

Theorizing together

Tobias Werron, Jelena Brankovic, Leopold Ringel
Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University, Germany

Published as:

Werron, T., Brankovic, J., & Ringel, L. (2023). Theorizing together. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2023.2259288>

Abstract

The article outlines ideas for a methodology of collaborative theorizing. The first part introduces our understanding of theorizing as a craft that provides all scholars in the social sciences and humanities – not just self-described theorists – with the ability to develop their thinking in the course of the research process and draws attention to everyday research practices that are usually not covered by the literature on qualitative and quantitative research methods. “Theorizing together,” as part of this craft, can be understood as a synergetic mode of theory-making geared to harnessing the advantages of everyday collaboration. The second part makes the case for a methodology of theorizing together built on personal experiences. First, we review our own research on rankings to show how collaborative practices allowed us to gain novel insights into an object of study, which would not have been possible had we done our research separately. Then, we offer preliminary ideas for a methodology. Specifically, we identify a number of practices involved in theorizing together and discuss various challenges and conditions associated with it. Our main goal is to inspire others to share their experience with collaborative work and, in the spirit of theorizing together, to further develop this mode of collective inquiry.

Keywords

theorizing; practices of theorizing; collaboration; methodology; rankings; historical sociology; organizations

Introduction

When teaching theory in the social sciences and humanities, we tend to confront students with finished products – usually, published books or articles – and leave them largely in the dark about the often long and difficult process that produced them. Yet, theorizing, too, is an everyday activity – or rather, a bundle of activities – that can be subject to methodological reflection. Our article focuses on this practical dimension of theorizing, while also drawing attention to how practices of theorizing are often, and perhaps increasingly, enacted in collaborative contexts. The main point we want to make is a methodological one. Based on our own long-term experience with collaborative work, we conceptualize “theorizing together” as a methodological tool – among other such tools – that scholars in the social sciences and humanities can adopt to harness the advantages of everyday collaboration. Seeing collaborative theorizing as a mundane activity that can be studied, taught, and learnt is promising for a number of reasons: it allows us to gain a better understanding of how theories are produced, it might help us improve our own theorizing skills, and it may prove valuable in our efforts to teach theorizing.

We start by explaining our own perspective on the current debate in sociology about theorizing. The main point of this debate, in our understanding, is that it advocates shifting the focus from *theory* – the output – to *theorizing* – a process. Taking inspiration from Richard Swedberg, Andrew Abbott, Diane Vaughan, and Howard Becker, among others, we see theorizing in fact as a *craft* that provides scholars, within and beyond sociology, with various tools – or modes – of thinking, based on various everyday practices. Theorizing together, as part of this craft, can be understood as a “synergetic” mode that combines the abilities of two or more people to develop a common perspective on a subject (a research topic or question). This understanding, we argue, calls for a methodology based on actual experiences with collaborative practices in all kinds of research. Although our view builds on the discussion of theorizing in sociology, we consider our argument relevant not just for sociologists but for scholars from all disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

The second section describes our personal experiences with theorizing together and presents some preliminary methodological implications. Reviewing several years of collaborative research on rankings, which synthesizes insights from different areas of research, especially historical sociology, global sociology, and the sociology of organizations, we show how tapping complementary skills and experiences helped us gain insights that, in all likelihood, would not have been possible had we undertaken our research separately. The

following section tentatively generalizes our experiences and sketches out a preliminary methodology of theorizing together. We (a) enumerate and describe collaborative practices that in our experience make theorizing together a valuable research strategy and (b) discuss major challenges to and conditions for theorizing together. In conclusion, we argue that, in addition to its methodological benefits, promoting togetherness in theorizing might help make theory as a scholarly activity more accessible and attractive to students and junior scholars.

Theorizing together as a mode of theorizing

The debate about theorizing (instead of theory) in sociology

The current debate about theorizing in sociology, inspired by Richard Swedberg (2012), revolves around two main concerns. While some contributions primarily seek to improve our empirical understanding of how theories work by studying the logic of their production (e.g., Farzin and Laux 2014; Guggenheim 2015; Krause 2021), others focus on improving our own ability to theorize and on how it might be taught to students (Swedberg 2012, 2014). Regarding the second concern, the debate overlaps with a methodological literature that discusses heuristic procedures to come up with new ideas and other “tricks of the trade” (Becker 1998; Abbott 2004, 2014; Martin 2015).

Whether the main purpose is analytical, methodological, or pedagogical in nature, the focus on processes and procedures implies studying the *social practices* that characterize this particular kind of work. In that regard, the discussion on theorizing shares heuristic implications with practice theory (e.g., Schatzki, von Savigny, and Knorr Cetina 2001; Schatzki 2019) and the “turn to practice” in science and technology studies (STS), which explore the everyday activities and material conditions that make intellectual work possible – traditionally with a focus on the natural sciences, but, in recent years, on the social sciences and humanities as well (e.g., Camic, Gross, and Lamont 2011; Martus and Spoerhase 2022). Notably, this includes an interest in looking at theorizing in terms of practices (building on Ryle 1949; Martus 2015).

Published works occasionally reflect on such practices in the introduction or in footnotes, and sometimes it is possible to trace them through a close reading of the final products, usually books or articles. A good example is the widespread strategy of introducing conceptual ideas via repeated references to the same empirical example, often an invented case, such as the “founding scenes” of social theory (Farzin and Laux 2014). Founding scenes can be indicative for how a theory was developed and perhaps reflect the use of a specific practice of theorizing that Eviatar Zerubavel (2021, 23-36.) calls “examplifying.” However, since we are

usually not privy to the author's daily life, we can only speculate as to whether, and if so how, founding scenes mattered in the theorizing process. After all, it is possible that they are used merely as rhetorical devices, illustrating an idea with different practical origins.

This points us to a more general problem: More often than not, the production of theory is not visible to the reader. Theorizing, in a practical sense, takes place in offices, libraries, cafés, in the field, in the corridor, at home, at the computer, with a typewriter or a notebook – in short, wherever and however scholars produce knowledge. A considerable amount of theorizing is inevitably locked in the individual's mind and is therefore inaccessible to outsiders; yet there may still be traces left in notes, drafts, and other inscriptions. Perhaps the best way of explaining what theorizing is all about, then, might be a list of everyday practices that are bundled together in the daily work of scholars: searching and reading (Abbott 2014), note-taking (Ahrens 2022), defining research questions and puzzles (Martin 2017, 16–34; Mears 2017), experimenting with basic imagery (Becker 1998), selecting cases and sampling data (Krause 2021; Becker 1998), conceptualizing and generalizing (Swedberg 2016, 2020; Zerubavel 2007), analogizing (Vaughan 2014; Zerubavel 2021, 37–58), making use of abductions (Swedberg 2012, 17–19) and other heuristics (Abbott 2004; Zerubavel 2021), visualizing ideas (Guggenheim 2015), making and reviewing mistakes (Vaughan 2004), looking for latent functions (Luhmann 1970; Abbott 2004, 156–158), zooming in and zooming out (Nicolini 2009), and taking and combining social standpoints (Go 2016, 2023).

This long (but by no means exhaustive) list blurs the line between theoretical and empirical work. It shows that theorizing is an integral part of daily research activities and, therefore, also an integral part of all kinds of empirical research. Scholars will not, of course, always have full awareness of what they are doing when they are theorizing. In fact, many – particularly those who are not familiar with this debate – may never have heard that there are such things as “practices of theorizing.” Still, even they will be experienced in the use of some of these practices, whether they are aware of it or not. As a bundle of mundane activities, theorizing in this broader sense can be described as taken-for-granted know-how which is just as characteristic of scientific work as qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Raising awareness of practices of theorizing is crucial, given that most of the practices we mentioned are also an integral part of empirical research. Theorizing, in this understanding, is not just something for self-identified theorists with a vested interest in Theory (with a capital T). Rather, it is methodological knowledge relevant for all scholars. Seeing theorizing as a bundle of everyday practices, then, questions the very distinction between theoretical and empirical work and instead calls attention to how such practices are enacted on a daily basis.

Theorizing as a craft

Richard Swedberg describes the knowledge we are interested in as a “practical kind of knowledge, similar to the kind of knowledge you need to have to be able to ride a bike or swim” (Swedberg 2016, 8). But while the knowledge necessary to ride a bike largely needs to be embodied (something you do better not to think about while doing it), the ability to theorize could actually benefit from becoming a constant and explicit methodological concern. In this respect, it resembles professional knowledge, which is cultivated and taught to aspiring members of a community. Possessing not only tacit but also codified types of knowledge, professionals are trained to be aware of the tools they have at their disposal, to know which ones are suited for the task at hand, and to be able to devise fallback strategies in case things do not go as planned.

An appropriate analogy for theorizing in this sense might be that of a craft. Theorizing is like a craft because it requires practical knowledge as well as reflexive monitoring in order to master the task at hand. Discovering something new or making sense of unexpected observations requires the skillful use of concepts; newly introduced concepts often require searching for additional data; new data requires different kinds of heuristics to specify research questions; new research questions may require additional concepts, and so on. Practices of theorizing bring this process into motion and keep it going. Another advantage of understanding theorizing as a craft is that there is nothing mysterious, heroic, or exceptional about a craft. All scholars, if so inclined, can theorize, provided they put in the time to master the tools and strategies that characterize this particular way of making things. And finally, like most crafts, theorizing can benefit from collaboration, calling into question the image of the “armchair theorist” who needs nothing but a brain (and, of course, an armchair). In fact, seeing theorizing as a craft could be understood as an attempt to circumvent the usual (and in our estimation, largely unproductive) divide between Theory (with a capital T) on the one hand and empirical research on the other. Theorizing, by contrast, is inextricably entwined with empirical research. For theorizing to become more like a craft, however, we have to be more specific in our account of the tools required for it and discuss how they can be used and how their use can be improved and taught. In short, just like qualitative and quantitative research, theorizing, too, needs a methodology.

Theorizing together as a tool

By seeing theorizing as a craft, we approach collaboration as a routine scholarly practice. If we

turn to how theories are produced, we quickly notice that they are, in fact, never developed in a social vacuum. Network analysis, for example, has shown that theory development is shaped by academic networks that inform our thinking (e.g., Moody 2004). Similarly, earlier works and disciplinary traditions shape our thinking by establishing habits of research, styles of thought, and criteria for selective attention – for instance, by focusing attention on certain “model cases” and by looking at select colleagues as classical “authors,” which are treated as objects of study in their own right (cf. Krause 2021). Last but not least, theories can be the result of everyday interaction and other forms of personal communication. In this sense, for example, we might consider many of Karl Marx’s works, not just the co-authored ones, as the outcome of his personal relationship with Friedrich Engels, while Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological views can be described as the result of his immersion in various long-term collaborative research endeavors (Heilbron 2011). We should also note that teams, which to some degree have always been a feature of academic life (e.g., Babchuk, Keith, and Peters 1999), are much more common today than they were in the past – in part due to the growing number of large-scale research projects that often require joint planning and everyday interaction between several scholars (e.g., Hunter and Leahey 2008; Spiller et al. 2015; Leahey 2016; Aldrich and Al-Turk 2018). This trend is reflected in the rising number of co-authored publications, documented for various disciplines in the social sciences including sociology (Warren 2019; Stoltz 2023). In all of these cases, theorizing is practiced in the context of collaborative empirical research. It is therefore crucial to think more systematically about how everyday collaboration affects theorizing (building on Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016) and its methodological implications.

Our point of departure is that, on the one hand, *all* practices of theorizing can be turned into collaborative practices by discussing concepts together, experimenting with heuristics together, and so on. On the other hand, merely involving more people in carrying out these tasks does not necessarily change their nature, nor can we be certain that it affects scholarly knowledge production. To get a sense of the impact that collaborative work has on practices of theorizing, we must consider the various styles of collaboration in academia.

Broadly speaking, we can distinguish three (for a similar typology, aimed at distinguishing ways of achieving cohesion within a project team, see Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016, 106). They are:

- a *hierarchical style*, in which senior scholars have the authority to make junior scholars do the legwork, that is collect data, review the research literature, and so on (for interesting examples from the humanities see Martus and Spoerhase 2022, 111–122). Junior scholars are thus enlisted as assistants, while senior scholars can

claim responsibility for the output. The primary purpose of such collaboration is to delegate the tasks considered less demanding, while the main intellectual work is centralized at the desks and in the minds of the more experienced scholars;

- a *division-of-labor style*, where the goal is to put down in writing an interpretation that the participants agreed on at the beginning. Here, the task of each individual is to make a contribution to the overall argument that he or she is considered particularly competent to make, for instance, by writing a chapter in a volume edited by the team;
- or, lastly, a *synergetic style*, in which a group of scholars team up to develop a common perspective that does not yet exist and could not have been developed by the participants individually. Collaborators, then, do not merely seek support from others or try to divide tasks. Instead, they engage with each other regularly in order to arrive at a new perspective. Foundational for such collaborations is that the outcome is not fixed but arises out of mutual engagement in the research process.

These three styles of collaboration are, of course, abstractions; rather than in pure form, they tend to materialize in various combinations. While acknowledging that variations and combinations merit methodological attention, we will focus mainly on the synergetic style, which, we believe, has the most potential for exploring the potentials and limits of theorizing together. In philosophical terms, this style can also be described as a regulative idea for the methodology of theorizing together that we develop here (an idea of collaboration that we strive towards without expecting that it can be completely realized).

For the purpose of this article, then, we can define theorizing together as *a mode of theorizing adopted by two or more scholars with the purpose of developing a shared perspective on a subject (research topic or question) in the course of everyday collaboration*. We are interested both in practices of theorizing that occur only in collaborative work and in those that can be adopted both alone and in collaborative groups. We specifically ask: How can we understand and systematically account for these practices as part of a methodology of theorizing?

Theorizing together as a journey: Lessons from our collaborative research project

We want to address the above question based on an account of our own experiences over the past few years (2014–2022). In part, this is a pragmatic decision, as it allows us to use our own recollections and notes to observe a collaboration over a longer stretch of time. However, it is

also a manifestation of our understanding of theorizing as craft, which sees theory work as a bundle of everyday practices. Personal reports on years of doing research together (such as Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016) provide unique insights into these practices. Based on such accounts, we hope, experiences with collaborative work can be shared, compared, and, possibly, transformed into a methodology of theorizing together.

In this section, we briefly discuss the process of building a team and our collaborative knowledge production, while the next section generalizes from these experiences and discusses their methodological implications.

Defining a point of origin is to some degree an arbitrary act, yet it seems to us that a workshop on *A Theory of Fields* by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (one of the instances of a cowritten monograph in social theory) could indeed be fixed on as the event that initiated what would later evolve into a collaborative research project. The workshop was co-organized by Leopold Ringel (LR) and attended by Tobias Werron (TW). During their discussions, we (LR and TW) discovered that we both preferred a version of sociology that does not live and die by its allegiance to a specific theory – or to Theory (with a capital T) in general – and instead treats theories as toolkits that enrich empirical research and are continually revised in the process. We also took note of the differences between us: TW was primarily interested in social theory, globalization theory, and historical sociology, whereas LR’s focus was on organizations, institutional theory, and qualitative methods. The fact that we understood each other in spite of – but perhaps also because of? – these differences was an important initial motive for the start of our collaboration.

When TW was hired as a professor at the University of Bonn, he had the opportunity to hire collaborators for research projects and invited LR to join him. One of these projects was, and still is, a historical sociology of competition. The project’s main goal was to further theoretical insights into competition – but, as it turned out, “armchair theorizing” would not be enough. Developing new conceptualizations of competition requires studying historical discourses and taking into account different types of competition that exist in multiple social fields (e.g., Werron 2015a, 2015b; Bühler and Werron 2022). We soon realized that there was only limited empirical knowledge available in the research literature about how competition has been constructed, criticized, justified, promoted, globalized, or localized over the last century or two. Our preliminary conclusion was that, in order to develop a sociological theory of competition, we needed to entwine theorizing and empirical research.

The first task at hand was to find a meaningful starting point. After carefully reviewing the literature, we decided to focus on the social construction of competition, a theme that had

thus far been largely neglected. The main question was: Which social processes allow social actors to recognize each other as competitors? How, for instance, is the idea of a “scarce good” that can only be acquired at the expense of others (and thus triggers competition) produced and institutionalized in different social contexts? Thinking about these types of questions directed our attention to rankings, which are often conceptualized as devices that fuel competition and criticized as instruments of neoliberal governance (Münch 2014). They frequently serve as an illustration of the idea that we live in a society where competition has become an encompassing phenomenon and increasingly shapes all kinds of social relationships (e.g., Rosa 2006). This literature suggests that rankings are a key element in the social production of competition, which makes their in-depth study all the more important. But what is the logic of competition produced by rankings, what are its effects and limits?

We started with a comprehensive review of the ranking literature and collected as many examples of published rankings, past and present, as we could find. In the literature, we found a large number of papers on university rankings, but also a growing literature on rankings of nation-states (often referred to as “global performance indicators”), companies, cities, and artists, just to name but a few (Ringel et al. 2021; see also Brankovic forthcoming). Many were critical, some sympathetic, while others aimed at improving the methodology of rankings. Few were interested in systematic comparisons between cases and in the history of rankings. An article by the literary scholar Carlos Spoerhase (2014 and 2018) was one of the rare exceptions, offering a fascinating analysis of comparative tables of artists – painters, writers, composers – published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which, on the surface, looked rather similar to the prominent and influential rankings of today.

Taking its inspiration from Spoerhase’s historical investigation and the research literature on rankings, quantification, and practices of comparing, a first paper (Werron and Ringel 2017) provided a preliminary conceptualization of the distinct properties of modern rankings. One of our initial insights was that Spoerhase’s eighteenth-century tables were one-time affairs, while today’s rankings are repeated regularly, on a yearly, monthly, weekly, or even daily basis. And while these early tables sought to identify historical greatness (implying that the compared artists were usually already dead), today’s rankings are mainly concerned with present and future performances.

Historical comparisons, then, drew our attention to the temporality of rankings and to how their temporal characteristics play into the production of competition. At this point, and with the relocation of our group to Bielefeld University in 2016, a third member joined the team – Jelena Brankovic (JB). Based on her extensive experience in higher education research,

combined with an interest in institutional theory and a focus on organizations, JB also developed an interest in the study of rankings. The team was subsequently able to broaden its comparative approach and deepen its insights into the temporality of rankings. The first published work by the now three-person team was a paper that analyzed how global rankings of universities produce competition (Brankovic, Ringel, and Werron 2018; see also Brankovic, Ringel, and Werron 2021). The main argument of that article was that numbers and tables do not in and of themselves create competition; rather, what transforms tables into rankings and rankings into engines of competition is their repeated publication comparing the same group of entities (in this case, universities). When each table is followed by another table, rankings observe the development of performances over time and thereby suggest to competitors that, whatever their current position, they must never stop performing because ranks are subject to change – in the next edition of the table. This is how rankings produce competition, or rather: this is how they suggest to the ranked and their audience that they should perceive themselves as competitors and behave as such.

If repeated publication is a core feature of modern rankings, then what were the conditions that made it possible? This – seemingly trivial but surprisingly complex – question motivated much of our subsequent work. After being awarded funding by the German Research Foundation in 2018, the team expanded again, adding Clelia Minnetian (a postdoc with a background in political science and discourse analysis), Stefan Wilbers (a PhD student with an MA in sociology), Stella Medellias and Anna Lena Grüner (student assistants with BAs in sociology), and Karina Korneli (a student assistant). Interacting and exchanging ideas regularly, the expanded team collected rich empirical material, particularly on sports and university rankings, and immersed itself deeper into the comparative history of rankings.¹ The results were numerous case studies and comparative analyses, published in varying co-authored papers, which analyze the formation of sports rankings (American baseball) in the late nineteenth century (Minnetian and Werron 2021), the first university rankings (Wilbers et al. 2021), and the story of the institutionalization, in the mid-to-late twentieth century, of regularly published university rankings in the United States (Ringel and Werron, 2020; Wilbers and Brankovic 2021).

The studies revealed that the rise of rankings is associated with a new understanding of “achievement” (or, depending on the field, “excellence,” “development,” etc.) which is largely identified with consistency of performance over time. This understanding lends itself to statistical evaluation and therefore fits particularly well with quantitative performance measures such as rankings (Ringel and Werron 2020). This point became evident in our historical analysis

of the redefinition of what made a “champion” in sports in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (cf. Minnetian and Werron 2021). A comparative analysis of the history of arts and university rankings led us to conclude that rankings can be conceptualized as “serial practices of comparison” (Ringel and Werron 2021): They are serial comparisons, not merely by virtue of being repeated regularly but also because they reflect an ideal of serialized performance (achievement, excellence) that appears to have originated in the nineteenth century.

While contributing to our understanding of the historical relationship between rankings and competition, these studies also made us aware of how today’s rankings often not only rank organizations (universities, sports clubs, governments, etc.) but are also mostly produced by them, ranging from government and media agencies to intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). This provoked intense discussions among members of the team about the role of organizations and the nature of their involvement in the production of rankings. The preliminary conclusions were documented in a paper that combines insights from the “old” and the “new” institutionalism to delineate what we refer to as “the organizational engines of rankings” (Ringel, Brankovic, and Werron 2020). Extending the idea of an “organizational engine,” a follow-up paper applied sociological role theory to organizations (Ringel and Werron 2022), arguing that the (nowadays institutionalized) roles of “ranker” and “ranked” are enacted, interpreted, and combined by organizations in various ways, while also leading to conflicts between these and the other roles of organizations (e.g., universities’ primary missions to research and to teach).

At the time of writing, our collaborative work has entered a new stage. Building on our previous insights, we currently undertake in-depth studies of how organizations engage, enroll, and build linkages with their environments in order to produce and maintain the legitimacy of rankings. A first case study explores how the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG), an organization operating at the intersection of technocratic, managerial, academic, and commercial social realms, upholds and diffuses “faith in rankings” (cf. Brankovic, Ringel, and Werron 2022). Another project, funded by the German Research Foundation, studies in situ how organizations that produce rankings (“rankers”) foster formations in which multiple types of actor are entangled to make sure that rankings can be published on a serial basis and be considered by others. We found that rankings, in particular those produced by NGOs, seek to put political pressure on governments, risk conflicts with powerful players, and constantly vie for attention and legitimacy in a potentially hostile environment. The project benefitted from a comparative study by LR (Ringel 2021a; 2021b), which has shown that rankings are transformed into public performances by their producers who also take great care of navigating

hostile environments and defending the credibility of their evaluative devices. The findings further indicated the necessity of ethnographic fieldwork that might improve our understanding of how “rankers” foster external relations by engaging multiple (types of) actors. The team’s focus, then, is shifting from the long-term history of rankings to their recent history and present, from historical discourse analysis to participant observation, and from rankings in sports, the arts, and higher education to rankings of nation-states, produced and published by NGOs for political purposes. Mainly responsible for carrying out the ethnographic case studies are two recent additions to the team, Can David Tobias and Elisabeth Strietzel, both PhD students with an MA in sociology.

In the spirit of transparency and critical reflection, we would like to add a note of caution. It is in the very nature of accounts such as the one presented here that they engage in retrospective sensemaking. We have undoubtedly been selective in our discussion of what constitutes critical episodes, which implies that we might have neglected, overemphasized, or perhaps even concealed certain information. After all, retrospection is, by its nature, biased and selective. Yet we also believe that it can be harnessed in the pursuit of a methodology for theorizing together. For one thing, participants are forced to pause for a second and talk about what has happened, which, at the very least, creates the possibility for self-reflection and the correction of biases. Moreover, readers are given the opportunity to take a glance at the backstage of theorizing, which they can then use to offer alternative interpretations or even take as an inspiration to think about and report on their own experiences.

A methodology for theorizing together

We now want to use our experience to outline a tentative methodology of theorizing together. In the first part of this section, we review the most crucial practices that made our epistemic journey in the sociology of rankings possible, discuss methodological implications, and demonstrate the potentials of theorizing together as a mode of theorizing. The second part offers reflections on challenges and conditions for theorizing together that we consider productive. Productive theorizing should, however, not be limited to theorizing for the sake of Theory (with a capital T) nor must it result in measurable outputs such as the number of papers published or research grants won. Instead, we call theorizing productive when it generates a shared perspective, which then informs further work by the team and its members. The perspective itself is, however, never complete; rather, it evolves as the work continues.

Before we proceed, let us reiterate why we understand theorizing to be a craft. As such, theorizing is not just about conceptual work, though this is an important part of it, but a combination of mundane practices, or tools, that help you “think about your research while you’re doing it” (Becker 1998). Theorizing together, then, describes a collection of tools of this craft which lend themselves to being used together. We start with a number of practices that we consider to be specific to collaborative work and conclude by discussing how other practices can be adopted in, and affected by, collaboration.

Practices of theorizing together

Assembling a team

Assembling a group of scholars who complement one another is a first set of practices that shaped our thinking. In 2015 TW and LR started their collaboration based on the intuition that they not only shared a similar view on sociological theory but also had complementary research interests and abilities, which they thought could be leveraged to their mutual advantage in studies on topics such as rankings where their interests intersected. Coming together in this situation involved a calculated gamble on the part of both as regards their academic futures: a decision to invest time in collaborative work, to share knowledge, resources, and ideas; trust in each other’s abilities and collegial spirit; and, finally, the hope that it would all pay off. Essentially, both trusted that the collaboration would lead to insights beyond what they could grasp as individuals, that it would help rather than slow or stall their academic careers, and that it would be more fun to work together than alone. The same was true of all the members who joined the team during the research process. The idea behind every addition was to bring in someone who shared our interests but also brought in different perspectives.

We feel that this proved beneficial immediately and increasingly so over the years. Being part of a team did not just make it easier to keep up with the state of research in a range of areas, it also *turned the perspectives of others into everyday companions*, quietly urging us to treat them as possible perspectives of our own. To give an example: JB’s resourcefulness in higher education studies and institutional theory allowed us to use the case of global university rankings to develop a more substantial understanding of the temporal characteristics of rankings. JB did not simply contribute expertise that TW and LR did not have (which would be a strategy more in line with the division-of-labor style of collaboration); rather, mutual engagement *transformed our thinking and resulted in a shared perspective*. Although differences between team members are occasionally the subject of jokes (never mean-spirited

of course), experiencing these differences on a daily basis has, we believe, had a beneficial impact on our thinking as a constant source of inspiration.

In methodological terms, we feel that assembling and maintaining a group of scholars with complementary skills can help each individual to accomplish more than they would on their own. Looking for such complementarities is, in our experience, especially important in developing one's thinking about general issues, such as, in our case, competition, rankings, and organizations, and in conducting comparative studies that cover a broad range of empirical sites and research areas.

Thinking aloud together

If assembling a team opens up the potential for theorizing together, interaction provides the means for tapping this potential. In our case, this included lunch meetings, scheduled sessions, long walks outside, telephone or zoom talks, ad hoc interactions in and around the office. On these occasions, we discussed new material, experimented with conceptual ideas, reviewed draft papers, prepared conference presentations, and so on.² In addition, we made extensive use of mobile instant messaging group services and emails to the group for quick exchanges of information, observations, literature, or data, both preceded and followed by face-to-face meetings. Yet, face-to-face meetings clearly were the most crucial setting for collaboration, contributing to our thinking not just as a context to discuss data and ideas but also helping us articulate our thoughts in the presence of others. Even our colleagues who did not study rankings but were part of the regular “interaction order” (Goffman 1983), became co-theorizers. We would like to mention Simon Hecke, in particular, historical sociologist and member of the extended team from 2015 to 2021, who often participated in our discussions and provided numerous thoughtful comments over the years.

Methodologically speaking, we can conclude that everyday situations like “meeting in the office,” “going for lunch,” “taking a walk,” “going to a conference” can be perceived, and should be cultivated, as opportunities for theorizing together. There are at least two reasons for doing so. The first is that interaction helps discover and leverage personal capacities in a way that is different from textual or other forms of communication, given that, when we are in the presence of others, we often express ourselves through a rich variety of nonverbal cues (raised eyebrows, sound of voice, etc.). Second, interaction creates recurring moments of thinking in the presence of others, reminiscent of what the German dramatist Heinrich von Kleist once described as “how we gradually make up our thoughts while speaking” (Kleist 1878 [1805/06]): We sometimes know how to conceptualize an idea only because someone else is in the same

room, listening and responding. Interaction can be crucial for theorizing, not just because it facilitates the exchange of ideas but also because it helps us develop and articulate our thoughts.

Collecting and sharing material together

Collecting and sharing material is another distinct bundle of practices within theorizing together. We shared material we found via a cloud service accessible to all members of the team.³ This constantly pushed our thinking in new directions, often in rather unpredictable ones. To give an example: As part of the project on the history of sports and university rankings between the 1850s and 1980, Anna Lena Grüner, research assistant from 2018 to 2020, immersed herself in online databases and browsed through hundreds of journals and other types of literature published before the 1980s to search for tables containing classifications, ratings, or rankings of universities. The large number of cases she found was itself a great surprise, given that, according to received wisdom, rankings only started to proliferate as late as the 1980s. Her search instead suggested that university rankings had in fact evolved gradually, and predominantly in the United States, throughout the twentieth century. This inspired us to adjust our perspective not just on university rankings but on rankings in general. In fact, we suspect that many of our conceptual contributions have benefitted tremendously from continuous engagement with new types of data.

Defining sharing of material as a bundle of practices characteristic of theorizing seems particularly plausible today, as digital technologies expand the opportunities for collaborative work. Not only have computers made it much easier to build and expand databases, but cloud services nowadays make it possible to share material instantly, thereby enabling the ongoing exchange of literature, findings, examples, visualizations and/or other bits of information. Such practices can have a strong impact on theorizing, not just because they provide a constant flow of references and empirical information but also because they allow collaborators to articulate their own point of view in data-related discussions almost instantly.

The impact of such practices becomes even clearer if we relate them to the practices mentioned above: Ideally, each member of the team will contribute different sets of skills, affording the group as a whole a larger heuristic scope and stronger interpretative ability. Similarly, the sharing of material will benefit from “thinking aloud together,” and vice versa.

Writing together

Cowriting publications is another set of practices in theorizing together. In our collaboration,

the decision to write a co-authored article was usually the result of discussions which led from one research question to the next and from one idea for a paper to another. The actual cowriting mostly developed step by step, with (a) one team member articulating the idea for an article and being responsible for its overall structure, (b) that person or someone else writing a first draft (sometimes divided into sections with different authors), (c) cowriters expanding and refining the argument, followed by (d) multiple rounds of discussions and revisions. Depending on schedules and availability, other members of the team often (e) reviewed the finished version and provided suggestions and comments, followed by (f) another round of revisions. In our particular case, choosing a language (English or German) for the publication and thinking about the target audience was also an important part of the process.

Putting thoughts into writing is an important part of any academic thought process because it allows for ideas to be articulated, arguments to be framed, structured, and revised, concepts to be defined and named, and so on. In addition to the general epistemic potential of writing, writing together encourages making thoughts clear to cowriters and defining a common perspective in dialogue. In our experience, drafts of papers have always been changed as a result of ensuing discussions between co-authors and the dialogical thinking enabled by the practices mentioned above. Far from just putting individual contributions into writing, cowriting papers arguably provides opportunities for “thinking together while writing.”

Bringing togetherness to other practices of theorizing

In closing this section, we wish to mention some select examples of practices of theorizing that can be enacted individually but, in our experience, might benefit from being enacted together. Indeed, in our experience there is “know-how” about engaging in all kinds of practices of theorizing together that is worth exploring in more detail. The most general practice is captured by the concept of “perspectival realism” or “standpoint theory,” as introduced by Julian Go in his discussion of social theory’s relationship with postcolonial thought (Go 2016, 2023). Though a philosophical concept first and foremost, it also describes a specific mode of theorizing: the strategy of looking at the same phenomenon from different perspectives, based on varying standpoints, in order to arrive at a novel perspective. Individual scholars can use this strategy by experimenting with and combining different standpoints in their imagination.

Theorizing together translates this cognitive mode of theorizing into a social practice that may enter everyday conversations between several scholars where individual standpoints are based in different disciplinary traditions and personal experiences. Everyday encounters compel collaborators to take each other’s standpoints into account in a way that is hard to

reproduce in an individual's imagination. In our case, the social theorist and historical sociologist was compelled to listen to the sociologist of organizations and qualitative researcher, and both were compelled to listen to the scholar of higher education and institutional theory, and so on. Having such conversations with people able to articulate their ideas is bound to bring those perspectives onto our radar and influence both individual thinking and group discussions. Anything that emerges from the dialogue between individual collaborators representing different standpoints might ultimately become the standpoint of the group (Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016 describe the process of arriving at such a shared perspective in terms of assembling, feeding, and calibrating “the comparator”).

Bringing scholars with complementary skills into a daily conversation may also give other theorizing practices a different twist. A notable example from our collaboration is the practice of developing research questions, or “puzzling” (Mears 2017), which benefitted from our mixture of historical and qualitative research interests. The same can be said about the sampling of data and cases (Becker 1998), which was influenced by the broad empirical expertise – for example, in history of competition, organizations, institutions, higher education, or world politics – that our collaborators brought into the conversation. We also feel that “making mistakes and trying to learn from them” (as described in Vaughan 2004) is another of the practices of theorizing that is enhanced in group settings, given that reflecting on mistakes is likely to benefit from several scholars discussing their ideas about what went wrong and what could be improved (for most of us, it appears, it is also easier to recognize the mistakes of others).

Other examples of practices that might benefit from togetherness are heuristic ones such as “changing levels of analysis” (Abbott 2004) or “zooming in and out” (Nicolini 2009), which are likely to work even better if scholars can contribute their expertise on different concepts and epistemic objects (as, in our case, historical discourse and fields on the one hand and organizations and institutions on the other). Analogizing, as suggested by Diane Vaughan, also came up in the course of our collaboration (Brankovic, Ringel, and Werron 2021), as did the use of metaphors as in “gospel” and “faith” (Brankovic, Ringel, and Werron 2022). Indeed, the variety of practices mentioned above is testament to another methodological implication: When theorizing together, people can pool and perhaps improve their knowledge of practices of theorizing.

Challenges and conditions for productive theorizing together

Our discussion of practices has highlighted the potential of theorizing together, which, in turn,

has strengthened our belief that collaborative work can make theorizing more productive and fun. However, we are also aware that there are risks involved and that it might not work out for everybody. It can fail, first of all, for the same reasons other types of collaboration sometimes fail. People who appear to have a lot in common may not be able to understand or trust each other; over time, people may lose interest in pursuing the common goal and prioritize other interests; simple misunderstandings may lead to irreconcilable conflicts.

Beyond these risks, theorizing together on the basis of the synergetic style seems to be a particularly ambitious form of collaboration. For individual (and often idiosyncratic) scholars to attempt to think together is a challenging endeavor, even under the best of circumstances (see Levine and Moreland 2004; Aldrich and Al-Turk 2018 for useful general discussions of problems in collaborative research). People may enter the collaboration with different expectations, which may be hard to predict and perhaps impossible to reconcile; they may have their own writing routines and time schedules; their career-related concerns or the precarious situations they find themselves in may interfere with their collaborative work. A team is rarely a stable formation, particularly under current conditions of employment at universities, where people often do not have permanent positions, which limits their ability to be part of a long-term collaboration (as mentioned earlier, this also limited the stability of our own team, with several members joining on temporary and project-based contracts). In a long-term collaboration, problems may also arise if collaborators try to take advantage of the work of others without being willing to reciprocate (*free riding*); and people may *perceive* others as free riders or feel that they are otherwise being taken advantage of. Finally, questions of ownership of ideas and findings always loom as a potential object of dispute.

Therefore, even if theorizing together turns out to be necessary, for epistemic reasons, this does not mean that it will be easy to accomplish in practice. And while, in our view, we have been lucky enough to largely avoid or deal with these challenges so far, it is also clear that they can obstruct any well-intentioned attempt at theorizing together. Hence, some words of caution: Before starting a collaboration with the ambitious goal of theorizing together, researchers may want to consider whether (a) the research topic, (b) the personal skills, preferences, attitudes, and ambitions, and (c) the organizational context make it likely that such a project will work out – both to the benefit of the group and to the benefit of each individual in the group.

Research topic

As we argued earlier, we feel that theorizing together is particularly promising if one plans to work on some *general topic* – like, in our case, “competition,” “rankings,” “organizations,” or “institutions” – that requires extensive empirical research. If researchers are looking for new concepts to come up with research questions, are in the process of searching for, sampling, and interpreting data, or if they are trying to conduct instructive comparisons of various empirical cases, then they are likely to benefit from other scholars’ knowledge and ideas. This, at least, made us turn to new ways of theorizing. In fact, as far as general topics are concerned, theorizing together might work as an antidote to the production of (over-)abstractions, famously criticized by C. Wright Mills as the style of “Grand Theory” (Mills 2000 [1959], 25–49).

Thinking together based on empirical material is also probably the most productive way of organizing an everyday dialogue between scholars with different perspectives. All of this is less likely to happen if the topic is narrowly defined, if you share roughly the same expertise or if you do not plan to do empirical research at all. There are, of course, other reasons to theorize together; after all, it can be more fun to think about something together rather than alone. However, combined theorizing of the sort described here will often involve assembling people with specific kinds of expertise, but whom one does not necessarily know that well before the start of collaboration (beyond publications, overall research interests, and a limited number of personal conversations). In such constellations, making sure that the topic allows for diverse forms of expertise is probably an important condition for the group to make the most of this mode of theorizing.

Personal dispositions

Further conditions for productive theorizing together relate to the *personal skills, capacities, and views of the participating researchers*. In part, this has to do with personal preferences and attitudes. Do you really want to invest a great deal of your time in collaborative work and live with the intended and unintended consequences of frequent interaction with other scholars? Do you enjoy participating in co-authored publications or do you find writing together tedious and exhausting? As a senior scholar, do you want to take responsibility as one of the leaders of the team, for instance, by investing time to work with younger scholars and offer guidance as a PhD adviser and collaborator? Are you willing to work with less experienced scholars and savor what you can learn from them? As a younger scholar, do you feel that being part of a close collaboration at an early stage of your career fits your ideas of intellectual growth and an academic career? If you are offered a job that requires being part of a team, do you just want

the job or do you also have intrinsic motivation for taking this step? Based on the job interview, do you trust that you will be treated as an equal? Theorizing together in the synergetic style, we feel, can only be expected – not guaranteed, of course – to work out if these questions can be honestly answered in the affirmative.

Another rather obvious condition that will affect theorizing together is the disciplinary composition of the team. Considering the topic and personal leanings, a decision has to be made whether the emphasis is on “sameness” or “difference.” For example, does the topic or funding scheme require the building of a multidisciplinary group – which may require being open to what Spiller et al. (2015) describe as “carnavalesque collaborations?” If so, can you expect scholars from the disciplines under consideration to be able to work together (which, depending on the current relationship between disciplines, might not always be the case; cf. Berger and Chaffee 1988) and to take each other seriously (Fiore 2008)? Or do you aim to build a group whose members already share a similar disciplinary outlook, perhaps even a preference for the same theories or styles of theorizing? In both cases, you obviously have to make sure that the people you bring together fit these requirements as far as possible.

Beyond personal skills and preferences, we feel that there are two other conditions, which are more philosophical in nature. The first is that theorizing together requires a *basic level of tolerance* from all collaborators. While you can always contribute your own ideas, you cannot expect those ideas to prevail all the time and under all circumstances. The whole point of theorizing together – of the synergetic style – is that you try to *develop a common perspective* and organize a research process that allows all collaborators to provide inputs. For this purpose, compromises have to be made. If you write a paper together, for instance, you might have to accept that other people structure papers differently and have stylistic idiosyncrasies—as long as they do not distort the general message that the team wants to put across. It might even be possible that by seeing more closely how others work you become aware of your own “quirks.”

The second general condition is so important that we would like to call it the golden rule of theorizing together: Try to be as generous as possible when it comes to the ownership of ideas, to the sharing of literature and sources, and to perceived recognition of authorship of publications. If you feel that you can think about recognition and other academic goods in terms of abundance rather than scarcity, and if you are willing to value the long-term advantages of collaboration over short-term claims to individual ownership of ideas or findings, then theorizing together can be an option. Conversely, if you have trouble thinking that way, find it naïve, or feel that you will not be able to trust your potential collaborators, then you should probably look for alternatives.

A significant challenge to this is that we live in an academic world that ultimately credits, hires, and awards tenure to individual scholars. In such a world, the individual quest for recognition is certainly a legitimate career concern. However, when theorizing together, you also might want to take into consideration that it is the functioning of the group that makes it likely that you will generate novel ideas and findings. In practice, this means that it is crucial to find a working consensus in which shared goals (for instance, in our case, contributing to a “sociology of rankings”) and individual interests intersect to a certain extent or at least do not oppose each other. When deciding on issues of authorship, for instance, you can try to validate the contribution of the group but also acknowledge the contributions of individual members by, for example, (a) publishing in varying co-author constellations, (b) using alphabetical order (if the contributions were roughly equal), (c) deliberately changing the order if a co-author did most of the work and/or the writing, and (d) finding other ways of transparently acknowledging individual contributions. Even so, there is no guarantee that individual perceptions of individual contributions will align at all times and that all members will always be happy with the way you share credit. It is therefore likely that you have to tolerate occasional disadvantages to enjoy the long-term advantages of theorizing together. Clearly, these disadvantages should only be occasional, and the burden of experiencing them should not be carried by particular members of the group only, especially if those members are junior scholars. To navigate these and other (difficult) situations, it is imperative that the team cultivates an egalitarian climate, in which concerns can be openly expressed and discussed.

Institutional and organizational context

The last set of conditions refers to the *institutional and organizational context*. Given a suitable topic and assuming that your expectations and personality are in tune with the affordances of a collaborative project, do you know colleagues who might be interested in starting such a project? If you do, do these people have positions at the same university that allow you to interact on a regular basis? Are there other opportunities to meet regularly that, perhaps combined with occasional video calls, may allow you to collaborate with people working at other universities? Are there resources available at your university to hire collaborators? Does your university or your country’s higher education system incentivize collaboration, for example, by allowing dissertations that contain co-authored publications (cf. Aldrich and Al-Turk 2018, 365)? Are there funding schemes for collaborative projects at your university, the national research foundation, or other organizations? Are there opportunities to apply for

funding as a small team and to use the preparation period to test the viability of long-term cooperation?

Conclusion: promoting togetherness in theorizing

We have drawn on our experience with collaborative work to argue that “theorizing together” can be seen, studied, and practiced as a mode of theorizing in its own right. We set out to see theorizing as a craft relevant to research in general, not just the production of Theory (with a capital T), and described theorizing together as a tool (among others) that can be used to tap the potential of collaborative work – particularly in a synergetic style of collaboration where two or more scholars work together in order to develop a common perspective on a subject. Reviewing our own experience, we have also discussed a number of practices which, over the years, have helped us theorize together: “bringing same-but-different scholars together”; “thinking aloud together”; “collecting and sharing material together”; “writing together”; and “bringing togetherness to other practices of theorizing”. While our discussion highlighted the potential of collaborative work, the last section also offered some words of caution, discussing challenges and conditions that may affect theorizing together.

This methodology is based on our own limited experience and the scarce literature we found on cooperative theorizing. It is certainly shaped by our individual experience and the epistemic cultures of our disciplines, as well as by the current discussion on theorizing in sociology. And like most methodological advice, it tends to conceal the randomness and luck that often determine whether we succeed or fail. We think of it as a preliminary list and an invitation to our readers to think about their own experience and generate similar or different lists of practices.

While turning collaboration into a methodology might prove challenging, discussing the potential of collaboration for theorizing is nonetheless important. Not only can theorizing together be a valuable tool in our research, it may also inspire us to take a different approach to teaching theory. Would it not be easier to spark our students’ interest in theorizing if we toned down the image of theory as a genealogy of great thinkers with mysterious individual skills – and instead highlighted that theorizing is a mundane and social activity? Our understanding of theorizing as a craft implies that you do not have to produce grand-style Theory in order to theorize. Empirical work in the social sciences and humanities requires theorizing, just as theorizing requires empirical expertise and, in many cases, empirical research. There is nothing mysterious about theorizing. We have underscored this point by arguing that collaborative work

and everyday interaction can even make theorizing more productive and fun. Showing how collaborative theorizing works and promoting it in our teaching may therefore attract students and colleagues who are sometimes put off by the still quite widespread individualistic (and rather male) image of “the theorist”. We, for our part, have become enthusiastic practitioners of theorizing together. We hope that this paper encourages others to try it out for themselves.

- ¹ We ought to mention that the productivity of our collaboration was limited by the fact that most members joined the team on temporary contracts. These employment conditions, common in the German university system, are clearly not conducive to establishing a stable team and thus, by implication, to theorizing together.
- ² This changed considerably during the COVID 19-pandemic, when, at times, face-to-face interaction was impossible or strongly discouraged. We used Zoom meetings as some kind of substitute but experienced them as more tiring and less fun.
- ³ This includes an alert that announces every addition to the database in real time (if this is more “togetherness” than you can take: this function can be turned off).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Simon Hecke, Johannes Ratte, Silke Engels, Helga Volkening, Katharina Braunsman, Linda Heiken, Clelia Minnetian, Stefan Wilbers, Stella Medellias, Anna Lena Grüner, Karina Korneli, Antonia Stüwe, Ellen Hegewaldt, Can David Tobias, Elisabeth Strietzel, Vivian Vollbrecht and Jasmin Weissberg for participating in our collaboration through the years and making it such a fun and productive experience. We also thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) for funding the research projects that made parts of this collaboration possible. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to Michael Guggenheim and Distinktion’s two anonymous reviewers, who have helped us improve the article with their comments on an earlier version.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Abbott, Andrew. 2004. *Methods of Discovery. Heuristics for the Social Sciences*. New York; London: W.W. Norton.

- Abbott, Andrew. 2014. *Digital Paper. A Manual for Research and Writing with Library and Internet Materials*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Ahrens, Sönke. 2022. *How to Take Smart Notes: One Simple Technique to Boost Writing, Learning and Thinking*. Hamburg: takesmartnotes.com.
- Aldrich, Howard E., and Akram Al-Turk. 2018. Crouching authors, hidden pitfalls. *Studi di Sociologia* 56, No. 4: 351–368.
- Babchuk, Nicholas, Bruce Keith, and George Peters. 1999. Collaboration in sociology and other scientific disciplines: A comparative trend analysis of scholarship in the social, physical, and mathematical sciences. *The American Sociologist* 30, No. 3: 5–21.
- Becker, Howard S. 1998. *Tricks of the Trade. How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It*. Chicago; London: Chicago University Press.
- Berger, Charles A., and Steven H. Chaffee. 1988. On bridging the communication gap. *Human Communication Research* 15, No. 2: 311–318.
- Brankovic, Jelena. forthcoming. Worlds of Rankings Research. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Valuation and Society*, eds. Anne K. Krüger, Thorsten Peetz, and Hilmar Schäfer. London: Routledge.
- Brankovic, Jelena, Leopold Ringel, and Tobias Werron. 2018. How rankings produce competition. The case of global university rankings. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 47, No. 4: 270–288.
- Brankovic, Jelena, Leopold Ringel, and Tobias Werron. 2021. Theorizing university rankings by comparison: Systematic and historical analogies with arts and sports. In *Research Handbook on University Rankings: Theory, Methodology, Influence and Impact*, eds. Ellen Hazelkorn and Georgiana Mihut, 67–79. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Brankovic, Jelena, Leopold Ringel, and Tobias Werron. 2022. Spreading the Gospel: Legitimizing university rankings as boundary work. *Research Evaluation* 31, no. 4: 463–474.
- Bühler, Martin, and Tobias Werron. 2022. What is global about global markets? In *In Search of the Global Labor Market*, eds. Ursula Mense-Petermann, Thomas Welskopp, and Anna Zaharieva, 260–280. London: Brill.
- Camic, Carles, Gross, Neil, and Michel Lamont. 2011. The study of social knowledge making. In *Social Knowledge in the Making*, eds. Charles Camic, Neil Gross, and Michèle Lamont, 1–40. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Deville, Joe, Michael Guggenheim, and Zuzana Hrdličková. 2016. Same, same but different. Provoking relations, Assembling the comparator. In: *Practising Comparison. Logics, Relations, Collaborations*, eds. Joe Deville, Michael Guggenheim, and Zuzana Hrdličková, 99–129. Manchester: Mattering Press.
- Farzin, Sina, and Henning Laux. 2014. *Gründungsszenen soziologischer Theorie*. Wiesbaden: VS Springer.
- Fiore, Stephen A. 2008. Interdisciplinarity as teamwork. How the science of teams can inform team science. *Small Group Research* 39, No. 3: 251–277.
- Go, Julian. 2016. *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Go, Julian. 2023. Theoretical innovation and perspectival realism. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*. Online first. doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2023.2242595.
- Goffman, Erving. 1983. The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address. *American Sociological Review* 48, No. 1: 1–17.
- Guggenheim, Michael. 2015. The media of sociology: Tight or loose translations? *British Journal of Sociology* 66, No. 2: 345–372.

- Heilbron, Johan. 2011. Practical foundations of theorizing in sociology: The case of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Social Knowledge in the Making*, eds. Charles Camic, Neil Gross, and Michèle Lamont, 181–205. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Hunter, Laura, and Erin Leahey. 2008. Collaborative research in sociology: Trends and contributing factors. *The American Sociologist* 39, No. 4: 290–306.
- Kleist, Heinrich von. 1878. Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden [On the gradual construction of thought whilst speaking]. *Nord und Süd* 4: 3–7.
- Krause, Monika. 2021. *Model Cases. On Canonical Research Objects and Sites*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Leahey, Erin. 2016. From sole investigator to team scientist: Trends in the practice and study of research collaboration. *The Annual Review of Sociology* 42: 81–100.
- Levine, John M., and Richard L. Moreland. 2004. Collaboration. The social context of theory development. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8, No. 2: 164–72.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1970. Funktionale Methode und Systemtheorie. In *Soziologische Aufklärung 1. Aufsätze zur Theorie sozialer Systeme*, 31–53. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Martin, John Levi. 2015. *Thinking Through Theory*. New York; London: Norton & Company.
- Martin, John Levi. 2017. *Thinking Through Methods. A Social Science Primer*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Martus, Steffen. 2015. Wandernde Praktiken „after theory“? Praxeologische Perspektiven auf „Literatur/Wissenschaft“. *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*. Online. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iasl-2015-0010>.
- Martus, Steffen, and Carlos Spoerhase. 2022. *Geistesarbeit. Eine Praxeologie der Geisteswissenschaften*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Mears, Ashley. 2017. Puzzling in sociology: On doing and undoing theoretical puzzles. *Sociological Theory* 35, No. 2: 138–146.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Minnetian, Clelia, and Tobias Werron. 2021. Redefining achievement: The emergence of rankings in American baseball. In *Worlds of Rankings. Research in the Sociology of Organizations 74*, eds. Leopold Ringel, Wendy Espeland, Michael Sauder, and Tobias Werron, 127–151. Bingley: Emerald.
- Moody, James. 2004. The structure of a social science collaboration network: Disciplinary cohesion from 1963 to 1999. *American Sociological Review* 69, No. 2: 213–238.
- Münch, Richard. 2014. *Academic Capitalism. Universities in the Global Struggle for Excellence*. New York: Routledge.
- Nicolini, Davide. 2009. Zooming in and out: Studying practices by switching theoretical lenses and trailing connections. *Organization Studies* 30, No. 12: 1391–1418.
- Ringel, L. 2021a. Challenging valuations: How rankings navigate contestation. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 50, No. 5: 289–305.
- Ringel, L. 2021b. Stepping into the Spotlight: How Rankings Become Public Performances. In *Worlds of Rankings. Research in the Sociology of Organizations 74*, eds. Leopold Ringel, Wendy Espeland, Michael Sauder, and Tobias Werron, 53–76, Bingley: Emerald.
- Ringel, Leopold, Jelena Brankovic, and Tobias Werron. 2020. The organizational engine of rankings: Connecting “new” and “old” institutionalism. *Politics and Governance* 8, No. 2: 36–47.
- Ringel, Leopold, Wendy Espeland, Michael Sauder, and Tobias Werron. 2021. Worlds of rankings. In *Worlds of Rankings. Research in the Sociology of Organizations 74*, eds.

- Leopold Ringel, Wendy Espeland, Michael Sauder, and Tobias Werron, 1–23. Bingley: Emerald.
- Ringel, Leopold, and Tobias Werron. 2020. Where do rankings come from? A historical-sociological perspective on the history of modern rankings. In *Practices of Comparing. Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice*, eds. Angelika Epple, Walter Erhart, and Johannes Grave, 137–170. Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press.
- Ringel, Leopold, and Tobias Werron. 2021. Serielle Vergleiche: Zum Unterschied, den Wiederholung macht - anhand der Geschichte von Kunst- und Hochschulrankings. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 73: 301–331.
- Ringel, Leopold, and Tobias Werron. 2022. Für einen rollentheoretisch informierten Blick auf die ‚Organisationsgesellschaft‘. *Soziale Welt* 73, No. 3: 387–419.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2006. Wettbewerb als Interaktionsmodus. Kulturelle und sozialstrukturelle Konsequenzen der Konkurrenzgesellschaft. *Leviathan* 34, No. 1: 82–104.
- Ryle, Gilbert. 1949. *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Schatzki, Theodore R. 2019. *Social Change in a Material World*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Schatzki, Theodore R., Eike von Savigny, and Karin Knorr Cetina, eds. 2001. *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Spiller, Keith, Kirstie Ball, Elizabeth Daniel, Sally Dibb, Maureen Meadows, and Ana Canhoto. 2015. Carnavalesque collaborations: Reflections on “doing” multidisciplinary research. *Qualitative Research* 15, No. 5: 551–567.
- Spoerhase, Carlos. 2014. Das Maß der Potsdamer Garde. Die ästhetische Vorgeschichte des Rankings in der europäischen Literatur- und Kunstkritik des 18. Jahrhunderts. In *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 58, eds. Wilfried Barner, Christine Lubkoll, Ernst Osterkamp, and Ulrich Raulff, 90–126. Berlin; München; Boston: De Gruyter.
- Spoerhase, Carlos. 2018. Rankings: A pre-history. *New Left Review*, No. 114: 99–112.
- Stoltz, Dustin S. 2023. Rising coauthorship in sociology, 1895 to 2022. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 9. Online. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23780231231171115>.
- Swedberg, Richard. 2012. Theorizing in sociology and social science: turning to the context of discovery. *Theory and Society* 41, no. 1: 1–40.
- Swedberg, Richard. 2014. *The Art of Social Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Swedberg, Richard. 2016. On the heuristic role of concepts in theorizing. In *Theory in Action Theoretical Constructionism*, eds. Peter Sohlberg and Håkon Leiulfstrud, 23–38. London: Brill.
- Swedberg, Richard. 2020. On the use of abstractions in sociology: The classics and beyond. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 20, No. 4: 257–280.
- Vaughan, Diane. 2004. Theorizing disaster: Analogy, historical ethnography, and the Challenger accident. *Ethnography* 5, No. 3: 315–347.
- Vaughan, Diane. 2014. Analogy, cases, and comparative social organization. In *Theorizing in Social Science. The Context of Discovery*, ed. Richard Swedberg, 61–84. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Warren John Robert. 2019. How much do you have to publish to get a job in a top sociology department? Or to get tenure? Trends over a generation. *Sociological Science* 6: 172–196.

- Werron, Tobias. 2015a. Why do we believe in competition? A historical-sociological view of competition as an institutionalized modern imaginary. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 16, No. 2: 186–210.
- Werron, Tobias. 2015b. What do nation-states compete for?: A world-societal perspective on competition for "soft" global goods. In *From Globalization to World Society. Neo-Institutional and Systems-Theoretical Perspectives*, eds. Boris Holzer, Fatima Kastner, and Tobias Werron, 85–106. London: Routledge.
- Werron, Tobias, and Leopold Ringel. 2017. Rankings in a comparative perspective. Conceptual remarks. In *Geschlossene Gesellschaften (Verhandlungen des 38. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie)*, ed. Stephan Lessenich, 1–10. Essen: DGS.
- Wilbers, Stefan, and Jelena Brankovic. 2021. The emergence of university rankings: A historical-sociological account. *Higher Education*. Online. Open access. doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00776-7.
- Wilbers, Stefan, Leopold Ringel, and Tobias Werron. 2021. Homöopathen, „Quacksalber“ und wissenschaftliche Mediziner. Zu den Anfängen der Hochschulrankings in der medizinischen Ausbildung der USA, 1850–1930. In *Organisation und Bewertung*, eds. Frank Meier and Thorsten Peetz, 393–424. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 2007. Generally speaking: The logic and mechanics of social pattern analysis. *Sociological Forum* 22, No. 2: 131–145.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 2021. *Generally Speaking: An Invitation to Concept-Driven Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.