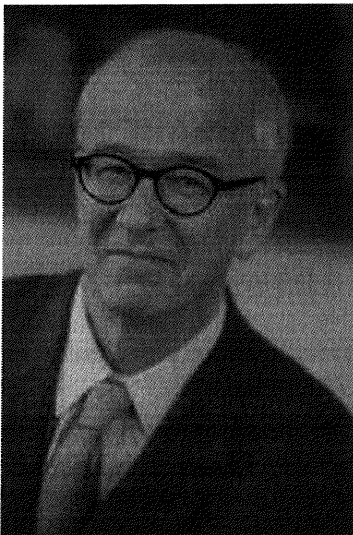


What Constitutes a theoretical contribution when an empirical study is evaluated?

by Richard Swedberg

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Omar Lizardo has recently addressed the question of what a theory paper should look like in order to be published in *ASR* (“Publishing Theory at *ASR*”, *Perspectives* Spring 2017). This note intends to complement Lizardo’s article by raising a related question, namely how are we to look at and evaluate the way that theory is handled in the average empirical research paper?

There exists a tendency today to ignore the theory part in sociological studies, not only its value but its very existence. This is in my experience often the case during seminars, when a paper is being discussed; in the comments you get when your paper is being reviewed; and also at faculty meetings, when decisions are made to hire someone or suggest someone for tenure. There is often plenty of discussion of the data and the methods that have been used in some research, but not of the theory part.

In an attempt to counter this trend I have put together a check list of what to my mind constitutes theoretical contributions. It contains items that can be mentioned and should count when some study or a person’s work is being discussed or evaluated. The hope is that the list will inspire sociologists to take a close look not only at the methods and the data that have been used in a study, but also at the theory part.

I have not commented on the various items on the list. One reason is to keep this note brief. Another is to keep the attention on what is at issue here, namely the current neglect of the theoretical dimension of sociological research.

The list should be viewed as one person’s suggestion for what kind of theory-related concerns that should be raised when a study is being discussed and evaluated. Note also that the list is for the average research paper, not for papers on theory per se (for which somewhat different criteria are relevant).

A CHECKLIST OF POSSIBLE THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS IN EMPIRICAL STUDIES

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

- YES NO** *A new theory has been introduced or an addition made to an existing theory*
- YES NO** *A new concept has been introduced or an addition made to an existing one*
- YES NO** *A close link has been forged between theory, method and data*
- YES NO** *There is a skillful integration of the research results into existing theory*
- YES NO** *The theory part has the potential to redirect empirical research*
- YES NO** *The theory part exemplifies sociological imagination*
- YES NO** *It is clearly shown that the research has a necessary theory part*
- YES NO** *A new phenomenon or concept has been named*
- YES NO** *The study includes an interesting speculative theoretical part*
- YES NO** *A new metaphor or analogy has been introduced or an existing one added to*
- YES NO** *An effort has been made to add to the theory part, not exclusively to verify existing theory*