

Call for Papers

for a Special Issue of the *Zeitschrift für Soziologie (ZfS)*

Relations of Theory and Empirical Research in Sociology

From the Division of Labor to the Co-Construction of Social Scientific Knowledge

Editors: Alexander Antony (Erlangen-Nuremberg), Paul Eisewicht (Münster), Tilo Grenz (Kreuzlingen),
Andreas Haupt (Karlsruhe), Alexander Schmidl (Erlangen-Nuremberg), Silke Steets (Berlin)

Sociological theory and empirical research form two core domains of sociology. Even so, they remain largely separate in both teaching and research practice. While theoretical work frequently draws on empirical examples, it tends to engage only selectively with empirical research. Conversely, empirical studies rely on theories to frame research questions and formulate hypotheses. Yet empirical findings are seldom used to critically examine theoretical assumptions or to stimulate modifications, extensions, or entirely new theoretical developments. This separation between theory and empirical research has repeatedly prompted reflections aimed at overcoming it and at fostering a fruitful relationship between the two.

In recent years, the discussion of the reciprocal relationship between theory and empirical research has gained renewed momentum. In the German-speaking context, this has occurred, for example, in qualitative social research through the discourse on theory-driven qualitative research (“*Theoretische Empirie*”) (Kalthoff et al. 2008). Qualitative research is increasingly expected to link theoretical work and empirical research in ways that allow both to benefit. In the international debate on theory building in qualitative research, Grounded Theory methodology has been further refined, and *abductive theorizing* (Tavory & Timmermans 2014) has been introduced as a form of theorizing integrated into research practice. This approach explicitly distances itself from an inductivist orientation in qualitative research and encourages a dialogue between data and existing theories. For quantitative research, Hedström similarly calls for a symbiotic relationship between theoretical and empirical work (Hedström 2005: 114). Beyond attempts to falsify theories—or parts thereof—empirical insights can also be used to modify general theoretical perspectives and to design research that enables a recursive interweaving of theory

and empirical data. Closely related is the *Theorizing* debate initiated by Swedberg (2012, 2014; Anicker & Armbruster 2024), which systematically aims to clarify and further develop techniques of theory building with explicit reference to empirical work.

Building on these debates, the special issue examines the potential and limits of shaping the relationship between theoretical and empirical work in sociology. It focuses on three key thematic areas:

(1) At the core lies the question of *research practice, organization, and strategy*. At what stages of the research process are different forms of theorizing applied, and how do they shape research designs and the construction of research objects? How do researchers select specific theories, especially in a multiparadigmatic discipline? To what extent can empirical insights inform critiques of theories, and according to which criteria can theories be unsettled or critically examined (Antony 2026)? What implications do these considerations have for the reformulation or further development of social theories and theories of society? What are the advantages and disadvantages of interdisciplinary research projects (Knoblauch & Löw 2020)? Theoretical perspectives, moreover, function not only as “thinking tools” (Kalthoff & Hirschauer 2022: 341) in empirical research, but also as a catalyst for methodological innovation. How can analytical perspectives be operationalized methodologically? How can empirical cases be conceptualized as specific theoretical cases, potentially extending beyond conventional research programs?

(2) Closely related to this is the question of what constitutes *adequacy and alignment when configuring theory–empirical research–method constellations* in sociological research. How can the adequacy of research objects and the alignment between theoretical foundations and methods be justified? Which theoretical approaches are compatible—or incompatible—with which methodological procedures, and where might novel constellations generate new insights? This also prompts consideration of whether, and to what extent, ‘Western’ theories are applicable to all empirical objects, and how positionality should inform reflections on appropriateness and fit. These discussions can also be seen as contributions to debates on quality criteria in theoretically informed empirical social research (cf. Strübing et al. 2018; Otte et al. 2023), and it is worth asking to what extent established quality criteria account for the epistemic and theoretical pluralization of the discipline (Eisewicht & Grenz 2018).

(3) Finally, to further these discussions, we invite contributions that build *connections across different approaches and research programs* or that compare them. Comparative perspectives may include, for example, the spectrum between more theory-oriented and more empirically focused research programs; between qualitative and quantitative approaches; between approaches centered on social theory or theories of society; or between German-speaking and international debates. It is also possible to explore comparisons at the disciplinary boundaries of sociology, such as those between analytical and synthesizing forms of knowledge production in design-oriented approaches (Lupton 2018). Such work

can additionally link to the theorizing debate (Swedberg 2012, 2014), discussions on the social practice of theorizing (Anicker & Armbruster 2024; Knoblauch & Löw 2020), and debates on the use of heuristics (Abbott 2004), visual strategies (Swedberg 2016), or theoretically informed mixed-methods research (Baur et al. 2017). Contributions that address evolving forms of hypothesis generation—for example through AI tools (Ludwig & Mullainathan 2024)—are likewise welcome.

The special issue invites contributions from a broad spectrum of theoretical and methodological orientations. It also seeks to foster dialogue between different—or even previously considered incompatible—perspectives and to highlight diverse strategies for shaping theory–empirical research relations in sociological research. Contributions rooted in general theory are as welcome as those demonstrating theory–empirical research relations in practice through concrete examples from empirical studies.

Abstracts of approximately two pages should be submitted to the editors of the special issue by **1 May 2026**. In a first step, submissions will be evaluated for their thematic fit. Authors of selected abstracts will be invited to submit anonymized full manuscripts (in German or English) to the editors of the special issue by **19 November 2026**. Manuscripts will undergo anonymous peer review following the standard ZfS procedures, with final decisions made by the ZfS editorial board based on the reviewers' reports. Before submitting full manuscripts, authors will have the opportunity to participate in an online workshop designed to further develop their contributions. The exact date of the workshop will be coordinated with participating authors. Publication of the special issue is scheduled for early 2028.

Abstracts should be submitted to the following email addresses: alexander.antony@fau.de, tilo.grenz@phtg.ch

Editors of the Special Issue:

Alexander Antony, Dr., is a Research Associate at the Chair of Sociological Theory at the Institute of Sociology, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen–Nuremberg.

Paul Eisewicht, Dr., is a Research Associate at the Institute of Sociology, University of Münster.

Tilo Grenz, Dr., is Head of the Research Office (Stabsstelle Forschung) at the University of Teacher Education Thurgau (PHTG), Switzerland.

Andreas Haupt, Prof. Dr., is Professor of Sociology at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology.

Alexander Schmidl, PD Dr., is Assistant Professor at the Chair of Methods of Empirical Social Research at the Institute of Sociology, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen–Nuremberg.

Silke Steets, Prof. Dr., is Professor of General Sociology at Technische Universität Berlin and Co-Spokesperson of the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 1265 “Re-Figuration of Spaces.”

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