7. WRITING ABOUT SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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"Writing is like driving at night: you can only see as far as the headlights, but somehow you make the whole trip that way."

—E.L. Doctorow

Many students struggle with reading and writing about abstract ideas. Sociological theory does not have to be highly abstract—sociology is ultimately about the daily lived experiences of people in particular times and places. But sociological theory is a way to generalize from individual-level experiences and empirical data. Using specific examples can help ground a discussion of abstract ideas. Below I will outline several ways to clarify your thinking and writing about sociological theory. First make sure you know what you are doing and what you are talking about. Then work on making your writing as clear and concise as possible (theory is not about sounding overly complex or using big words). Finally, use the work of other theorists to develop your own arguments. In the below I will outline some solutions to these issues by mobilizing examples from my own work. I don't do this out of ego, but rather because I can explain what I was trying to do and assess whether I was at least partially successful.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

What kind of theory are you using? Are you developing your own work, or are you extending the work of others? Start by making sure that you understand the foundational concepts of social theory and know which you are working with (and why).

There are two basic approaches to theory: Induction and Deduction. The process of induction proceeds from small to big: from empirical evidence to a generalization based upon that data. That is to say, first we observe the world, from these observations we notice certain patterns, and based on those patterns we formulate a hypothesis. If the hypothesis tests well, we may shape it into a theory.

Deduction is the opposite approach: we start with a larger theoretical frame that explains how things work. Based on this frame, we study the world and see if our empirical observations conform to the theory. If so, the theory is upheld. If the world looks different from what was predicted we must revise the theory.

So what kind of theory are you working from, is it inductive or deductive? Are you using an existing theory to make predictions? Or are you looking at a set of observations and drawing inferences? Knowing the difference in your own work and the work of others helps make your writing and thinking more clear.

ON WRITING IN GENERAL, AND THEORY IN PARTICULAR

Writing about theory starts with knowing the theoretical material backwards and forwards. The best way to get a handle on the details of a

theory is to start with reading the primary sources and get to know them well. Then move on to explore secondary sources. Find the authors who are most often cited about a topic and examine them to help you understand the nuances of the primary source. Be sure to look at the reference sections of the secondary sources and take some time to explore those. There will be a lot of them, so be careful: going down this rabbit hole too far can end up as a form of procrastination. But it is the best way to get deeply into the topic at hand.

Once you think you have a handle on the subtleties of the theory, start writing about it. Start generally and work towards the particulars. Be sure to keep your writing simple and concise. Avoid quoting long passages, in general you should not quote more than two or three lines of text; paraphrase often instead. Finally, avoid ending your discussion with a quote from someone else: always give yourself the last word of interpretation.

BUILDING FROM OTHER THEORETICIANS

Sometimes in writing about theory you will be connecting multiple, broad, high-level ideas. In these cases it might be appropriate to cite entire works by a theorist as a way of gesturing towards those large ideas. In the below extract, I try to draw lines from the spatial reality of bicycle messengers to their cultural liminality (Wehr 2009):

> Bicycle messengers occupy a complex position in the city and in our culture: they are somewhere in between cars and pedestrians, they operate at the margins of the street, and their jobs pay the low wages common to the service sector. They are somewhere in between, or liminal: not quite one, and yet not exactly the other (Turner 1967). Yet this status of being

liminal–being different from others–is precisely what binds this unique community together: through rituals of working, racing, and partying, messengers build and rebuild their community, in many cases taking pride in their difference. Pierre Bourdieu has written extensively on the production and reproduction of culture in contemporary society: Communities can be formed by tradition, through common experiences of adversity, or because of similarities in experience. These connections can be fleeting, or even imaginary, but often they are persistent, even if they are informal (Anderson 1991). There are cultural symbols that stand out too–some people find spatial and cultural meaning in postal zip codes (Beverly Hills 90210) or telephone area codes (Brooklyn 718), people identify with a place, a group, an occupation, or a style of self-presentation. Cultural communities are developed in part by individuals practicing improvisational techniques within the larger structures of society, something Bourdieu called the habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1984).

In this piece, I cite several large works of theory development by Pierre Bourdieu and Victor Turner as a foundation for theorizing about where bicycle messengers fit into our contemporary society. While gesturing towards their works, I am assuming that the reader will have a level of familiarity with their ideas. This, of course, will not always be an accurate assumption, so be careful.

Sometimes you might put two theoretical frames in conversation with one another as a way of moving your argument forward. In the below extract from an article written with Tao Li (Li and Wehr, 2007), we compare the theory of pragmatism with rational choice theory to begin an explanation of why people who may hold

pro-environmental attitudes do not actually engage in pro-environmental behavior:

> There are several attempts to account for this gap between attitudes and behaviors. Two theoretic approaches come from the pragmatist school and rational choice theories. Pragmatists explain behavior as generally patterned and non-reflexive. Thus an abstract expression of concern in the discursive realm may have little connection with everyday lived practices (Dewey 1927/1988; Giddens 1984). People are, in short, subject to behavioral momentum where habits and routines that reduce uncertainty are adhered to in the face of social problems or the need for change (Stern and Aronson 1984). The rational choice explanation uses a game-theoretic model, assuming that actors balance the potential costs and benefits of their actions. Since any individual action will make little overall difference and actors are relatively powerless to change the behavior of others, each rational agent will choose to minimize the costs of their behaviors since the overall environmental quality will continue to decline in the face of general intransigence to environmental protective action—a variation on the tragedy of the commons (Buttel and Gijswijt 2001: 47; Hardin 1968).

Both of these theoretical perspectives explain the mismatch between attitudes and behaviors, but with very different assumptions about the foundation of human behavior. Notice that at this point, we do not declare one theory a better explanatory fit. Putting these two theoretical approaches in dialogue with one another helped us on the road of developing our own explanations.

Finally, make sure that you know what you are trying to say and then say it plainly. If you are having trouble writing clearly about a theory, you may not be clear about it yet. Confused writing usually originates in confused thinking. Even complex topics can be summarized concisely. In the below extract from my 2012 book on the Do It Yourself movements, I use Habermas' ideas of "system" and "lifeworld" to demonstrate how DIY to be a "take back" from capitalism:

> Jurgen Habermas, a contemporary German social theorist had a term for the ways that capitalism takes over social relationships, such as inserting money between producer and consumer: the colonization of the lifeworld. Habermas (1984) argues that our social lives can be understood as involving two different worlds: There is the world of economic production and politics (which he called "system"), and the world of home, play, and sexual reproduction (which he called "lifeworld"). System is characterized by bureaucracy, rationality, and instrumental means-ends calculations. Lifeworld, on the other hand, is characterized by shared values, norms based in morals or traditions, and personal relationships. Of course these two realms are not completely separate, for example intimate relationships are regulated by the government (marriage, domestic partnerships, divorce, alimony, etc.). Habermas calls this the "colonization of the lifeworld." The forces of capitalism and government insert themselves into our daily lives beyond the workplace: we buy things on the market (gasoline, groceries, clothes), and our private behaviors are governed (federally-mandated health insurance, homosexuals cannot marry in most states). Money and power are the currency of the system, and

wherever we see them in our daily lives it is likely that colonization has occurred. But, as with many processes, the colonization of the lifeworld has its reverse: decolonization. A guerilla gardener from Detroit illustrates Habermas' ideas clearly: "This is a way of decolonizing ourselves from the corporate food structure and doing something better at the same time" (Lee and Abowd 2011). Community gardens on vacant lots allow neighbors to resist the invasion of money and power into the farmer-consumer relationship.

I hope that my writing is clear enough for the reader to understand the root concepts of colonization and decolonization of the lifeworld. Notice the repeated use of basic examples from everyday life (including one that is now out of date!) to illustrate the higher-level theoretical points.

There is a final type of writing about sociological theory: a close reading and explication of a particular theoretical position. This work requires that the author is very familiar with the text, and represents a deep dive into the specifics of the theory. In this example below, from the book Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex, co-authored with Elyshia Aseltine (2013), after exploring the Marxist and Durkheimian perspectives on crime, prison, and society, we develop an intersectional position on the PIC:

> It is important to note that in-group/out-group membership is a complicated affair. To understand the nature of oppression by identity, we turn to feminists and critical race theorists. Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "matrix of domination" is a useful theoretical tool to describe how oppression is experienced in complex ways. This is because of the intersection of multiple social identities, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. In her pioneering work Black Feminist Thought, Collins moves away from "additive" conceptualizations, where one is either black or white, male or female, rich or poor. In reality, we are all much more complex than any one or two of these dichotomies can describe. The matrix of domination posits an interlocking set of social relations, characterized by multiple characteristics such as race, class, and gender, but also sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and a number of other factors (Collins 1990:225-7). Under an additive model one might be tempted to classify white women as being more privileged than black women. A more accurate description based on the matrix of domination would recognize that a white woman is privileged by her race, but not by her gender or her class if she is poor. Her lived experience may have much more in common with that of a poor black woman than a rich white man. The matrix of domination is also structured across several levels of analysis: personal, community, and society. Following C. Wright Mills' (1959) notion of the sociological imagination, Collins suggests that no two biographies are alike, even though they may be rooted in the common cultural experiences of a single community and subjected to similar pressures from social institutions like the school, the church, the media, or the criminal justice system (Collins 1990:227-8). The matrix of domination requires us to recognize the complex and nuanced ways our lives are shaped by various social identities.

Here we attempted to show how simple binaries in theoretical analysis are incomplete,

and a more nuanced and intersectional position offers a stronger foundation for understanding the complexities of human behavior in relation to the structures of social institutions.

IN CONCLUSION

Writing about sociological theory does not have to be difficult, but we sometimes make it that way. Writing about theory should not be overly abstract. It should tend towards simple and clear prose, and ultimately it should connect to the daily lived experiences of particular people in specific times and places: The job of writing about theory is to generalize using deduction, or to build from empirical data using induction. In seeking clarity and simplicity, try to use specific examples to ground abstract ideas.

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