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Can Substantive Theorizing Really Save Us From Ourselves? A Skeptical Commentary on Wicker's Proposal

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This commentary concurs in Wicker's call for more attention to substantive theorizing, but attempts to place that strategic approach within a broader conceptual and methodological context. It presents a perspective that is somewhat more skeptical than Wicker's as to the ultimate potential of research in our field. Specifically, the commentary discusses five themes that Wicker raises in support of the importance and potential value of substantive theorizing, looking at the dark side of each of them as well as at the potential gains. The commentary thus tries to give an appropriate balance of attention to both the limitations and the advantages of substantive theorizing.

Let me foreshadow my commentary at the start: Wicker (this issue) urges us to use a strategy he refers to as substantive theorizing. I agree with much of Wicker's argument in this paper, but I think some other things need to be said about these matters as well. Therefore, I attempt to place Wicker's arguments within a broader conceptual and methodological context. But reader be warned: My version of that broader context presents a considerably more skeptical picture of the overall possibilities of our science, even when it is practiced *at its best.*

Wicker argues for a strategy he calls "substantive theorizing," and discusses that strategy in terms of five clusters of choices that characterize it. But from a broader conceptual and methodological perspective, each of those sets of choices themselves pose the chooser with dilemmas. That is, those

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choices are embedded within a set of mutually conflicting desiderata (i.e., mutually exclusive criteria), all of which are valuable but not all of which can be maximized at the same time. When one makes a choice within the research process, in order to gain an increment on some desired criterion, one usually at the same time is taking a loss on some other, equally desirable criterion. Hence, any one set of choices—including those Wicker touts for substantive theorizing—themselves pose limitations as well as opportunities.

But Wicker forthrightly bills his presentation as advocative rather than balanced. Thus, he is not to be faulted for failing to dwell on the down side—that is, for failing to emphasize the pains that go with the gains of those choices leading to substantive theorizing. So I counterbalance his advocative stance with a skeptic's stance. Specifically, I address each of the five clusters of choices, that Wicker takes as descriptive of substantive theorizing, as a set of choices involving dilemmas. I thereby note some of the negative consequences of choosing the substantive theorizing course, setting them beside the positive ones that Wicker lays out so well.

SUBSTANTIVE THEORIZING REPRESENTS ONE OF SEVERAL ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH PATHS

Wicker begins by emphasizing the very important point that substantive theorizing is one, but only one, of several possible research paths. He notes, and I want to emphasize, that each research path both provides opportunities for potential advancements of knowledge and at the same time guarantees constraints and limitations on that knowledge.

In my opinion, we social psychologists by and large have become far too narrow in our practice of the scientific enterprise. And, willy-nilly, we have tended to let those overly restrictive operational practices define our underlying philosophy of science, rather than the other way around. Often, we have practiced (and preached) evangelistically—as though we believed there was only one acceptable research path, leading more or less inevitably to some state of knowledge we might refer to as "the truth." For many, that valued path is one I have referred to elsewhere (cf. Brinberg & McGrath, 1985) as the experimental path. For others, the preferred path is one I have labeled the empirical path. Wicker discusses and illustrates both of these paths.

I believe we ought, instead, to view our line of work much more ecumenically, both in practice and in preaching. We should recognize that there are alternative paths by which to pursue our quest for truth—the two mentioned above, and others as well, including the substantive theorizing path that Wicker champions. Furthermore, we should recognize that each one of those paths not only offers opportunities to perhaps edge closer to that elusive truth we ostensibly seek but is also fraught with pitfalls and limitations—

indeed, that each path is seriously, even fatally, flawed. Thus, our only hope of arriving at some satisfactory state of knowledge is to travel along many of those paths, not just one of them. Hence, I am arguing, *not only must we open up alternative routes to knowledge* (as Wicker urges effectively, for the substantive theorizing path), but *we must not put too much faith in any one of them.*

I support Wicker's urging of the substantive theorizing path because that path has been sorely neglected in the post-Watsonian era within which social psychology has come to maturity. But I warn its advocates not to overlook the down side of that strategy as well. Too often, social psychologists seem to argue thus: "Your strategy is flawed. My strategy is different from yours. Therefore, my strategy must be flawless." None of us should ever imagine that our preferred strategy is itself without flaws just because we know that some other research strategy is clearly flawed, and that ours avoids those flaws. Our strategy, assuredly, has flaws enough of its own. After all, the limitations of substantive theorizing are kissing cousins to those conceptual and methodological flaws that led to the demise of introspectionism and the rise of a vigorously antitheoretical behaviorism in the first quarter of this century.

SUBSTANTIVE THEORIZING EXPLORES SOCIALLY IMPORTANT EVENTS AND PROCESSES

Yes, but that is a value-laden matter. To paraphrase the adage, one scholar's "vital issue" is another's "trivial pursuit." For example, Wicker believes that small retail businesses in the Los Angeles area are a substantive domain of importance—but many others might not. I have studied Little League baseball, and in the context of that study found it of importance—but many others might not. Similarly, for our colleagues doing research on consumer behavior, marketing, military training, sports motivation, religious practices, and so on. The ecumenical view that I am urging here carries with in the obligation to be tolerant—of others' views of what substantive issues are important to study, as well as of others' views about effective methodology for such study. Wicker, himself, is certainly more than tolerant in these matters; but his strong position in this article might lead other less tolerant scholars astray.

SUBSTANTIVE THEORIZING PROBES A CONTEXTUALIZED, LIMITED DOMAIN

Yes indeed. But, to paraphrase the Old Testament passages about wheels within wheels: If we are to deal with a world composed of systems within

systems within systems, we must keep in mind two crucial points. The first point is that no one level of system has an exclusive claim on "causality"; each level can make its own unique contribution to our understanding of the phenomena in question. Therefore, every level has an equal claim to value (in regard to the "Socially Important Events" just discussed), and narrow domains are no better or worse than broad ones (in regard to "In-depth Exploration of a Domain," discussed next). The second point is that the "causal collage" at any given level is tied—often in intricate and nonobvious ways—to the causal collage at adjacent levels. Hence, although knowledge potentially can be gained by study at any given level, we cannot settle for knowledge gained at any one level. Knowledge gained at multiple levels, as well as knowledge gained by means of multiple paths, is a sine qua non for approaching that state of knowledge we call "truth."

SUBSTANTIVE THEORIZING REQUIRES IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF A DOMAIN

Yes, but . . . Wicker discusses this cluster of choices in close relation to the preceding cluster that deals with context. He argues for at least three points here: (a) That the researcher should select a narrow substantive domain; (b) that the research process should involve an intensive and comprehensive coverage of that domain, and (c) that the research activity should lead the researcher to develop a system-insider's level of expertise but at the same time maintain a system-outsider's perspective. All of these deserve comment.

Certainly the breadth or narrowness of an empirical domain is related to the level of system that is focused upon for study. If the systems-within-systems view expressed in the context section is to be taken seriously, then no one level of system is preferable for study. Each has its own contribution to make; and, in a sense, each is necessary for understanding the others. I empathize with Wicker's concern for dealing with relatively homogeneous components, and with undertaking comprehensive study of the substantive systems chosen. But this is just another preference within a dilemmatic space. When we choose substantive systems to work with, and conceptual tools to do that work, there is always a trade-off to be made between contextual particularity (or system fidelity) on the one hand and generalizability on the other. Wicker simply prefers to maximize on the former at the expense of the latter—whereas many others make precisely the opposite (equally limiting) choice. Choosing to study a narrow system in a comprehensive (but not generalizable) way is a perfectly reasonable choice. But that choice is not in and of itself inherently more rational or virtuous than many other choices.

Furthermore, this choice of a narrow but comprehensive treatment is expensive in two ways. First, the chosen mission is essentially endless. There is always another level of detail at which to learn the system (remember there are systems within systems within systems, as per the previous discussion). Second, this approach invites seduction. If a researcher honestly sets out to become expert in a system, sooner or later he or she is likely to "go native," and thereafter to have an inside-out view of the world—as do system participants, and especially as do system managers. That may be a useful view, one that is worth entering into your study; but it is certainly a limited view, and one not especially conducive to new ways of seeing the system or new ways of understanding its underlying structures. This is akin to the cultural anthropologist's *etic-emic* problem, writ small. So, if researcher A is going to take on the system in its full particularity, it may be useful for the research team to include a researcher B, who stands back and looks at the system of interest from some conceptual distance, and perhaps tries to relate it to other "nearby" systems.

SUBSTANTIVE THEORIZING IS AN OPEN PROCESS, NOT A STATIC PRODUCT

This, like Mom's apple pie, conjures up lots of warm and fuzzy stuff; who can be against it! But it is more a pious platitude than a viable principle. In any case, it is misplaced here. Making research activity an open process is really not a "cluster of choices" in the research process; rather, it is a point of view regarding the purpose of that research activity. Moreover, I see no reason why the virtues Wicker calls up in this section—openness with respect to new ideas, flexibility with regard to methods and assumptions, recognition of multiple goals, deliberate adoption of multiple perspectives—are any more likely to be practiced by substantive theorists than by experimentalists or empiricists. I agree that these are virtues; I just do not agree that they are related to the research path or perspective taken.

REPRISE

I agree with Wicker that we need more of what he calls substantive theorizing. We need it in part because we have had so little of it. But that will not cure all our woes. Substantive theorizing is just one of a number of research paths. Each is helpful, but none is sufficient, and none is without serious flaws. So, overemphasis on the virtues of substantive theorizing, and underemphasis on its limitations, can nullify some of the advantages that

a more cautious pursuit of this approach could gain us. I am sure that Wicker has in mind such a more balanced approach; certainly, that is what he practices. My comments here are intended to keep all of us sensitized to the other, darker, side of this and every other strategy for research. We are more likely to gain the most from this (or any) strategy if we use it with an eye to both its limitations and its potential.

REFERENCE

Brinberg, D., & McGrath, J. E. (1985). *Validity and the research process.* Beverly Hills. Sage.