Teaching Theory in an Empirically-Oriented Graduate Program

R. Stephen Warner

The role of theory is to facilitate cognitive integration, both for sociology and for sociologists. Integration has a vertical dimension (abstract to concrete) and a horizontal one (across schools and substantive fields). Attention to these dimensions of integration competes for time in sociology courses, with the result that trade-offs are required. Teaching theory in an empirically oriented graduate degree program, the author has decided to stress horizontal integration over the upper level of vertical integration.

I have long believed that theory plays, or should play, an integrative role in sociology, but my view of integration has changed. I still believe that the ultimate goal of theory is the understanding of society and that the criteria of understanding are vague and substantive rather than precise and formal. I still lean, as a follower of Weber, more toward idiographic than nomothetic questions. But I have changed on my convictions as to the best means to those goals.

One cause of this change is the major empirical research project (forthcoming) I undertook between my teaching experience at Yale (1970-76) and my service (beginning in 1977) at UIC. But most important in the present context is that the external circumstances at UIC differ in several respects from those at Yale. We have more students from non-Western cultures (particularly from China); we have more students from working-class backgrounds; our students are as likely to be placed in research positions (lucrative ones, I may say) as professorial ones; they are required to accomplish empirical research projects for their master's theses and doctoral dissertations; we teach on the quarter system with a relatively light course load; and I no longer have a monopoly on teaching theory courses. Norman Alexander, James Carey, Kathleen Crittenden, David Rubinstein, Mildred Schwartz, and I share responsibility for offering four mixed undergraduate-graduate theory survey courses and staffing a yearly graduate theory topics seminar. I

R. Stephen Warner is associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Address correspondence to the Department of Sociology, University of Illinois, Chicago IL 60680.
have taught most of these courses, but my particular specialization has been the
Contemporary Sociological Theory survey course. (See Latimore and Levesque-
Lopman, 1984, pp. 154-167, for a recent course syllabus and collection of assign-
ments.) My experience in teaching this course lies behind my reflections in this
article.

Because my students are and will likely continue to be users, rather than teach-
ers, of theory, my course concentrates more on theory as a resource than as a
topic. In other words, for those students who are oriented more to the social
world than to the discipline of sociology, it is more important to examine the
implications than to explain the genesis of theories. Although my own under-
standing of theories is informed by the sociology of knowledge and history of
social thought, I teach little of these subjects in my course (see Warner, 1985).
Nor do I spend as much time as I used to in comparing and contrasting schools of
thought. (See Sherman, 1974, for an index of my former pedagogy.) We now
spend most of our time working in detail through the ideas of actual theorists, for
it is these models of thinking that empirically-oriented students can aspire to
emulate, not the overarching "schools of thought" whose biases and partialities
are all too apparent. Our students not only are users of theory, they contribute to
its development. But their contributions stem less from coherence tests of theory
than correspondence tests. To say that I present theory more as a resource than as
a topic is also not to say that theory comes out of a toolbox all shiny and sharp.
Few theories worthy of attention in a survey are that accessible. It takes some time
to ready them for use, and one does that by examining the respective theorists'
applications of their ideas.

I interpret the integrative role of theory to consist in a vertical and a horizontal
dimension. Theory should integrate the field and the student's thinking vertically
between concepts and data and between abstract and concrete ideas. For this
pedagogical purpose I use the framework developed in his own teaching by Neil
Smelser (1976, chapter 9). I have long thought that theory requires empirical
content and have taught that if Marx had written only The German Ideology,
Durkheim The Rules, and Weber his Wissenschaftslehre, they would be forgotten
in sociology today. Nonetheless, with students knowledgeable in empirical re-
search, I have had to be more precise about the bearing of Capital, Suicide, and
The Protestant Ethic on these three theorists' general ideas. That has required me
to bring my suggested applications of theory closer to ongoing empirical research
than I used to. For the students, it may mean raising to a higher level than they
might otherwise the rubrics under which they conduct their research. For all of
us, it means honing our skills of seeing the general in the particular and the
empirical in the categorical. When we encounter each other in this vertical di-
alog, I get an inkling of what Merton was talking about when he spoke of his
fateful yoke with Lazarsfeld. I have learned the most substantive sociology in this
interaction, and I am currently learning from my students how to get social
insight from General Social Survey data. Yet it is with respect to the horizontal
integration that I have had to rethink theory.