence CC BY 4.0. The figure is made by John Pemberton.

If we now leave the philosophy of science and return to sociology, it can be pointed out that several sociologists have developed ideas about theory that go well with the perspective of theory as a set of activities, even if they do not use this terminology nor have pushed their ideas all the way in this direction. Merton speaks, for example, of “theory work” and gave during many years a pioneering course in “theorizing”; Dietrich Rueschemeyer advocates working with “theory frames”; Michael Burawoy

⁶ For more on Cartwright’s ideas on theory as interconnected sets of practices, see e.g. Cartwright, Shomar & Suárez 1995 (and for some earlier work along similar lines in the philosophy of science, e.g. Hacking 1992).

speaks of “living theory”; and Eviatar Zerubavel of “generic theorizing” (e.g. Merton 1968, Rueschemeyer 2009, Burawoy 2021, Zerubavel 2021). There also exist a number of sociologists who have engaged in “theory construction”, especially during the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Stinchcombe 1968; Mullins 1971; Smelser 1971; Zhao 1996, Markovsky 2008). The concept of theory that is used here comes however from logical positivism, which means that theory is portrayed as a set of verbal propositions that are logically interrelated. Little attention, in addition, is paid to sociological practice and how theories are actually developed and used in research.

The sociologist, however, who may have come the closest to argue that it is helpful to view theory as a set of activities, is Pierre Bourdieu. Many suggestive and original ideas along these lines can be found in his work, for example in his discussion of classification struggles and how theory should be taught in the so-called Paris Workshop (e.g. Bourdieu 2018; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:216–260).

Much can be learned from Bourdieu’s ideas on these and related topics. What ultimately separates his view from the perspective advocated in this paper, however, is the following. This is that for Bourdieu theory is primarily a question of habitus, not of activities (e.g. Brubaker 1993). While the concept of habitus is centered around the disposition to act, that of activities refers to specific and concrete ways of acting which need to be spelled out and discussed. It is similar to the notion of cognitive skills in psychology, in the sense that these too refer to a number of separate activities, such as reasoning, remembering, visual processing, and so on (e.g. Reisberg 2013).

If metaphorically speaking the viewpoint of theory as a text tends to squeeze theory into a box, how can we get it out of the box and set theory free? There are several ways to proceed, each of which goes some way in this direction. One is to approach and read a theory text in a different way, primarily by focusing on the way in which it portrays the research process and, as part of this, how theory is linked to method and facts. There is also the fact that some of the information about the way in which the research was actually carried out, is not included in the published text but can be retrieved, and in this way add to the usefulness of the theory. Finally, not only some of the activities that *precede* the publication of a text can be taken into account when you want to get a concrete handle on a theory in a text, but also some of the activities that *come after* its publication.

Each of these three ways to approach a theory text and read it in a different way needs some brief explication. First, in the perspective of theory as activities the basic unit is, to repeat, the research process in a broad sense; and this means that one should look at theory, methods and facts in a special way when an article or a book is read. These must not be seen as separate and isolated from one another, but rather as activities that often overlap and are part of one another. By viewing a written text in this manner, its theory part is re-embedded in concrete activities and appears in a different light.

Second, in reading an article or a book from the perspective of activities it is also helpful to make use of some of the material that did *not* end up in the text. From statements by Merton and Bourdieu, we know that some of the ways in which research

is actually conducted are left out from what ends up in the published text. This includes some of the activities that precede the writing up of a theory for publication and often goes under the name of theorizing. Examples are activities such as creating the research object, working with concepts and categories, naming the phenomenon, and more (e.g. Swedberg 2014). Some of this material can with some luck be found in other publications by the author, in interviews, archival material and so on. With its help, a theory in a text can become fuller, easier to understand and easier to use in research.⁷

Some of the skills that go into theorizing are also part of what can be called tacit knowledge and do not get recorded by definition (e.g. Bourdieu 2004[2002]:37–44). The same is true for presuppositions, which also they need to be spelled out by the researcher to get a better handle on a theory. Something similar is true for a number of other factors that influence the production of a work. Like everybody else, sociologists are, for example, deeply affected in their ways of thinking, acting and feeling by the society in which they live as well as by politics and more.

Also conversations with colleagues may influence the way a theory turns out, but are rarely mentioned in publications; and the same is true for what happens at conferences. To this one can add the role of so-called oral publications or the kind of insights that are announced during a lecture or in class, but do not take the form of a printed publication. In some cases these may lead to ordinary publications, as was the case with Merton who also coined the term (Merton 1980, 1998; Merton & Persell 1984). When this is the case, however, their history is not mentioned.

There exist many variations of each of the activities that have just been mentioned and also of some similar activities. In discussing the role of oral discourse in academia, for example, Merton has noted that it can take several different forms (Merton 1980). You can, for example, lecture, mentor, participate in seminars, engage with others in a research organization, and so on; and all of these activities may be part of what becomes a theory.

The number of activities that make up a research project is large indeed; and it becomes even larger when the focus switches to research in a broad sense. Besides the activities that have already been mentioned, there is, for example, the immediate context as well as influences of society at large and of history, all of which to a certain extent can be understood as activities.

And there is more. Some activities that are part of the production of a theory are also influenced by the personality of the researcher. While the role of personality would seem to belong to the area of psychology, it is clear that theoretical activities are always carried out by single individuals. Since the focus of this article is practical in nature, the personality of the researcher is of importance also for this reason; while the issue of what belongs to the discipline of psychology or to that of sociology is less so. To give

7 Bourdieu refers to the attempt by some social scientists to describe earlier research as a “retrospective illusion” (Bourdieu 2020:3). There is some obvious truth to this statement. Still, accounts of this type often contain information that is very helpful for the perspective of theory as activities; see e.g. Hammond (1964), Whyte (1993), Vaughan (2004).

an example, someone with a bold personality as opposed to a more restrained one, may react quite differently to what kind of theory to use.

There are also some activities that take place *after* the publication of an article or a book that will affect the theory. The very first activity that someone has to engage in who is interested in an article or book, is to read it. A text only becomes words and sentences with a meaning when it is read by a person; before this it is just some dots on pieces of paper or on a computer screen. And to read a scientific text is, as we know, a complex activity; you have to interpret the content, single out what is important, lay bare the theory, and quite a bit more.

Some sociologists have realized the importance of teaching students how to read a sociological text and typically do so in an informal manner (e.g. Krippner 2000; Detering 2011; Abbott 2014:129–141; Wacquant n.d.). What is said in this type of instructions is often helpful but two points are rarely made. One is that reading the theory part in an article or book is quite different from reading the other parts and also demands its own set of skills (for exceptions, see e.g. Ekegren 1999; Abbott 2014:135–140). Another point is of a more general nature, namely that it is impossible to come up with *the* correct interpretation of a theory, an illusion that most sociologists are well aware of but which nonetheless is hard to get rid of (e.g. Ogden & Richards 1989:9–10).

There is also the fact that even if the act of reading constitutes an activity of a special type, it is not necessarily also the time when the content of a text is understood and its implications become clear. It is, for one thing, often thanks to activities that take place *after* you have read a text that makes you absorb it; say by closing the book and thinking about some special point or by going back to the text to study your underlinings. Some of the ideas you pick up when reading a text also work a bit like a time release capsule; the effect comes a bit later.

Every sociologist has also to relate to the tradition of sociology; and this involves certain activities as well. It is true that a tradition primarily refers to activities in the past and by others, but the works and insights that make up the tradition also have to be kept alive today (through activities such as study, teaching, consolidation of contemporary research findings, and so on). Theories that are totally new do not exist; a theory always draws on works of the past.

As the sociological tradition develops and changes, so do the meaning of the activities it describes. To read, say, *Suicide* in 1897 (the year it appeared in France), in 1951 (the year of the first English translation), or today, is to read slightly different studies, which suggest somewhat different activities for the sociologist. Durkheim's theory of integration, for example, has changed and will continue to change with research on this topic. It is also clear that a complex study such as *Suicide* has a theory that can be taken in many directions. It has, for example, not only resulted in research on integration, but also on suicide, deviance and anomie.

Note also that the kind of tradition that exists today in sociology is primarily based on published texts, something that is troublesome for several reasons. One is that quite a bit of useful information has been excluded from these texts; another that the

room for arbitrary interpretations increases. One way to counter this would be to try to recover some of the material that has been excluded, another to consult work in the history of sociology, history of science, and so on.

Much of what has been said in this paper so far may give the impression that the activities that make up a theory are carried out by a single person. Much space has been devoted to the way that the individual sociologist engages in various theoretical activities as part of her research, such as developing concepts, changing categories, and the like. This, however, only accounts for one part of the activities that produce a theory; a theory, to repeat, always has a collective dimension in the sense that it is the result of the activities of many people.

It is also clear that the individual sociologist herself is part of a collective, whether she actively participates in one or not. Students of practice have developed the notion of communities of practice, and one can perhaps in an analogous fashion speak of communities of activities (e.g. Wenger 1998). Nancy Cartwright's term for this phenomenon, to recall, is a thick tangle; and it nicely captures the complex and confusing network of activities that make up a productive scientific community (see Figure 1).

Again, no theory is the product of a single individual; this is an illusion that belongs to the mythology of theory as a text. All studies are linked to other studies in various ways; this is not only true backward in time but also forward in time. Theory, like scientific work more generally, can be described as a broad stream of activities, coming from the past, going on just now, and in all probability continuing tomorrow.

To view theory as a collective phenomenon also helps to get a better grip on what kind of activities are needed to become good in theorizing. Not only in the sense of Herbert Simon, when he says that "[t]o make interesting scientific discoveries, you should acquire as many good friends as possible, who are as energetic, intelligent, and knowledgeable as they can be" (Simon 1991:387). More to the point here, theoretical progress basically consists of additions to or modifications of some existing theory. In terms of activities, this means that the researcher first of all has to learn how to absorb a theory, and preferably in such a way that it also can be used. A researcher who is good at theory is one who both knows its content and how to use it.

One can perhaps go one step further and say that for true excellence in theory you need in addition to be trained in the right kind of theory and tradition. As examples of this in sociology, one can mention the works that make up its core tradition (by Weber, Durkheim, Merton, Bourdieu and so on). Working with works that draw on a weak tradition makes it very hard to produce good studies, including theory; and working with works that are not linked to a tradition in sociology at all leads nowhere.

Discussion

You cannot step into the river twice.

Heraclitus

The quote above refers to an important feature of the notion of activity, namely its dimension of time. Activities take place in time, and time is in constant motion forward. This also means that all activities are ultimately different. What you do as part of some research has, for example, already changed by the time you decide to write it down. And once a work has been completed and published, its content will soon change as well, since all studies in a discipline are at some level related to each other and in a movement forward. This was earlier illustrated with the example of reading *Suicide* at different points in time. In brief, theory is not stationary; like everything else that people do, it is in constant motion, since people are always in motion.

Let us now turn to the main argument of the paper, which consists of a discussion of two different approaches to theory: theory as text and theory as activities. Theory as text was discussed first; and to get some perspective on why theory in the first place can take the form of a written statement, a short account of the impact of the invention of the Greek alphabet as well as of printing was given. In addition, it was pointed out that sociologists have developed special norms for what should be included in a publication and what should be excluded.

Several reasons were given why the notion of theory as a text is not very helpful. One of these is that this perspective is much too fixated on the idea that a theory takes the form of a verbal formulation in a published text. Another is that it tends to present theory, method and facts as self-sufficient and essentially separate from each other. It leaves out quite a bit of material of what takes place during the research process. And no effort is made to discuss how the theory can be used. All of this makes it difficult to understand a theory, to teach it, and to use it.

It has also been suggested in this paper that it is more useful to view theory as activities; and that the most important of these activities are those that are part of the actual research process. From this perspective, research constitutes the basic unit of which theory is an organic part, just as methods and facts. Theory, it has also been suggested, can be seen as “fact-laden”, in the sense that it is based on some facts and also directs the attention of the researcher to certain facts. In this sense, a theory can be said to imply a number of activities, what may be seen as potential activities.

The fact that a theory is general in nature also means that it can be applied to a number of new topics or situations. This constitutes another form of potential activities; it also presents an opportunity for the researcher to be creative. These activities can, for example, lead to an improved version of the theory, a new concept, and so on.

It should be made very clear that the view of theory as activities does not mean that published texts should be moved to the side or somehow regarded as unimportant. Texts in social theory are central also in this perspective. The main reason for this is

that a text is able to preserve quite a bit of what the writer thinks; and that others can easily inspect as well as work with this material. This is true even if some information is always lost in the transition from actual experience to experience expressed in a text; and also if some important parts of the research process are typically excluded because of the way that scientific articles should look like. A final argument for the continued centrality of texts is that it is possible to read a sociological text in a different way than is often done, by emphasizing that theory, method and fact are linked to each other and partly overlap.

Given the argument in this paper, it would seem that a kind of gestalt switch is called for in sociology, from viewing theory as a text to viewing it as activities. A change in perspective of this type does not mean that earlier research in theory should be rejected but rather that it can be seen in a new light. It also means that a new research agenda becomes possible, one that has as its goal to work out in detail what it means to view theory as activities.

But even if a gestalt switch of this type would represent a positive change, there also exist some drawbacks to the activities approach which should be pointed out. It is, for example, clear that this approach covers such a multitude of activities that it is just not possible to take all of them into account. They overflow, to put it mildly, in a number of directions.

It is also hard to see how some of the activities that have been discussed in this paper are linked to or part of a theory. Take, for example, the role of the context, the historical background of some text, and the personality of the researcher. The boundaries between the various activities that are part of a theory are also often vague, something that makes it easy to misunderstand them or miss them completely.

A further drawback is that the term activity is an everyday term that has not yet been tested over a period of time, nor specified to the extent that one might want. It is finally also true that the focus on practicality in the activities approach is not always something positive; that something works well does not necessarily mean that is correct.

But even if it is clear that there exist some problems with looking at social theory as a set of activities, this perspective is also very helpful in a number of respects. Some of the most important of these are the following: it is an approach that makes it much easier to work with theory in research, to teach theory, and to understand what theory is about. This approach also draws attention to some interesting material that is excluded from published texts. And perhaps what is most positive of all, the activities approach makes it easier to both discuss and engage in theoretical creativity, a topic on which the approach of theory as text is silent.

When theory is primarily seen as a practical enterprise, it becomes easier to both read and work with texts; it also becomes easier to teach what theory is and how to use it. The traditional way of teaching theory by just having students read a number of texts, would be much improved if it was combined with practical exercises. Learning by reading works better if combined with learning by doing. It should be added that in constructing and using exercises, it is possible to draw on a long tradition in the West of using exercises. This tradition is not just about teaching and learning in a narrow

sense; it has also some very interesting things to say on the topic of how exercises have been used to work on one's self (e.g. Hadot 2002; Foucault 1985[1984]).

Another benefit of the activities perspective is that it allows you to add to the information in theoretical texts, and in this way make these fuller, easier to understand, and easier to use. According to this perspective, you will also want to establish the exact ways in which a theory is linked to methods and facts. Some information that is often dealt with only in history of sociology, history of science, sociology of science and similar fields, may also be added to the theory and thereby facilitate the way it can be used.

There is finally the crucial issue of creativity which needs to be mentioned once again, since it is ultimately through the human capacity for creativity that new and interesting theory comes into being. If you look at the way that a theory is presented in a text, what you see is the result of creativity, not how the act of creativity originated nor how it was played out. To borrow a metaphor from Wittgenstein: the ladder that was used to climb up has been kicked away.

To view theory as a set of activities allows creativity to be taken into account; it also makes it easier to become creative. For one thing, it now becomes easy and natural to unite an interest in theory with the desire to be creative. While it may not be possible to learn how to be creative, you can at least invite creativity by opening yourself up to it. Charles Sanders Peirce was, for example, very interested in developing various ways to court scientific creativity or abduction as he called it (e.g. Peirce 1929, 1992[1898]:181–196). Someone like Max Weber, on the other hand, was less sure that this was possible; “[i]deas occur to us when they please,” as he noted, “not when it pleases us” (Weber 1917:136). While Peirce experimented with a number of activities to court creativity, such as improving your capacity to guess, taking solitary walks at dawn and dusk, lifting weights, and quite a bit more; the only activity of this type that Weber mentions was of a more passive nature: to relax on a couch after dinner, while enjoying a cigar (Weber 1917:136).

This paper started out by noting that theory in sociology is often criticized on two grounds: that it is often separated from facts, and that it is unclear what the term theory means (does it refer to propositions, empirical generalizations, specific explanations or what?). The view of theory as activities suggests some answers to both of these critiques. While it does not solve the problems involved, it does cast some new light on them and also proposes a different way to deal with them.

Take the critique that the word “theory” has several different meanings in sociology, such as concrete explanations of single cases, empirical generalizations, single factor explanations and so on (e.g. Merton 1945; Abend 2008). Many of these can however also be seen as activities that it makes sense to try out and play around with during the research process, as part of the attempt to come up with an explanation. Again, while this way of looking at the problem of theory having multiple meanings does not solve all the problems involved, it does cast a new light on this issue and show that the issue may not be as severe as is generally thought.

Also the argument that there exists a huge gap between theory and facts in modern

sociology looks a bit different when viewed from the perspective of theory as activities (e.g. Goldthorpe 1997). The reason for this is that the basic unit in this approach is not theory, separate from facts and method, but the research act. And theory, method and facts are united in this act, not separate. This means that it makes little sense to speak of a study that has facts but no theory or one that has a theory but no facts. What you do have in the former case is a study with many facts, where the theory that was used to produce these is not made explicit in the published text; and in the latter, a study where the facts that inspired the theory in the first place are not included in the text, just as the potential facts are not mentioned. Again, while these arguments do not solve the problem with the gap between theory and facts, they do present a different perspective on it.

Finally, does the theory that comes into being by using the perspective of activities also make it easier to make a contribution to sociology? Some factors would seem to work in this direction; and they have already been mentioned. For one thing, theory is now more closely linked to actual research as well as to the facts and the method. It is also more practical in nature when viewed from the perspective of activities than from that of theory as a text. Nonetheless, when it comes to concrete cases of research it is impossible to answer a question such as this in advance. Serious research, as Weber points out in “Science as a vocation”, is in this sense always a “gamble” (*Hasard*; Weber 1988[1922]:590).

References

- Abbott, A. (2014) *Digital paper: A manual for research and writing with library and internet materials*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Abend, G. (2008) "The meaning of 'theory'", *Sociological Theory* 26 (2):173–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00324.x>
- Becker, H. (2007[1986]) *Writing for social scientists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Benzecry, C., M. Krause & I. Reed (2017) *Social theory now*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Blau, P. (1979) "Elements of sociological theorizing", *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 7 (1):103–127.
- Blau, P. (1997) "Introduction to the Transaction edition", ix–xxiii in P. Blau & J. Schwartz, *Crosscutting social circles*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351313049>
- Blumer, H. (1954) "What is wrong with social theory?", *American Sociological Review* 19 (1):3–10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2088165>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977[1972]) *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986[1979]) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990[1980]) *The logic of practice*. London: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1987) "Reading, readers, the literate, literature", 94–105 in P. Bourdieu (1990), *In other words*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2002) "Sur l'esprit de la recherche," 175–239 in Y. Delsaut & M.-C. Rivière. *Bibliographie des travaux de Pierre Bourdieu*. Pantin: Le Temps des Cerises.
- Bourdieu, P. (2004[2002]) *Science of science and reflexivity*. London: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2018) *Classification struggles: General sociology, vol. 1. Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–82*. London: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2020) *Habitus and field: General sociology, vol. 2. Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–83*. London: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. & L. Wacquant (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Braithwaite, R. (1953) *Scientific explanation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brubaker, R. (1993) "Social theory as habitus", 212–234 in C. Calhoun, E. Lipuma & M. Postone (Eds.), *Bourdieu: Critical perspectives*. London: Polity Press.
- Bruch, E. (2014) "How population structure shapes neighborhood segregation", *American Journal of Sociology* 119 (5):1227–1278. <https://doi.org/10.1086/675411>
- Burawoy, M. (2021) "Living sociology: Being in the world one studies", *Annual Review of Sociology* 47:17–40.
- Burke, P. (2015) *The French historical revolution: The Annales school 1929–2014*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Calhoun, C., J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff & I. Virk (Eds.) (2022) *Contemporary sociological theory*. Fourth edition. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Cartwright, N. (2020) "Middle-range theory: Without it what could anyone do?", *Theoria* 35 (3):269–323. <https://doi.org/10.1387/theoria.21479>
- Cartwright, N. & R. Runhardt (2014) "Measurement", 265–287 in N. Cartwright & E. Montuschi (Eds.), *Philosophy of social science*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cartwright, N., T. Shomar & M. Suárez (1995) "The tool box of science: Tools for the building of models with a superconductivity example", *Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and Humanities* 44:137–149.
- Cavallo, G. & R. Chartier (Eds.) (1997) *A history of reading in the West*. London: Polity Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1966) *Cartesian linguistics: A chapter in the history of rationalist thought*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Clemens, E., W. Powell, K. McIlwaine & D. Okamoto (1995) "Careers in print: Books, journals and scholarly reputation", *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (2):433–494. <https://doi.org/10.1086/230730>
- Collins, R. (2019) "Writing with force and ease", <https://www.drRANDALLcollins.com/creativity-via-sociology/2019/7/3/writing-with-force-and-ease> (Accessed 22 February 2022)
- Coser, L. (1977) *Masters of sociological thought: Ideas in historical and social context*. Second edition. New York: Waveland Press.
- Csiszar, A. (2018) *The scientific journal: Authorship and the politics of knowledge in the nineteenth century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Descartes, R. (1637) "Discourse on the method of rightly conducting one's reason and of seeking truth in the sciences", 25–91 in R. Descartes (1968) *Discourse on method and the meditations*. London: Penguin.
- Descartes, R. (1649) "The passions of the soul", 325–404 in R. Descartes (1985) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511805042.010>
- Detering, N. (2011) "How to read a sociology article", <https://ablconnect.harvard.edu/book/how-read-sociology-article> (Accessed 12 January 2022).
- Durkheim, É. (2002[1897]) *Suicide: A study in sociology*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994320>
- Edwards, M. (2015) *Writing in sociology*. Second edition. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Eisenstein, E. (1979) *The printing press as an agent of change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107049963>
- Eisenstein, E. (2005) *The printing revolution in early modern Europe*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819230>
- Ekegren, P. (1999) *The reading of theoretical texts*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203021828>
- Foucault, M. (1985[1984]) *The history of sexuality, vol. 2: The use of pleasure*. New York: Pantheon.

- Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goldthorpe, J. (1997) “The integration of sociological research and theory: Grounds for optimism at the end of the twentieth century”, *Rationality and Society* 9 (4):405–426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104346397009004002>
- Goldthorpe, J. (2021) *Pioneers of sociological science: Statistical foundations and the theory of action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108933254>
- Goody, J. (1987) *The interface between the written and the oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goody, J. & I. Watt (1963) “The consequences of literacy”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (3):304–345. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500001730>
- Hacking, I. (1992) “The self-vindication of the laboratory sciences”, 29–64 in A. Pickering (Ed.) *Science as practice and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hadot, P. (2002) *What is ancient philosophy?* Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Hammond, P. (1964) *Sociologists at work: The craft of social research*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hanson, N.R. (1958) *Patterns of discovery*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Havelock, E. (1963) *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Hudson, N. (2002) “Challenging Eisenstein: Recent studies in print culture”, *Eighteenth-Century Life* 26 (2):83–95. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00982601-26-2-83>
- Joas, H. (1997) *The creativity of action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Klein, J. & G. Giglioli (2020) “Francis Bacon”, in E.N. Zalta (Ed.) *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy. Fall 2020 edition*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Knorr Cetina, K. (2001) “Objectual practice”, 175–188 in T. Schatzki, K. Knorr Cetina & E. von Savigny (Eds.) *The practice turn in contemporary theory*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203977453>
- Krippner, G. (2000) “How to read a (quantitative) journal article”, <https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/savvy/introtosociology/Documents/MethodsDocuments/KrippnerReadingQuantArticle.html> (Accessed 12 January 2022).
- Kuhn, T. (1962) *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leahey, E. (2008) “Methodological memes and mores: Towards a sociology of social research”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 34:33–53. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134731>
- Leed, E. (1982) “Review essay: Elizabeth Eisenstein’s *The printing press as an agent of change* and the structure of communications revolutions”, *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (2):413–429. <https://doi.org/10.1086/227682>
- Lynch, M. (1997) “Theorizing practice” (review of S. Turner, *Social theory of practices*), *Human Studies* 20 (3):335–344. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005336830104>
- Markovsky, B. (2008) “Graduate training in sociological theory and theory construction”, *Sociological Perspectives* 51 (2):423–445. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2008.51.2.423>

- Merton, R.K. (1945) "Sociological theory", *American Journal of Sociology* 50 (6):462–473. <https://doi.org/10.1086/219686>
- Merton, R.K. (1965a) "Correspondance with Elizabeth Eisenstein", box 23, folder 5 in the Robert K. Merton collection at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.
- Merton, R.K. (1965b) *On the shoulders of giants: A Shandean postscript*. New York: The Free Press.
- Merton, R.K. (1968) *Social theory and social structure*. Enlarged edition. New York: The Free Press.
- Merton, R.K. (1976) *Sociological ambivalence and other essays*. New York: The Free Press.
- Merton, R.K. (1980) "On the oral transmission of knowledge", 1–36 in R.K. Merton & M.W. Riley (Eds.) *Sociological traditions from generation to generation*. Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Merton, R.K. (1998) "Afterword", 295–318 in C. Mongardini & S. Tabboni (Eds.), *Robert K. Merton and contemporary sociology*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351291361>
- Merton, R.K. & C. Persell (1984) "An interview with Robert K. Merton", *Teaching Sociology* 11 (4):355–386. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1317796>
- Mullins, N. (1971) *The art of theory: Construction and use*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Nightingale, A.W. (2004) *Spectacles of truth in classical Greek philosophy: Theoria in its cultural context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511482564>
- Ogden, C.K. & I.A. Richards (1989) *The meaning of meaning*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Olson, D.R. (1994) *The world on paper: The conceptual and cognitive implications of writing and reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ong, W. (1982) *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the world*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203103258>
- Paul, A.M. (2021) *The extended mind: The power of thinking outside the mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Pavese, C. (2021) "Knowledge how", in E.N. Zalta (Ed.) *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy. Summer 2021 edition*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Peirce, C.S. (1929) "Guessing", *The Hound & Horn* 2 (3):267–282.
- Peirce, C.S. (1992[1898]) *Reasoning and the logic of things: The Cambridge conferences lectures of 1898*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pickering, A. (1992) "From science as knowledge to science as practice", 1–28 in A. Pickering (Ed.) *Science as practice and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Plato (1997a) "Phaedrus", 506–556 in J. Cooper (Ed.) *Complete works*. Cambridge: Hackett.
- Plato (1997b) "Letters", 1634–1676 in J. Cooper (Ed.) *Complete works*. Cambridge: Hackett.
- Polanyi, M. (1966) *The tacit dimension*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Pomata, G. (2011) "Observation rising: Birth of an epistemic genre, 1500–1650", 45–80 in L. Daston & E. Lunbeck (Eds.) *Histories of scientific observation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Qian, G. (2015) "Books or articles: Which are more important in the scientific evaluation of the different sciences?", *Current Science* 109 (11): 1925–1928.
- Radkau, J. (2008) "Max Weber between 'eruptive creativity' and 'disciplined transdisciplinarity'", 13–30 in F. Adloff & M. Borutta (Eds.), *Max Weber in the 21st Century*. EUI Working Paper MWP 2008/356. Florence: European University Institute.
- Radkau, J. (2009) *Max Weber: A biography*. London: Polity Press.
- Reichenbach, H. (1938) *Experience and prediction: An analysis of the foundations and the structure of knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Reisberg, D. (Ed.) (2013) *The Oxford handbook of cognitive psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195376746.001.0001>
- Ritzer, G. & J. Stepinsky (2018) *Contemporary sociological theory and its classical roots: The basics*. Fifth edition. London: SAGE.
- Rueschemeyer, D. (2009) *Usable theory: Analytic tools for social and political research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ryle, G. (2009[1949]) "Knowing how and knowing that", 16–20 in G. Ryle, *The concept of mind*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203875858>
- Schickore, J. (2008) "Doing science, writing science", *Philosophy of Science* 75 (3):323–343. <https://doi.org/10.1086/592951>
- Simon, H. (1991) *Models of my life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Smelser, N. (1971) *Sociological theory: A contemporary view: How to read, construct and do theory*. New York: General Learning Press.
- Smith-Lovin, L. & C. Moskowitz (2016) *Writing in sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Soler, L., S. Zwart, M. Lynch & V. Israel-Jost (Eds.) (2014) *Science after the practice turn in the philosophy, history, and social studies of science*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315857985>
- Stark, D. (2019) "What is your publication strategy?", *Sociologica* 13 (1):1. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/9377>
- Stinchcombe, A. (1968) *Constructing social theories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Suppe, F. (1998) "The structure of a scientific paper", *Philosophy of Science* 65 (3):381–405. <https://doi.org/10.1086/392651>
- Swedberg, R. (2014) *The art of social theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Swidler, A. (1986) "Culture in action: Symbols and strategies", *American Sociological Review* 51 (2):273–286. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095521>
- Turner, S. (1994) *The social theory of practices: Tradition, tacit knowledge and presuppositions*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Vaughan, D. (2004) "Theorizing disaster: Analogy, historical ethnography, and the Challenger accident", *Ethnography* 5 (3):315–347. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14666138104045659>

- Wacquant, L. (n.d.) “Practical tips for reading sociology” (handout for students in sociology, UC Berkeley), <http://gsi.berkeley.edu/media/Practical-Tips-for-Reading-Sociology.pdf> (Accessed 12 January 2022)
- Weber, M. (2001[1905]) *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203995808>
- Weber, M. (1917) “Science as a vocation”, 129–156 in H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (Eds.) (2009[1946]) *From Max Weber*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203452196>
- Weber, M. (1978[1921]) *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Weber, M. (2019[1921]) *Economy and society: A new translation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Weber, M. (1988[1922]) *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Weber, M. (2012) *Briefe 1918–1920. Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*, volume II/10,1. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803932>
- Whyte, W.F. (1993) “On the evolution of *Street corner society*”, 279–373 in W.F. Whyte (1993[1943]) *Street corner society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wootton, D. (2015) *The invention of science: A new history of the scientific revolution*. New York: Harper.
- Zerubavel, E. (2021) *Generally speaking: An invitation to concept-driven sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197519271.001.0001>
- Zhao, S. (1996) “The beginning of the end or the end of the beginning? The theory construction movement revisited”, *Sociological Forum* 11 (2):305–187. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02408369>
- Zuckerman, H. & R.K. Merton (1971) “Institutionalization, structure and functions of the referee system”, *Minerva* 9 (1):66–100. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01553188>

Author

Richard Swedberg is Professor emeritus at the Department of Sociology at Cornell University and affiliated with the Department of Sociology at Stockholm University. His two specialties are economic sociology and social theory.

Corresponding author

Richard Swedberg
 Cornell University, Department of Sociology
 109 Tower Rd, Ithaca NY 14853, USA
 rs328@cornell.edu