

Reintegrating Theories, Methods, and Historical Analysis in Teaching Sociology

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Abstract We discuss ways of bringing theory and methods into conversation with each other within courses and across the sociology curriculum. Theory is often taught completely separately from research methods, which in turn are simplistically divided into quantitative and qualitative. To counter this fragmented approach to the discipline we discuss two major paradigms, a social-forces paradigm often linked to quantitative research and an interpretive paradigm often linked to qualitative inquiry. But at a deeper level both paradigms require an understanding of historical context. The relationship between these two paradigms and more familiar categories of theory such as "functionalism" and "conflict theories" is not straightforward. We conclude the discussion by describing classroom-tested strategies that help students explore the complexity of the linkages between theories and empirical inquiry.

Keywords Sociological theory · Research methods · Paradigms · Social forces · Interpretive analysis · Teaching sociology

“Theory creates the objects”—Javier Auyero; “It is theory that decides what we can observe”—attributed to Albert Einstein.

In this paper, we discuss ways of bringing theory and methods into conversations with each other within courses and across the sociology curriculum, to create a more stimulating, challenging, and coherent learning environment for students. Instead of separating theory from methods, and further dividing quantitative from qualitative methods, instructors can build connections among them, link them to the analysis of historical contexts, and provide insights into the foundations of the discipline. These objectives can be achieved within theory and methods courses by individual instructors or built into a sociology curriculum at

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either the graduate or undergraduate level. In an ideal curriculum, the theory-methods nexus would form the core of the discipline, but in less than ideal institutional circumstances the linkages can still be pursued within either theory or methods classes. The overall goal is to unify an increasingly fragmented field whose disciplinary core has become difficult for students to discern. The motivation for integration is pedagogical, with the goal of providing a strong and comprehensive intellectual foundation for the next generation of scholars and practitioners. In addition to the goal of strengthening the discipline, theory-methods integration in the curriculum has cognitive benefits for individual learners that accrue when conceptual knowledge (theory) is knit together with empirical understanding.

In Part One, we identify ways in which the field can be unified and in Part Two, we formulate questions and suggest learning activities to support the goal of stronger coherence in our teaching.

Part one: “Unify the field” as a Learning Goal:

As recently as 2017, the ASA issued a task force to take stock of the Sociology Major and offer “recommended practices for sustaining high quality and comprehensive sociology programs for undergraduates” and for which this report could help “to inform curriculum review, assessment, and program development” (Pike et al. 2017, p. iv). Recommendation # 3 discusses numerous types of courses, including introductory-level, theory, methods, statistics, and substantive courses. “Sociological theory courses provide foundations in both classical and contemporary theory across the breadth of theoretical contributions,” whereas methods courses “provide foundational understandings of the demands of empirical inquiry.” In both cases it is advised that these courses be offered early on, so that students can use their acquired skills in more “advanced” courses. In the ASA’s recommendation, theory and methods courses are differentiated from “substantive topic courses” which show students “how sociologists apply basic sociological theories, methods, concepts, and skills to various substantive areas” (Pike et al. 2017 p.26).

While proposing new updated suggestions for Sociology departments, the problem of fragmentation remains, as the language used to define courses clearly demarcates theory and methods as autonomous realms only converging in “substantive” courses. To continue those lines of thinking simply reifies, rather than integrates aspects of the discipline into a coherent whole. With the rise of neoliberalism and globalization, complex problems require complex approaches, ones which necessarily entail a dialectical approach which focuses on the interconnection between theory and data. As a result, we should not leave the integration of the different aspects of the discipline to students alone to assemble them into a coherent epistemology. While the ASA recommendations offer sound advice in terms of different types of courses and their need to be implemented earlier, rather than later in the undergraduate curriculum, the challenge ahead requires greater integration of theory and methods, not just at the substantive level, but at all levels and areas of sociological inquiry.

Theory and research methods are often taught in separate courses after the introductory level. Introduction to sociology textbooks provide a brief coverage of both topics, but intermediate and upper-level courses are generally focused on either theory or methods. We created a small exploratory sample of 30 institutions using random selection from lists of institutions in the United States, published in the annual listing of U.S. institutions of higher education in the 2017 *US News and World Report*:

The undergraduate sociology curricula and theory and methods course descriptions of these 30 institutions were examined through course catalogues, syllabi and texts assigned for courses, and website program descriptions for each institution. The institutions in which theory and methods were interconnected used terms such as “the interaction between theory and research” and “interrelationship between sociological theory and research” and these curricula were coded as “connected.” If the two types of courses were described entirely separately, with no mention of theory-methods interconnections, the curriculum was coded as “separate.” In about a quarter of the sample, it was difficult to discern whether or not there were inter-connections and these cases were coded as “ambiguous.” The two areas were clearly connected in 8 of the 30 institutions.

The Table 1 below suggests that there was variation by type of institutions. Liberal arts institutions with a primarily undergraduate focus (“liberal arts colleges”) and private Research-1 institutions were more likely to mention inter-connections than public Research-1 institutions. The residual category “other” composed of private and public regional or comprehensive universities also displayed little interconnectedness.

In this small sample of 30 institutions: for 8 institutions, research methods and theory were described as interconnected; for 15 the two areas were treated as essentially separate, with no wording that indicated attention to interconnections; and for 7 institutions, the curricular design was difficult to interpret. Variation by type of institution is suggested in the following table:

Wording that suggests an interconnection appeared in four of the eight liberal-arts colleges’ syllabi and curriculum descriptions, in three out of four private Research-1 university documents, and in only one of the public-Research-1 institution documents. With a small sample, this distribution is suggestive, but one needs to be cautious in reaching conclusions about the types of institutions at which the connections of theory and methods are the most valued.

At the graduate level, even “research” (or “research methods”) is broken down further into essentially watertight compartments. For example, Hancock et al. (2018) provide an analysis of top 20 sociology graduate programs, ascertaining that all the departments require training in quantitative methods, while only a fifth require coursework in qualitative methods. (The top 20 sociology departments included in this analysis are based on the 2017 U.S. News and World Report Best Graduate Schools ranking. Five departments were tied for #17, resulting in a sample size of 21 instead of 20.) This pattern of training suggests an even further fragmentation of a unified sociological field of theory and methods into “quantitative” and “qualitative” research which are treated as if they have completely distinct theoretical foundations—and are often presented with the assumption that quantitative researchers are indifferent to theory and to historical contexts.

Table 1 Undergraduate theory-methods connection by institution type

	Liberal Arts	Research-1 Public	Research-1 Private	Other	TOTAL
Connected	4	1	3	0	8
Separate	3	9	1	2	15
Ambiguous	1	5	0	1	7
TOTAL	8	15	4	3	30

The frequent separation of the theory and methods instruction—probably the modal situation and perhaps even prevalent in an absolute majority of curricula—has consequences for both theory and methods. In the realm of theory, we identify 5 issues that are problematic. 1) Theory is presented in terms of concepts; theories are clusters of concepts that are not tested against empirical findings nor updated to encompass current social phenomena. “Theory” therefore becomes an abstract and detached pursuit, and is often experienced by students as a memorization exercise in a specialized vocabulary or jargon, and it is seen as the work of “dead white males” (Fevre and Bancroft 2016). 2) Theory is read as a set of unchanging and uncontested statements with little attention to its generativity, its capacity to spark contending interpretations and stimulate research. 3) When theory courses address contemporary society, they often turn away from empirical exploration of the central issues of classical theories (capitalism, class inequality, the nature of the modern) and instead focus on theories of “the other” and the marginalized, decisively following the cultural and post-structural turn. These issues were partially addressed by the exchange between Burawoy and Sica on theory, living and dead (Burawoy 2013; Sica 2013). 4) Theory becomes an exercise in application to current issues and events (Herring et al. 2016; Behbehanian and Burawoy 2014). Although the current-events approach may be stimulating to students who are already politically engaged, it does not address the absence of links to empirical research. This absence of a link between empirical research and theoretical thinking is especially problematic in graduate classes because it has implications for the way the discipline will develop in the future. 5) Insufficient attention is given to the way that knowledge is produced and to research as an embodied and disciplined activity. When theories are primarily deployed as lenses for viewing social issues, theorizing becomes perspectival in the minds of students and closely related or even conflated with ideologies and opinions.

In the realm of methods, we also identify five problematic issues: 1) Methods are disconnected from broader issues of frameworks, types of analysis, the politics of knowledge, and critical thinking. 2) “Methods” becomes a dry cookbook exercise composed of learning specific techniques for application. 3) “Methods” are defined primarily as quantitative methods, even at the undergraduate level (one of our new graduate students thought that “empirical” is a synonym of “quantitative”), and data analysis is taught with little attention to underlying theories of society or social action. 4) Variables and data sets are treated in a “taken for granted” manner, as if they are natural rather than constructed. 5) Research questions and variables are selected with no attention to their links to different bodies of theory. This problem is most evident in the conflation of gender and sex category and the unthinking use of race and ethnicity, but it is endemic in the choices of variables and their operationalization.

Seth Abrutyn (2013) and others (Keith and Ender 2004; Carter 2013) have argued that teaching theory increasingly is marked by problems in accommodating the historical or temporal dimension, and we suggest that this “time problem” is associated with the disconnection of theories from their accompanying empirical inquiry. Only the concepts are carried forward, and they are increasingly “disembodied” from the research to which they were originally connected. As a result, little discussion takes place about how the fundamental concepts of each theory might have to be revised to make sense in new historical contexts and theories are not put into discussion with each other to explain contemporary research findings. Meanwhile current empirical research, as portrayed in many textbooks and taught in standard research methods classes, lacks

an analysis of the changing historical context of social phenomena, the historical determination of behaviors, actions, interactions, and correlational findings. The texts and syllabi at each institution include a chapter or unit on the history of research but only rarely do they trace how the interrelationship of specific methods and concepts has changed over time within the context of larger historical and social changes.

Neglecting the original empirical base of theories is associated with what Abrutyn calls “the time crunch” (2013), the increasingly long time-span that theory courses must now cover, for which the solution is often an unconvincing division into “classical” and “contemporary” courses accompanied by growing disagreement about what or whom to include in the “contemporary” course. Here too one can discern a fragmentation of the material as the classical theories, often taught with little attention to the original empirical research, and the heterogeneous “contemporary” theories are treated as if they were disconnected from each other.

Finally, from a Kuhnian perspective, a problem arises from the separation of theory and research because students fail to understand their field in terms of its changing and contending paradigms. Without an understanding of overall paradigms composed of both theory (classical and contemporary) and research designs (quantitative and qualitative), it is difficult to see the ways in which the paradigms change over time as they are transformed both by internal discussions in the field and in response to external phenomena such as historical changes in societies, institutions, and cultures.

How can an understanding of all three—theory, empirical research methods, and their historical contexts—be developed together in undergraduate and graduate classes? This overall goal requires bringing together two distinct sets of learning goals into a single course. The first set of learning goals involves designs, methods, and techniques. Students learn to select and follow procedures of empirical inquiry, and hopefully to question, disrupt, and innovate these procedures. The second set of learning goals focuses on theories, and involves identifying major theories in their original historical contexts and then experiment with reapplying them to contemporary phenomena. This approach helps students to observe and explain social reality, and to assist them in seeing what has changed and what has remained the same. As Merton pointed out, theory and empirical research are reciprocal, however it is often difficult to completely integrate them, since they are both interconnected but distinct (Merton 1967a, b). As Merton characterizes this relationship:

The recent history of sociological theory can in large measure be written in terms of an alternation between two contrasting emphases. On the one hand, we observe those sociologists who seek above all to generalize, to find their way as rapidly as possible to the formulation of sociological laws. Tending to assess the significance of sociological work in terms of scope rather than the demonstrability of generalizations, they eschew the “triviality” of detailed, small-scale observations and seek the grandeur of global summaries. At the other extreme stands a hardy band who do not hunt too closely the implications of their research but who remain confident and assured that what they report is so. To be sure, their reports of facts are verifiable and often verified, but they are somewhat at a loss to relate these facts to one another or even to explain why these, rather than other, observations have been made. For the first group the identifying motto would at times seem to be: “We do not know whether what we say is true, but it is at least

significant." And for the radical empiricist the motto may read: "This is demonstrably so, but we cannot indicate its significance." (Merton 1967a, p. 139).

As Merton indicates, the fact that theory and empirical research are interconnected also means that they are in some sense distinct in ways that often are overlooked when viewed from one or the other perspective. As a result, we must always view theory and empirical research as mutually nourishing where each "initiates, reformulates, refocuses, and clarifies" the other as the basis of sociological inquiry without which one could never understand the specificities of a specific case, nor how a case fell under a general rule (Merton 1967b, p. vi).

This set of goals develops critical thinking and uses theory to see beyond "what is." By introducing a discussion of empirical research into the discussion of theory, the instructor can counter the students' sense that the study of theory is primarily a way of pushing the progressive political agenda of sociologists, a concern elucidated by Fobes and Kaufman (2008). An honest introduction of empirical research, one that recognizes Max Weber's notion of inconvenient facts (1946/1958), opens the door to thoughtful reflections on the nature of evidence and the question whether praxis can overcome inconvenient facticity, as Marxists believe.

Examining the relationship between theory and methods in historical context also helps students to think beyond the false dichotomies of macro and micro, structure and agency, and to come to understand these terms more dialectically. The dialectic approach enables students to conceptualize how the micro and meso levels of analysis have to be contextualized in the macro; the macro can be seen "at work" in the micro, just as the micro makes the macro concrete and saves it from reification.

The Logic of Inquiry: Two Conjoined Paradigms and their Theoretical Roots: Logic of Social Forces Vs. Logic of Interpretive Analysis.

In a combined theory-methods pedagogy a major learning goal must be an understanding of the theoretical sources and endpoints of empirical research strategies. A major step towards understanding the interconnection of theory and empirical research is to consider two major theory/research paradigms in sociology and to show how these paradigms grow out of a shared foundation in the analysis of historical contexts. Each of these paradigms is constituted by both theory and methods.

The terms "quantitative" and "qualitative" that are applied to the two major paradigms that students encounter obscure the deeper logics of design and their connections to theories. The design of a research project is molded by the underlying theory, the underlying models of human action and the paradigm of inquiry that forms around a theory, in terms of the puzzles that can be solved, the questions that can be asked, or those questions that are necessarily excluded. Sociology students generally encounter two major paradigms. In the logic of correlational, multivariate analysis the discovery of correlations takes the researcher down to the deeper level of causal analysis connected to theory—we will call this the Social Forces Tradition (with exemplars such as Emile Durkheim, Harriet Martineau, and Erving Goffman). In logic of interpretive analysis, we observe actions, interactions and organizational processes, as well as attempt to enter "people's heads"—and these observations take us into theories of how these actions are structured—we will call this the Interpretive

Tradition of *verstehen* (with exemplars such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and W.E. B. DuBois, who actually participated in both traditions). (Ragin and Zaret 1983).

Despite their apparent differences, both paradigms are formed by steps that take us from data production procedures (“research methods”) into theories of human action and social structure. Both approaches delve into history, in attempts to grasp the ever-changing landscape of social life, even if both are taught in an a-historical way in many programs.

The Social Forces Tradition: The Example of Durkheim and the Logic of Inquiry

Why is Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1951) such an important exemplar for the integration of theory and methods? Unfortunately, the text is often taught as an exercise in a correlational methodology, with little attention to the underlying theoretical schema. Methods texts focus on the correlations that Durkheim tried to establish between suicide and various socio-demographic variables, some at the individual level and some at the level of the country or region. The most famous of these is of course the relationship between religion and suicide rates, with Jews having the lowest rate, Catholics an intermediate one, and Protestants the highest. Similarly, he found relationships between marital status and suicide, military service and suicide, and homicide rate and suicide rate (the last of these being an inverse relationship among European nations).

What is often left out of this introduction to Durkheim’s work is the theoretical analysis that underlies the mass of empirical data, namely the focus on the two generating social forces: social cohesion (the dimension underlying the empirical findings about marital status, religion, and military service) and normative regulation (the dimension underlying the empirical findings about the business cycle and suicides and the suicide rates of slaves and young wives). Each of these dimensions has a “Goldilocks” logic in which over and under-regulation produce respectively fatalistic and anomic suicides and over and under-cohesion produce respectively altruistic and egoistic suicide. These underlying dimensions are the point of Durkheim’s correlational empirical analysis; he uses the empirical data to reveal the underlying dimensions of regulation and cohesion. They form the core of his understanding of “how society works”. Moreover, these dimensions have a strongly historical thrust, as Durkheim believed that modern societies have increasing levels of anomie, closely associated with the growing dominance of the market, and decreasing levels of social cohesion.

Durkheim’s research questions are strongly theoretically driven, and the theory is a theory of historical social change. The research questions are not a search for a compendium of “Big Data” correlations about who commits suicide but rather comprise an attempt to understand the structure, cohesion, and normative regulation of groups and societies. To explain Durkheim’s work as both theory and empirical inquiry, the instructor needs to show how these goals are intimately linked and that it is the historical/theoretical goals that drive the empirical analysis in the Social Forces Tradition.

In the Social Forces tradition, theory and empirical research serve to identify and express in conceptual form the social forces that underlie the phenomena of social reality. These social forces are identified as external to both the observer and the observed and as discernible in their effects on behavior. Quantification can be incorporated into the analysis. We have named Durkheim in *Suicide* as the clearest exponent of the tradition of Social Forces, but he was not the first one. Comte’s view of positive science as a model for social inquiry is an early step in this direction, and two writers of the first half of the nineteenth century explore this avenue, though without the language of quantification. Harriet Martineau’s study of

“manners and morals” in the United States in the mid-1830s, published as *Society in America* (1837) points to the social forces shaping life in the new nation. Although the book is sometimes described as ethnographic, it does not particularly delve into the culture of the observed, largely the planter class in the South; on the contrary, her sympathies with the abolitionist cause are associated with the observer’s cold and distant gaze rather than a *verstehen* approach to the planter class. Martineau was a British translator and popularizer of Comte’s work, she was close to the Darwin family, and she was a champion of a secular stance. Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* is similar in tone and its view is always the gaze of the objective observer, focused on behaviors generated in specific conditions, rather than on actions of subjects whose inner lives we need to examine.

The external and objective observations of the Social Forces tradition were enormously bolstered by the end of the nineteenth century with the rapid development of statistical analysis throughout the sciences and the massive onset of models of statistical determination. Durkheim is considered the “father” of quantitative analysis but he was not the only one to base the discovery of social forces in quantitative inquiry. He worked at a time when discovery of statistical determinations had become a goal throughout the sciences; the publication of *Suicide* took place in the same year as the discovery of radioactive decay as a process that is predictable in its overall patterning. The concept of statistical determination in the social sciences was linked to the growing ability of governments to collect and interpret data about the state of the economy and society. For example, Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, and their colleagues at Hull House carried out a study of life in inner-city Chicago, *Hull House Maps and Papers* (1895), by “Residents of Hull House” with individual chapters by Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, and others (Crowell and Co.) It was modeled partly on Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People of London* and was carried out as part of a larger, national study of the slums of Baltimore, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia that was commissioned by the US Congress in 1892. Mapping was one of its innovative methods in which the Social Forces tradition took tangible form, and its use in the Hull House volume much predates its more famous use in the work of Park and Burgess. Continuing the tradition of using new scientific tools the work of William F. Ogburn made use of statistical analysis and the use of indicators, especially in his *Recent Social Trends* (1933). He had a leading role in the growth of sociology in the United States and his decided allegiance to the Social Forces approach had a strong effect on the discipline. Ogburn was research director of President Herbert Hoover’s Committee on Social Trends (1930–33). Ogburn became Chair of Sociology at Chicago in 1927, President of the American Sociological Society in 1929, President of the American Statistical Association in 1931.

With the arrival of Paul Lazarsfeld on the scene in the U.S., interest in quantitative analysis and sophistication in its uses, took a quantum leap forward, simultaneously subordinating the Frankfurt Institute’s interpretive tendencies to a stronger emphasis on systematic production of objective data. This new turn, which contained elements of both paradigms in uneasy partnership, can be seen in Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*.

By mid-century, the enormous ongoing shift in psychology towards quantification impacted social psychology and sociology and gave rise to strongly externalist and quantified studies, most notably exemplified by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, 1950. New York: Commonwealth Fund. In their analysis of 1000 cases, they matched 500 persistent male delinquents with 500 non-delinquents of similar age, IQ, and ethnic origin, in high delinquency areas in an effort to identify major factors

predicting delinquency that were subsequently used in paper and pencil instruments to assess the risk of delinquency in young children; this longitudinal study in sociology was an identical counterpart to the trend to predictive tests in the psychology of the period.

Not all work in the Social Forces tradition was quantitative, as we noted above in the discussion of Martineau and de Tocqueville. Some researchers shared the “objective” stance of the Social Forces paradigm while carrying out studies that involved observation and ethnographic strategies. The work of Robert Park (*The City: Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment*. 1927. University of Chicago Press) exemplifies this trend, so closely identified with the Chicago School. Social forces were made visible in the “concentric zones” and “natural areas” of the city, in an ecological model derived from studies of plant communities, i.e., from an externalist stance associated with the natural sciences.

Often these spatially-defined studies began with quantitative data—available public sector statistics—and then connected these to a qualitative inquiry focused on social forces, especially as they operated within an urban or community setting.

Beyond the ecological and “natural” model of external forces, in a more sociological framework the social forces could be linked into conflict theory, as in the case of the Lynds’ work in Middletown (Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*. 1929), but sometimes they were conceptualized as functional imperatives, for example in Lloyd Warner’s Yankee City research. The Lynds applied “the approach of the cultural anthropologist” and used official documents, statistics, newspapers, interviews, and surveys. They organized their data into six fundamental types of activities (getting a living; making a home; training the young; using leisure; religious practices; community activities), but the underlying concept is the division of the community into the working-class majority (70%) and the business class. The Middletown study became a model for the “community study” approach. In contrast, W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt (*The Status System of a Modern Community*. 1942. Yale University Press. Vol II of the “Yankee City” series) used similar methods to arrive at a functional analysis of stratification, based on functional anthropology, especially Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, both drawing on Durkheim. Like the Lynds, the Yankee City team identified “social classes” (three of them with an additional three-fold segmentation within each class), but the examination of classes was folded into an overall functionalist theory. Later in the paper, we will discuss the question of whether similar methods (in these two cases, community studies) can be linked to markedly different theoretical models (in this case, conflict theory and functionalist analysis).

The Interpretative Tradition: The Example of Weber and the Logic of Verstehen

The second tradition which focuses on interpretation can be seen in the work of Max Weber (1949). Here the key term is not correlation but *verstehen*, “to understand.” This means getting inside the heads of the research “subjects”. In this paradigm, there are no “behaviors” (measurable utterances and gestures, broken down into units by an external observer and amenable to analysis as operational variables) but only actions in which exterior and interior are inextricably linked and always contextualized in a historical time, even if it is elided in the “ethnographic present.” Weber’s *verstehen* is the fount from which a large range of methods spring, from macro-level and historically-based comparative analysis (for example, in Riesebrodt’s *Pious Passion*, a comparative analysis of Iranian Islamicist thought and Protestant fundamentalism (1993) and in

Campbell and Schoenfeld’s examination of changes in the U.S. penal system (2013)) to micro-interactionist research (though the genealogy is more stretched in this instance, and Erving Goffman explicitly connected his work on the interaction order to the Social Forces Tradition (Verhoeven 1993). This logic of inquiry has several possible foci, none of them amenable to the correlational methods of survey research or (most) secondary data analysis, although statistical data might be included to help understand the context. The key elements of the interpretive, *verstehen* paradigm include:

- The unfolding of interaction;
- Embodiment;
- The search “inside the heads” of the research participants, whether through observation, interviews, life narratives, focus groups, and the analysis of culture and ideology (in all the versions of that complex and contentious term);
- The concept of action as opposed to measurable behavior;
- The organizational case study, especially of social movements, political parties, and state actors;
- The examination of symbolic universes constituted in discourses, texts, material objects and icons, and rituals and games.

All this could be coded and quantified, in order to fit it into a simplified version of the correlational paradigm, but a great deal would be lost in the process, above all, the location of this “material” in a historic context.

Although Weber could be credited with the invention of this interpretive paradigm, in fact Durkheim made a parallel contribution in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915), an ethnographically-based challenge to Kantian a priori; Durkheim argues that society—that is to say, interaction and the construction of a shared symbolic universe—constitutes the fundamental categories of thought, including religious belief and even basic concepts of time and space.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the interpretive tradition was also expanded by the Chicago School, with works such as Thomas and Znaniecki’s study of Polish immigrants (W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (2 volumes, 1918–1919). University of Chicago Press) which pioneered the use of “human documents” (especially correspondence) and focused on “attitudes and values.” The textual analysis and overall approach emphasized the interpretive concept of “the definition of the situation.”

Finally, Pitirim A. Sorokin’s “logico-meaningful method,” presented in Vol. I of *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1937), moved toward cultural analysis in opposition to Vilfredo Pareto’s “logico-experimental method” modeled on natural sciences. In doing so, Sorokin cautioned us be historically mindful as we approach the discipline of Sociology. In his essay “Amnesia and the New Columbuses” published in *Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology and Related Sciences* (1956), he warned of two major pitfalls into which new Sociologists too often fall. First, he argued that younger scholars suffer from historical amnesia and forget to acknowledge their predecessors who came before them. As a result, they find themselves in the “discoverer’s complex” in which they mistakenly assume, in a deluded sense of superiority, that their discoveries are ones that have never been made before (Sorokin 1956, p.5). Furthermore, Sorokin warned us not to be taken in by “Quantophrenia,” whereby mathematical models and statistics are taken as the only modes

to establish scientific precision and true validity. More often than not, these models are misused and misfire as they are applied across the discipline to everything (Sorokin 1956, p. 103). This is especially the case with phenomena that do not lend themselves to such modeling, leading to a scientific rigor that in the end is simply a fallacy of Sociology parading as if it were exact knowledge modeled on the natural sciences.

A Mixed Tradition?

At this point the reader may object that the categorical division into “Social Forces” and “Interpretation” is too simple, that we are seeing a spectrum rather than two categories, and that many major works of sociology are actually in the middle of the spectrum or “mixed.”

Of course, a dichotomous classification neglects the way these two paradigms can be combined within a single study. For example, many ethnographies include quantitative data, and a social autopsy such as Klinenberg’s *Heat Wave* moves from the “Social Forces Tradition” (in his examination of individual and community-level correlates of mortality) to an analysis of organizations (municipal social service agencies, the police department, city administration, and media). Was there ever a genuinely mixed paradigm? Recently doubts have been raised about the possibility of mixed inquiry (Hancock et al. 2018), but a few magisterial pieces of work suggest that it is possible, if rare. For example, already at the end of the nineteenth century, W. E. B. DuBois carried out an intensive ethnography of the 7th Ward of Philadelphia that included the study of stratification within the black community based on interviews and urban mapping (*The Philadelphia Negro*, 1899). Much of it followed a social forces model to document and discuss the conditions that shaped the lives of African American Philadelphians, but as DuBois developed concepts such as “double consciousness” and “the Veil” he also contributed to the interpretive tradition which has a strong role in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1909).

A “mixed” method and interests in both traditions can also be discerned in William F. Whyte’s *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. (1943. University of Chicago Press). Famous for its use of participant observation method (derived from functional anthropology) and use of a “key informant” to understand the meaningful aspects of community life, this study outwardly largely exemplifies the social forces tradition of identifying conditions that shape life for a community; but extensive use of biographical data, deployment of social psychological explanations (reflecting a much closer relationship between psychology and sociology in that era), and reflective discussion of what we would now term “positionality of the researcher” link it to the interpretive tradition.

To conclude the discussion of “mixed” examples, we remind the reader that we have already commented on Adorno’s work on the authoritarian personality as another example of bridging the two major paradigms.

Hancock et al. (2018) provide a valuable discussion of issues in combining these two paradigms and blending qualitative and quantitative data in “mixed methods” research. They take a critical view of the combinations, placing the label “cameo appearance” on the introduction of the secondary method (quantitative data production in ethnographic research and ethnographic and other qualitative methods within a quantitative overall design); and they assert that in cameo appearances the fundamental axioms of the method are treated casually and never integrated nor synthesized into a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena at hand.

Taking the Traditions to the Extreme:

Although one can point to examples of genuinely mixed methods in which a single piece of research utilizes and balances both paradigms, one can also point to the extreme ends of the spectrum, to inquiry that categorically rejects the “other” orientation.

On the one hand, we now have Big Data, so resolutely committed to quantification and objectification that its focus on correlations precludes theoretical explanation at all. By taking the Social Forces methodological paradigm to a *reductio ad absurdum*, it undermines the very notion of social forces, substituting data for the effort to conceptualize and name the underlying social forces.

On the other hand, in inquiry that is often labeled as “feminist” or “post-modern”, the interpretive paradigm is taken to its extreme conclusion, a refusal to consider the possibility that data and knowledge could ever be objective at all and a totalizing embrace of interpretation. The focus is on the interactive production of knowledge by the researcher and the researched. The interview becomes a “speech act” between interviewer and interviewee (Alvesson 2002: 122) and the positionality of researcher is a paramount consideration. Standpoint epistemology represents a closely related orientation (Smith 1990, 1992).

Of course, not all feminist inquiry takes this extreme position, and in fact it can fall into either tradition. Recently for example in Scott and Siltanen (2017)—intersectionality—a concept that grows out of the interpretive tradition—has been taken to a strongly social forces and quantified location in multivariate analysis.

Conflict Theories and the two Traditions: Interpretation Is Not Endorsement and Objectivity is Not Indifference

The reader may at this point wonder whether there is a correlation between two paradigms of inquiry and the more conventional division of theories into conflict theories and other (largely functionalist) theories. Here initial conventional assumptions have to be challenged: While the social forces paradigm appears to be one of a coldly objective gaze and is claimed to be a “masculinist” inattention to the inner lives of the “research subjects,” it may actually be the position that is more critical of dominant ideologies and more sensitive to the possibility and necessity of praxis to change the world.

There are at least two distinct ways of integrating critical conflict theory with different paradigms of inquiry. The conflict theorist can firmly cleave to the Social Forces paradigm, objectively and ‘externally’ understanding the prevailing social conditions, “the objective conditions” as Marxists once said. We can return to Martineau’s account of life in the ante-bellum South; as an abolitionist she wanted to keep her distance from the world view of the slave-owning class and for that very reason, her observations are firmly within the social forces paradigm.

But a second way of connecting conflict theory to paradigms of inquiry is to move back and forth between analysis of the social forces and an interpretive strategy. The interpretation can be aligned with the subaltern side of the conflict, as for example in the work of Patricia Hill Collins. But interpretation does not always mean sympathy with the world views that are being interpreted. It can mean examination of the world views of the dominant actors, as is brilliantly exemplified in Karen Ho’s *Liquidated* (2009), an interpretive but highly critical foray into the myths, narratives, and world views of Wall Street investment bankers.

Interpretation does not have mean endorsement, and in Ho's analysis the interpretive paradigm is firmly anchored to a critical understanding of social forces in the field of finance capital. Her interpretive data expose the ideologies of the dominant actors and the role of these ideologies in legitimating the prevalence of unequal social forces.

In closing this section, it may be useful to discuss these two fundamental paradigms in the terms that Burawoy (and others) have used: that the first paradigm represents positive science and calls for reliability, representativeness, replicability, and a non-reactive (i.e., detached) role for the researcher, while the second paradigm is closer to a reflexive science and directs the researcher towards the extended case method, in which the research is extended in four ways that run counter to the positivist precepts: 1) recognizing the researcher as a participant; 2) bringing in history and a broader macro-context; 3) identifying external forces that impinge on the study setting, and explicitly including theory, rather than leaving it as an unspoken foundation for the correlational "findings"; 4) avoiding the reduction of research questions into a series of testable hypotheses. Burawoy himself recognizes that this distinction is often blurred and that both sides have something to offer in sociological research, although he obviously leans toward the reflexive model which he labels "the hermeneutic dimension of social science (Burawoy 2009)." Durkheim would certainly object to the view that theory is weak or even excluded in the positive, correlational model of inquiry. The route to the theoretical and the historical is different in the two paradigms, but ultimately the historical contextuality of all human action provides the link between the "qualitative" and the "quantitative" –well beyond any cameo appearances.

This said, it seems crucial to introduce students to both theory and methods in the same learning activities (and courses), whether the specific methods belong to the reflexive (and often qualitative) interpretive designs or to the positivist social-forces (and generally quantitative and correlational) category of inquiry. In fact, students should be encouraged to consider what "mixes and matches" of methods, designs and theories are possible, as one way of exploring the issues and problems that arise when linking theory and methods. For example, is Marxist inquiry always of the reflexive type, given the premise that praxis, theory, and inquiry must be unified? Should it not begin with a Social Forces paradigm, objectively identifying the impact and effects of the "relations of production" before moving to any interpretive type of examination of ideology? Why are quantitative, correlational studies so often linked to structural-functional theories, and is this not the case because the data reveal the underlying structural social forces? (The affinity of quantitative methods with rational-choice and market models of human action are more self-evident, given the atomistic logic of inquiry, the assumption of coherent answers from individuals, and the individual-level data that characterize surveys.)

This discussion of "mixes and matches" between theories and methods brings us to a deeper understanding of research designs and methods. For "methods" are composed of both the designs, differentiated by their fundamental logic of inquiry, and the methods in a narrower sense, the specific activities and practices of research. Ethnographies, social autopsies, and quantitative data analysis constitute distinct logics of inquiry, distinct frameworks for producing knowledge, and distinct views of what constitutes a "case" (Ragin and Becker 1992). However, any one of them might make use of interviewing as a method of data production. "Interviewing" or "observation" are methods that can be used with different designs, although they are necessarily organized and deployed differently depending on the design in which they are utilized and perhaps ultimately depending on the theory that drives the choice of design.

For example, we might see how Marx used a survey method in his 1880 plans for an enquête ouvrière but these interviews about working conditions and workers' everyday lives were linked to socialist organization and guided by the theoretical concept of praxis. (Bottomore 1956:203). In a similar vein, one can also argue that within a large current of theory, different streams are associated with distinct ways of producing data. For example, we might argue that analytical Marxists would not be opposed to the production of individual-level data, whereas these data would not be of much importance in a Hegelian-Marxist framework or an Althusserian-structuralist one.

In closing this section, we argue that in the past these issues of theory-methods matchings (and mismatches) were much closer to the surface of sociological inquiry. They are nowhere better illustrated than in Goffman's dramatic assertion that his apparent micro-interactionist approach was in fact a neo-Social Forces reformulation of Durkheim's focus on normative regulation (Verhoeven 1993). This revelation welded together classical structural theory and post-war interactionist methodologies. Goffman de-linked his work from symbolic interactionist theory (where many wanted to locate it) and tied his observational methods to theories of regulation, previously deemed to be largely macro in scope and structural-functional in their theoretical grounding. His assertion thus suddenly shed a new light on normative regulation in particular, and theory-methods linkages in general and forced his audience to rethink their assumptions about these linkages.

In the next section, we discuss questions that can guide the pedagogy of linking theories and methods and describe learning activities to implement this goal.

Part two: Towards a Pedagogy of Linking Theory and Methods

Five Questions for Linking Theory and Methods:

In order to facilitate the dialog between theory and methods (and the dialog between "quantitative" and "qualitative" research designs), we begin with a series of provocative questions in order to make students aware of the links and to encourage them to develop projects and thought experiments that probe the answers to these questions. Pursuing these questions with students calls for instructors who are themselves open to both theory and methods, whether the point of departure is a theory class or a research/methods class. The questions point to broad strategies for thinking about theory-methods links; we conclude the essay by suggesting a few examples of specific learning activities to further explore the questions.

One: Can this Contemporary Topic Be Handled by Different Theories?

In this project, students select a contemporary topic or issue of interest to them (e.g., police-community relations; or income inequality; or racial and class disparities in educational outcomes) and develop a series of research proposals for different theorists. This series of proposals illustrates how different theoretical foundations require different forms of research questions and call for different research strategies. For example, a study that uses interactionist theory might develop a research strategy is similar to that of Jean Anyon's observations of classrooms in different schools (Anyon 1980). One can conceptualize this research strategy as an effort to identify a prism or paradigm that gives us

insight into the workings of the whole system, whereas a study of educational disparities based on quantitative data would offer a more statistically convincing but also more fragmented and dispersed set of observations. Ideally these approaches would both be in play, not as small strained cameo appearances introduced by a researcher whose heart really lies in one or the other, but in a more dialogically composed conversation.

Two: Could this Empirical Work Have Been Carried out with a Different Theory?

In this exercise, students select an example of empirical work, identify its foundational theories, and ask whether the observed phenomena could be “tethered” to a different theoretical foundation. The theoretical choice made by Alice Goffman (2014) in *On the Run* provides an example, suggested by a graduate student (Juan Chavez): Why does she state that her work is in a dialog with Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and his concept of the Panopticon (Foucault 1977)? Why did she not choose a piece from Foucault’s later work that gives explicit attention to racialization and racism as a form of bio-politics in his 1975–1976 lectures at the College de France “Society Must Be Defended” (Foucault 2003)? Or Marx? Durkheim? Or perhaps Erving Goffman as a micro-Social Forces theorist concerned with the interactive basis of normative regulation? How and why did she choose the foundational theory that she addresses and could this choice have been different? Would her data production and research strategy have to be different to adjust it to a new theoretical foundation?

Three: Could this Theory Have Been Supported by Different Data?

Can Bourdieu’s theoretical work on social reproduction in France be “transferred,” “applied” or replicated in the United States with its vastly decentralized educational institutions (Lotringer and Cohen 2001; Wacquant 1993)? Would the very categories of analysis become meaningless in the face of a different reality, formed by very different historical forces? This is akin to the problem of generalization and directly addresses concerns raised by Burawoy in his extended case method (2009). The exercise involves reading the original work and then imagining and discussing a transposition of the research question and design to a new setting.

Four: What would Happen to the Theoretical Basis of a Study if we Changed the Research Strategy and Design?

For example, many surveys are linked to structural-functional or rational-choice models of society. If we were to tap into the same field of opinions, perceptions, and views using unstructured interviews or embodied ethnography, would we find that our data compel a shift to other types of theory, such as the work of Foucault? (A graduate student for example suggested that Laumann et al.’s (2000) survey research on sexualities would be transformed from its connection to “sex-market” theory into a Foucauldian theoretical framework if unstructured interviews became the method of choice.)¹ We could extend this question from designs to specific methods: do even specific methods, such as interviewing or participant-observation,

¹ Juan Chavez, March 2017; class paper.

which appear within many different research designs, constrain and direct the choice of theoretical explanations.

Five: What Is the Role of History and Historical Context?

When students are asked to develop a research proposal for a contemporary issue in relation to a theory they are also being asked to confront changing historical contexts. These exercises address Michael Burawoy's call for an extended case method (Burawoy 1991, 2009). Although the student, unlike the mature ethnographer, cannot trace historical changes in their research site, the exercise at least gives a current snapshot of a longer process and thereby encourages us to ask "what happens to a theory and to a set of research findings over time?" "Do these changes also have implications for research designs and strategies?" For example, one might go back to Merton's theoretical article on social structure and anomie (1938), as well as the symbolic interactionist discussion of opiate addiction in the post-war period (Lindesmith 1947; Lindesmith et al. 1968) and ask how these analyses might change when we examine the contemporary opioid epidemic. What carries over from the earlier perspectives (Merton's structural one or Lindesmith and Strauss's social constructionist one) as we try to apply them to new circumstances that include new populations and locations as well as new health practices of doctors and pharmaceutical companies (widespread prescriptions for new types of opium derivatives)? The addition of theoretical questions and the testing of earlier theories instantly deepens the proposed research from a synchronic empirical question (who gets addicted and what gets them addicted?) to a broader reflection of how society and social institutions changed or failed to change. Willis (2000) provides an outstanding example of how the Marxist analysis of working-class social reproduction in *Learning to Labor* (1973) had to be updated to address shrinkage in employment and new cultural forms in the post-Thatcher era.

Learning Activities to Support Exploration of these Questions:

What are the learning activities that engage students in addressing these questions? Here we address three learning activities by describing and illustrating them with a few specific examples drawn from student work:

These kinds of exercises encourage a deep-level critical thinking about empirical research and the definition of social issues and problems. And they encourage students to think about how theories (and not only empirical data) are products of specific historical contexts that the specific theories may or may not be able to outlive.

Learning activities need to venture beyond response papers. The typical response paper format (especially but not only utilized in undergraduate classes) allows students to voice opinions about a text (I like it, I don't like it, it matches my personal experience, etc.) without much analysis; at best, they express criticism by simply identifying flaws in methodology, often of the type "it wasn't a representative sample" or "the researcher did not reflect the views of the community," but they are rarely asked to address how the flaw should be remedied (Duneier 2011).

Since theory and morality are frequently confounded, graduate students (and more sophisticated undergraduates as well) complain that the authors paid no attention to positionality, and the concern is expressed as a moral judgment—that the researcher has shown disrespect for the community—rather than an intellectual critique, and so this

response fails to point to ways of changing research practices (Hedley and Markowitz 2001). Nor does it answer the tough questions about the relationship between “positionality” and “objectivity.”

Students thus oscillate between two poles without being able to address them dialectically. On the one hand, only the positivist, correlational paradigm associated with the social- forces tradition seems to generate “real data” and “real evidence.” Students find it very difficult to see qualitative research as anything but anecdotal and exploratory; in quantitative-methods classes they have learned that qualitative research is only exploratory, a prelude to real data collection. On the other hand, in qualitative research, they expect a researcher to “respect” the views of the community and therefore to substitute these views for analysis, while eschewing any interpretation of his or her own and essentially ignoring the “attitudinal fallacy, “that is, believing that verbal accounts accurately reflect behavior” (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Students have come to believe that believing indigenous accounts is the best way to recognize the “positionality” of the researcher and therefore treat these accounts rather unquestioningly. Theory is not seen as the ultimate source of research objectivity, as *the* practice that frees the researcher from *both* narrow amassing of correlational facts *and* deferential abdication to the opinions of the indigenous community. A fuller discussion of issues of positionality, truth in ethnography, and resolving differences in interpretations provided by the researcher and the research subjects/participants can be seen in the following studies: Wacquant 2002; Duneier 2011; and Kurzman in Burawoy 1991; and May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000.

Attention to the historical context of human action addresses and deepens the constant student concern about the “up to dateness” of what they are reading. Students will often voice the complaint that the findings are “out of date” but they are not able to take this superficial criticism to the level of reflection on history, changes in society and institutions, and even changes in how we understand social phenomena. Encouraging students to take their critical responses to the level of theoretical foundations ultimately forces reflection on different perspectives, on different research paradigms, and on how these themselves change over time and reflect historical contexts.

Examples of three Learning Activities that Link Theory and Methods:

Let’s look at examples of activities that students can pursue as they begin their journey through the logic of inquiry and try to link theories with empirical designs and methods.

One: Writing Mini-Proposals for Empirical Inquiry in a Theory Class.

As they learn about a theory, students write a brief proposal for empirical research that draws on the theory and uses it as a foundational theory for the empirical inquiry. An example would be “replicating” Durkheim’s study of suicide to carry out a contemporary study of homicide, with similar demographic and cross-national analysis and a similar search for the “deep structures” of normative regulation and social cohesion.

In a graduate theory class, students wrote the following short proposals for empirical research for types of theory that were read in a course on Classical and Modern Sociological Theory: Marxist theories of capitalism and the relations of production; Marxist theories of ideology and the superstructure; Durkheim on society; Durkheim on the logic of inquiry; Weber (and Ritzer’s work on McDonaldization); Du Bois; the

social behaviorists (Mead and Cooley); Simmel, Freud, and the individual in society; the Chicago School; Marxist-influenced theories of culture (Frankfurt School); and post-war U.S. sociology (Parsons, Merton, and the varieties of functionalism; Mills and conflict theories; and symbolic interaction); and Goffman who can be seen as both a micro-interactionist and a neo-Social Forces theorist.

The proposals are relatively short, and because the students varied in their familiarity with research methods, the proposed designs are often simply stated rather than elaborated, with the favorite methods being interviews with key elites, ethnographies, observation, organizational case studies, and secondary data analysis. The key point is that these applications of theory to contemporary topics are imagined as empirical inquiry, rather than a mere statement that the theory applies or a specification of useful concepts for the application. The student papers specified research questions and the designs and methods that could be used in empirical research. This exercise also induces reflection on the contrasts between grounded theory, theoretical abduction, and foundational theories (Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Scott and Garner 2013; Reichertz 2010.)

To provide samples of student work, we offer a list of proposals written by students for two of the modules: Marxist theories of capitalism and class relations; and Weber (with a follow-up based on the work of George Ritzer).

Marx on class and capitalism:

- High unemployment rates of African American men
- The organization of agricultural labor in the US
- Using court costs and fines as a local revenue base in the neoliberal era (pertains more to superstructure)
- Child care arrangements by social class
- Uber and the phenomenon of the part-time contractor
- Poverty and ideology among U.S. blue-collar workers
- The increasing level of income inequality
- Alienation among Walgreen workers and managers
- Investment in African economies
- The US health care system

Weber (with an additional reading by George Ritzer on McDonaldization):

Tracing themes of rational-legal modes of action, bureaucracy and organization, religion and economy, and the triad of class/status/party as dimensions of inequality and social action.

- NGOs and other organizations as stakeholders in the refugee crisis
 - The Million Man March and its religious foundations in both Protestantism and Islam
 - University management of student enrollment; a comparative analysis of class, status, and party in national power elites
 - The sources of communal activism in Black Lives Matter
 - Business transactions between corporations and religious organizations
 - Class and power and their role in Democratic Party policy formulation
 - US health care and McDonaldization (several specific topics within this rubric)
 - The role of PACs in contemporary U.S. political action
 - The marketing of “artisan choice” and “creativity” within the overall McDonaldization of the fast-food industry
 - McDonaldization in the criminal-justice system.
-

Two: Writing Mini-Proposals and/or Fieldwork Papers Informed by Theory in a Methods Class

Reading and re-interpreting contemporary empirical research: Students read an empirical study, note the theoretical foundations cited in it, and suggest an alternative theoretical interpretation.

The logic of linking theory and methods can also be flipped, with students asked to provide theories that could be foundational for specified research design. For example, in a graduate methods class, students wrote theory-informed short proposals modeled on the following studies: An ethnography based on Pattillo's *Black Picket Fences* (1999) and drawing on Weber on class and status, critical race theory, and social disorganization; an embodied ethnography, based on Wacquant's *Body and Soul* (2004), drawing on Bourdieu and the concept of habitus (1990); social autopsies, based on Klinenberg's *Heat Wave* (2002) and using his model of moving from a quantitative Social Forces analysis of who was affected by the disaster (in terms of individual demographic characteristics and community characteristics) to an Interpretive analysis of how government agencies and other social service organizations responded to the disaster; examples of quantitative studies using secondary data analysis and surveys; and a social history of twentieth century European immigration and the Catholic Church based on the content analysis of published letters to a saint (Orsi 1998).

In each case, students were challenged to understand why and how the author had deployed specific theories to understand the social phenomena of the study, and as they wrote their proposals for empirical inquiry they were asked to provide the theoretical foundations for their projects. This was a difficult challenge for some students who had little background in sociological theory and therefore did not fully understand the authors' choices and were not able to come up with alternative theoretical options. In a course with ample time for field work, this same activity can be carried out based on actual student fieldwork; The students can conduct a field study and then identify one or more alternative theories to account for the observed empirical phenomena. For example, students in an undergraduate qualitative methods class observed shopping behavior and used concepts drawn from Simmel, Marx, Benjamin, and Marcuse to analyze their empirical findings.

Three: Using an in-Class Exercise or Student Fieldwork to Connect Empirical Observations to Theories

Students carry out a small research project of their own and when they write the research report they develop at least one theoretical perspective on the data they have produced or they can conduct in class exercises and then connect their observations to their readings in theory. For example, in an undergraduate qualitative methods class, students participated in an in-class focus group exercise in which five students talked about their food habits in response to questions from moderators, while the rest of the class observed. In the discussion, students were encouraged to move from the scattered individual responses to conceptualized conclusions. (See Pederson 2010 for more on interactive strategies for teaching theory.) They came up with two concepts: identity formation, noting how the focus group participants talked about their (fading) ethnic heritage and about their own identities organized around "being healthy"; and globalization, noting how the participants often crossed culinary borders and incorporated

foods from different cultures into their food habits. After this conversation, itself already quite conceptual and theoretical, a student of Nigerian background said that he thought the food preferences he had heard described in the focus-group exercise were entirely individual and that no patterns were discernible. Far from dead-ending in the conclusion that “it’s up to the individual,” this astute observation led to a conversation about food habits in other places (Nigeria, Southern Bavaria, etc.) and the degree to which they were highly uniform and structured, and this contrast in turn led directly to Durkheim’s concept of anomie and the tendency in modern market societies for informal normative regulation and constraints on expectations to break down, producing highly individualized behaviors (with the United States as the foremost example). Here a methods exercise led to conceptualization and ultimately to theory, placing the apparently scattered personal remarks of the focus group into a coherent set of macro-contextualized conclusions.

Conclusion: Restoring the Theory-Methods Linkage.

The impulse of many students is to force every proposal into a correlational hypothesis testing format, perhaps because their courses in contemporary psychology have propelled them in this direction or because of their training in statistics (which seems to call for this format) or because of current notions of what constitutes an “evidence-based” conclusion.

As students encounter more examples of the interpretive paradigms, they gradually see the strengths and basic practices of this paradigm. Reading ethnographies, viewing documentary films, carrying out micro-interactional observations, and tackling historical research gradually moves them away from believing that all inquiry must follow the correlational paradigm.

But the correlational paradigm is often taught without sufficient attention to the underlying social forces; the correlations cannot be understood without a theoretical (and often historical) leap. What causes the health disparities between white and black people? Why do frequent residential moves have a negative impact on educational achievement? What is the underlying causal mechanism for these types of correlations? It is tempting to stop with “turtles all the way down”—moving through more and more refined correlational analysis with additional controls and multiple hierarchical layers until the key variables become manifest and their interactions are fully clarified. But ultimately this path also takes us to theory and the concept of social forces: Why are there neighborhood effects? What historical process has produced this specific mix of social class and racial stratification in the disparities we are investigating? What has produced the balance of local, national, and global determinants of whatever it is we are studying?

The mini-proposals written under the sign of interpretive logic also carry problems. How do we select an interpretive framework? What evidence do we have for the “correctness” of the interpretation? If the researcher’s interpretation differs from the views of the community, what is the basis of the intellectual authority of the researcher? If we argue that a specific practice (or event, or pattern of interaction, or symbol) is “paradigmatic” as Geertz does for the Balinese cockfight, what evidence do we have to present for this conclusion (Geertz 1973; Duneier 2011)? And where does the paradigm come from and how does it become isomorphic with other practices and with the culture as a whole?

Both the quantitative (or positivist) and the qualitative (or reflective) paradigms call for a theoretical grounding. These examples demonstrate how activities that link theory and methods and provide a historical grounding for both can deepen the conversation in both graduate and undergraduate courses as well as in curricular design and encourage a more complex understanding of sociology as a discipline (Halasz and Kaufman 2008). Although immediate rewards seem to accrue to individual instructors who focus narrowly on either theory or methods, and within methods, on either the “quantitative” or “qualitative” model, the discipline as a whole would be strengthened as an intellectual enterprise if we introduce the next generation of scholars and practitioners to a comprehensive and integrated understanding of our field.

In the final analysis, the intellectual reward for thinking about theory and research together is playfulness, a child-like delight in solving puzzles and mixing, matching, and sorting ideas and data. We can confront, deconstruct, and joke about the malign “concept of the concept” (to use Adorno’s term) by this playful handling of concepts and research acts. We sit at a big play table, dropping brightly colored shapes (research practices and data) into brightly colored boxes (concepts and theories)—which will fit best? The pleasure is tangible, sensuous, and even transgressive.

To return to more serious motivations, scholars and scholarship are now in an age of commodification, marketization, and co-optation by private interests, and so the contribution Sociology makes to civil society grows ever more important (Burawoy 2016). Universities are under pressure to produce experts with marketable skills rather than intellectuals with a critical understanding of society. The disappearance of public and private funding has reshaped the terrain of the universities and colleges where most sociologists work. These social forces pose a challenge for how, we collectively as Sociologists, must now rethink about the role and relevance of our enterprise (Hancock 2016).

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