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Comment on Richard Swedberg/1. Surprise! Some Comments on Richard Swedberg's Peirce Paper

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Surprise! Some Comments on Richard Swedberg's Peirce Paper

by Andrew Abbott

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Richard Swedberg has deftly employed the familiar confusion over Peirce's concept of abduction as a route into the Lowell Lecture and its broader advice on how to theorize. Swedberg's project of encouraging student theorizing seems admirable indeed.

To be sure, there is a certain misrecognition here. Students theorize all the time. They theorize about their teachers' reactions to this or that paper topic, about whether another student will ask them for a date, about the best place to take a vacation. Like M. Jourdain, they have been theorizing all their lives. What we want is to change what they theorize about: to encourage them to theorize social life.

Perhaps we want also to make them less predictable in that theorizing. For above all, Swedberg wants students' theories to be surprising. In his five-step model of theorizing, it is surprise that makes the difference. "Observe and be hopeful?" – yes, of course, although the watched pot never boils, which explains Peirce's reminder that we should watch unconsciously. "Select one idea?" – good advice indeed. "Explicate and turn the abduction into hypotheses?" "Test them?" These last two are the guts of most methods courses.

No, the whole sequence of five steps balances on surprise. It is somewhat surprising that Swedberg does not spend more time telling us what makes something surprising, although one might further ask whether it is surprising that I in particular find it surprising that Swedberg did not say more about what it means to find something surprising. (Et cetera.) Swedberg does give us various hints about surprise in

various places. He tells us at one point for example that “the observation is carried out in a way that is unorthodox and imaginative” (but what makes something “unorthodox and imaginative?”)

But his crucial remark comes earlier, when he tells us that Peirce locates surprise in “an erroneous expectation of which we have hardly been conscious.” Thus the problem of surprise boils down to the problem of expectations, and hence the question “where does surprise come from” is really the question “where do expectations come from?”

In the social sciences expectations come from research communities, those little groups I have elsewhere called generational paradigms [Abbott 2001]: cumulating little programs of social science in which this or that group is rediscovering some important truth in a disciplined and corporate way. It is clear that facts and theoretical ideas can be surprising and novel within one of these little paradigms *without* being surprising and novel outside. Political scientists in the early 1980s were not surprised to hear that the state was important, but some historical sociologists – who had disregarded the state for a decade or so while they pursued economic determinism – found the importance of the state so surprising as to write a widely-cited book about it [Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985].

Surprisingness is thus local to scientific communities. But how does that work? I don’t agree with the Peircian model, which seems to assume that there is a grand scientific synthesis in the context of which this or that idea *really is* surprising. Expectations – and consequently surprisingness – are more truly local than that. But if that is true, then it could be that to be regarded as creative or innovative one must, in Robert Frank’s phrase, choose the right pond [Frank 1985]. The right pond is that place with respect to whose local rules and expectations your own new ideas are just different enough to be regarded as intriguing and creative but not so strange as to be regarded as “unscientific,” “bullshit,” etc. So on that theory one “becomes uninteresting” – one becomes a person who does normal science – purely by locating oneself inside a particular tradition of expectations. One becomes creative by addressing such a community from a little further off, by setting oneself slightly outside.

But we could also make that argument fractally, within itself. We could say that people could orient to smaller, local runs of expectations within a generational paradigm, and be regarded as “finding surprising things” within those local runs. The situation could be like the spleenwort fractal, defined such that creativity is “being on the stem of the fern rather than in the leaves.” Since the leaves are themselves just smaller stems with smaller leaves, and those smaller stems are just even smaller stems with even smaller leaves, etc., everybody is on a stem with respect to some collection of leaves of some order. In such a model, producing surprising theory is a

matter of knowing the order of magnitude of one's local collection of leaves. Hence the timid theorist produces a modification of late Durkheimianism to astound the little community of Durkheimians while the venturesome theorist will astound us all by denying the possibility of historicist causation.

But that takes a certain structure for granted, as if it existed *ex ante*. (Well, disciplines and subcommunities do exist before any particular individual, but who cares? Let's be surprising.) A more adventurous approach would be to argue that we begin with an unstructured collection of potential scholars, each with a given level of timidity, or a given "feel" for surprisingness. Given that, is it the case that we could arrange any possible distribution of such people in a way that they would feel located in a pseudo-spleenwort fractal such that they would all be satisfied with the degree of surprisingness this location allowed to each of them? Or would it be the case that some distributions of inherent surprisingness would be defective, unorganizable? (Perhaps we would have all "surprisers" and not enough "normal scientists" to give them people to astound, even if we choose some fractal arrangement, and even though most surprisers are themselves normal scientists with respect to at least some other surprisers.)

At the end of the day, the deep question is not whether everybody can be a surprising theorist, but whether the degrees of surprisingness available in the population at hand can be so arranged that everyone feels suitably revolutionary with respect to one group and suitably conservative with respect to another. But the problem posing with that posing of the question is that the whole analysis assumes that we can imagine individuals with given levels of surprisingness. Perhaps those levels are endogenous? That would be surprising. But then if...?

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Comment on Richard Swedberg/1

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Abstract: As part of the larger project of trying to revitalize social theory by drawing attention to theorizing, I analyze the views of philosopher Charles S. Peirce on this topic. I take my departure in his 1903 lecture called "How to Theorize" and note that for Peirce theorizing was closely linked to his concept of abduction. In analyzing this central concept in Peirce's work, I suggest that we may want to look at it especially from a practical point of view. More precisely, what can we learn from Peirce in terms of concrete tips and suggestions for how we ourselves should go about theorizing? I also supplement the material from the 1903 lecture with what can be found in Peirce's later writings.

Keywords: Theory, social theory, theorizing, Peirce, Charles S., abduction.

Andrew Abbott is the Gustavus F. and Ann M. Swift Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Sociology and the College at the University of Chicago. Abbott took his BA (in history and literature) at Harvard in 1970 and his PhD (in sociology) from the University of Chicago in 1982. Prior to his return to Chicago in 1991, he taught for thirteen years at Rutgers University. Known for his ecological theories of occupations, Abbott has also pioneered algorithmic analysis of social sequence data. He has written on the foundations of social science methodology and on the evolution of the social sciences and the academic system. He has also written on heuristics and general theory.