

Metatheory

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Word Count: 2159

A metatheory is a broad perspective that overarches two, or more, theories. There are many metatheories- positivism, post-positivism, hermeneutics, and so on- of importance in sociology and other social sciences. Two of the best-known and most important are methodological holism and methodological individualism. Methodological holism takes as its basic unit of analysis, and focuses most of its attention on, "social wholes" such as social structures, social institutions, imperatively coordinated associations, capitalism, etc. It overarches such large-scale, macro-level theories as structural functionalism, conflict theory and some varieties of Neo-Marxian theory. Methodological individualism takes as its unit of analysis and focal concern individual-level phenomena such as the mind, self, action, accounts, behavior, rational action, and so on. It overarches a series of micro-level theories such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, exchange theory and rational choice theory. There is a third, methodological relationism, that concerns itself with the relationship between social wholes and social individuals and overarches a series of theories that arose mainly in the 1980s to compensate for the micro- and macro-extremism of the two extant metatheories. Methodological relationism encompasses a number of largely American micro-macro theories and more European agency-structure theories.

A particularly useful term to use in thinking about metatheories is Thomas Kuhn's famous, albeit highly ambiguous and controversial, notion of a paradigm. In fact, a paradigm is broader than a metatheory because it not only encompasses theories, but also methods, images of the subject matter of sociology, and a body of work that serves as an exemplar for those who work within the paradigm (Ritzer 1975).

The social facts paradigm derives its name and orientation from the work of Emile Durkheim and his contention that sociology should involve the study of social facts that are external to and coercive over individuals. He distinguished between two broad types of social facts- material (now most commonly called social structures) and non-material (now usually called social institutions) social facts. The two major theories subsumed under this heading are structural functionalism and conflict theory, and to a lesser extent systems theory. The social definition paradigm derives its name from W.I. Thomas's "definition of the situation" (if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences). Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical component of the social definition paradigm as is ethnomethodology. Finally, there is the social behavior paradigm, adopting a focus on behavior from the psychological behaviorists, especially B.F. Skinner. Exchange theory and rational choice would be included in this paradigm.

The relatively narrow macro (social facts) and micro (social definition and social behavior) foci of extant paradigms led to the delineation of a more integrated sociological paradigm. Marx and his dialectical approach, especially to the relationship between the capitalists and proletariat on one side and the structures of capitalism on the other, is taken as the exemplar of this approach and this paradigm can be seen as encompassing the micro-macro and agency structure theories mentioned above.

Metatheorizing can be seen as a specific form of metasociology that examines sociological theory. While sociological theorizing attempts to make sense of the social world, metatheorizing

attempts to make sense of sociological theorizing. As with other forms of metastudy, reflexivity is a crucial component of sociological metatheorizing. All metatheorizing involves a high level of reflexivity, although the highest level of reflexivity is found among metatheorists.

Metasociology encompasses not only metatheorizing, but also meta-methods and meta-data-analysis. Meta-methods involves the reflexive study of the discipline's various methods, while meta-data-analysis takes as its subject a range of studies of a given phenomena and seeks to gain an overall sense of them and to aggregate the data in order to come to a more general conclusion about a given issue.

A wide variety of work can be included under the heading of sociological metatheorizing. What distinguishes this work is not so much the process of metatheorizing (it may vary greatly in a variety of ways), but rather the nature of the end products. There are three varieties of metatheorizing, largely defined by differences in their end products.

The first type "metatheorizing as a means of attaining a deeper understanding of theory (Mu)" involves the study of theory in order to produce a better, more profound understanding of extant theory. Mu is concerned, more specifically, with the study of theories, theorists, and communities of theorists, as well as with the larger intellectual and social contexts of theories and theorists.

The second type "metatheorizing as a prelude to theory development (Mp)" entails the study of extant theory in order to produce new sociological theory. Thus Marx's intensive (and critical) study of the theoretical work of economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, philosophers such as Georg Hegel and the Young Hegelians, utopian socialists such as Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and many others provided the basis for his own theory. More contemporaneously, the McDonaldization thesis is derived, at least in part, from a study of the theories of Max Weber, especially his theory of rationalization.

The third type "metatheorizing as a source of overarching theoretical perspectives (Mo)" is oriented to the goal of producing a perspective, a metatheory, that overarches some part or all of sociological theory. Alexander's attempts to develop a "general theoretical logic for sociology", as well as his later effort to develop a postpositivist approach, would both be examples of this third type of metatheorizing.

Although metatheorizing takes place in other fields, it is particularly characteristic of sociology. The prevalence of metatheorizing in sociology is rooted in the fact that sociologists deal with culturally diverse and historically specific subjects. This makes universal truth claims difficult or impossible. The failure to discover universal truths and invariant laws of the social world has informed many metatheoretical efforts. The clashes of multiple paradigms competing in the realm of sociological theorizing create a perfect condition for the emergence of metatheoretical discourse.

Social theory is embedded not only in academia but also of the larger society. As a result, there are a series of larger forces that impinge on, even control, it. Metatheorizing serves to alert theorists to the existence of these forces as well as to the need to resist them.

The coming of age of metatheorizing in American sociology can be traced to the collapse of the dominant social facts paradigm during the 1960s. That paradigm, especially its major theoretical component, Parsonsian functionalism, had dominated American sociology for more than two decades before it was seriously challenged by rival paradigms, as well as critics from a wide range of other perspectives. The emergence of a multiparadigmatic structure in sociology in the late 1960s reflected the growing disunity of the discipline and increasingly fragmented sociological research. There emerged a widespread feeling that sociology was facing a profound

crisis. It was this sense of imminent disciplinary crisis that help to invigorate meta-analyses of all types. At first, this took the form of what was, at the time, called the sociology of sociology. Later, metasociology had to overcome strongly negative views of the sociology of sociology as being dominated by minor studies of trivial aspects of the discipline. However, metasociology, especially metatheorizing, has survived, even prospered, as the sociology of sociology and its weaknesses have receded into history

A more recent challenge and spur to metatheorizing is the rise of postmodern social theory. Since the latter involves an assault on rationality and the modern orientation and metatheorizing is both modern and rational, it has come to be questioned by postmodernists. On the other hand, postmodernism has provided metatheorists with a whole series of new tools and approaches with which to study theory.

One example is deconstruction, a form of textual criticism that scrutinizes the ways in which texts, including theoretical texts, are constructed. A deconstructionist takes a finished text and analyzes the ways in which various literary devices and strategies of argumentation are used to give the impression of a coherent whole.

One important deconstructionist technique is decentering. This can mean several things to metatheorists. First, it might mean moving away from according primacy to the author (especially one associated with the discipline's canon) and giving up on the objective of attempting to discern what an author "really" means.

Second, it can mean the end of the effort to get to the heart, or central meaning, of a theory. Rather, the objective might be to focus on more promising peripheral aspects of that theory. Certain passages of specific works often are presented in such a way that they are made to seem of central importance. Over the years, metatheorists have tended to emphasize those passages or to enshrine other passages as being of key importance. In this context, deconstructionism leads one away from the familiar passages and into ignored aspects of the theory or perhaps rarely read footnotes.

Third, it might be advisable to focus on an undecidable moment in the history of social theory and an analysis of some of the courses taken and, more importantly from the point of view of deconstructionism, not taken by social theory.

Fourth, an effort might be made to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it. There is, for example, a clear hierarchy of schools of sociological theory and there is a tendency to devote most attention to the leading schools. This suggests that what metatheorists need to do is focus more attention on the most marginal of schools (this is another version of decentering) for their marginality may tell us a great deal about the theoretical system in which they exist. Furthermore, their very marginality may make them far easier to study than high-ranking theoretical perspectives. This is traceable to the fact that those associated with lower-ranking perspectives have little to hide, while thinkers linked with the premier schools have a vested interest in concealing things that may adversely affect their exalted status. Similarly, specific ideas have come to be seen as of central importance in every theoretical perspective. These ideas, tend to come to the fore any time a given theory is examined or discussed. However, it is entirely possible that important ideas have been lost and a search for those marginal ideas could pay huge dividends.

However, the search for marginal schools, theorists, or ideas should not be turned into a routine or into a new, albeit reversed, hierarchy. Deconstructionism leads to the idea that all such routines, or hierarchies, need to be continually displaced. This prevents metatheoretical work

from settling into any comfortable routines; any new construction immediately must be deconstructed.

It is this last aspect of deconstructionism that has the most important implications for metatheorizing. As modernists, most metatheorists have implicitly engaged in deconstruction, but almost always with the objective that they and/or those influenced by their work would engage in a process of reconstruction. This could involve the rebuilding of the theory they have just deconstructed or the use of the lessons learned to create an entirely new theoretical perspective. As modernists, most metatheorists would reject the idea of deconstruction in order to further deconstruct. Rather they would be oriented to the modern view of progress toward the goal of the ultimate theoretical perspective, or truth about it. However, as with all modern notions, this seeks an end or closure of the theoretical "conversation" in the creation of that ultimate theory. The postmodern view is that the goal is not to end the conversation in some ultimate truth, but rather to continually deconstruct in order to keep the conversation going. Such an objective makes sense for metatheoretical work; in fact, it may be *the raison d'être* for such work. A round of metatheoretical work may be seen as merely the basis for the next one and not as aimed at some ultimate and conclusive objective. In these terms, metatheorizing may be seen as the exercise par excellence in keeping the theoretical conversation going.

While it is possible to look at postmodern theory as a threat to modern forms of metatheorizing, it also is possible to see it as offering an array of provocative new ideas that could be of great use to it and point it in a variety of new directions.

SEE ALSO: Deconstruction; Durkheim, Émile; Hermeneutics; Positivism; Post-positivism; Theory Construction

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