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## Theorizing from neglected cases

Monika Krause

Department of Sociology, London School of Economics, London, UK

### ABSTRACT

Some cases in the social sciences have been attributed a greater capacity to generate transferrable insights than others. This is evident in the phenomenon now widely diagnosed as Eurocentrism but is not limited to it. When some cases are privileged by convention, others come into view as occasions primarily for ‘application’ of insights derived from other cases or of insights canonized in conversations organized around the label of ‘theory’. This paper seeks to identify opportunities for higher forms of theorizing based on these observations about patterns in existing knowledge-production, focusing particularly on the opportunities that arise for theorizing from a focus on ‘neglected cases’. Cases that have been neglected vis-à-vis specific categories help us to examine and challenge assumptions associated with existing concepts; they help us to reveal the range of properties bundled by existing concepts and allow us to develop a more precise vocabulary for the universe of social phenomena, which is the basis for description, explanation and critique. Based on the distinction between ‘privileged’ cases on the one hand and ‘neglected’ cases on the other hand, the paper also discusses strategies for the reflective use of privileged cases for theorizing.



### KEYWORDS

Theorizing; case selection; anomalous cases; conceptualization; generalization; case study; neglected cases

## Introduction

When social scientists discuss ‘professions’ or ‘professionals’, they reference doctors, much more so than pharmacists, priests or journalists. When they study cities, they focus on growing and very large cities. The scholarly literature about ‘humanitarianism’ has accorded an outsized role to one organization, Doctors without Borders (MSF).

I have argued that social scientists privilege some cases over others in ways that are in some aspects similar to the way researchers in the life sciences focus on specific animals or other organisms like chicken, mice or fruitflies, which have come to stand in for larger categories of objects. In the social sciences, too, some cases are studied more frequently than others. They shape their concepts, help their facts travel, and are attributed a greater capacity to generate transferrable insight (Guggenheim and Krause 2012; Krause 2021).

**CONTACT** Monika Krause  m.krause@lse.ac.uk  Department of Sociology, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

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This is evident in the phenomenon now widely diagnosed as Eurocentrism (Chakrabarty 2000) but is not limited to it, as the examples above show.

The tendency to focus a lot of attention on some cases comes with a tendency to apply concepts derived from privileged cases onto other cases. This takes a specific form in conversations organized by the label ‘theory’: in the course of canonization of authors or approaches, cases cease to be cases and become paradigmatic examples instead. Insights related to these examples are then applied to other cases as theories. This provides a recipe for the production of papers that are theoretical in some sense, but can treat theory as a static set of ideas and may only aim to demonstrate that a particular theoretical approach can indeed be applied rather than aim to provide a critical assessment in light of other theoretical approaches and empirical evidence.

Starting from these observations, this paper seeks to identify opportunities for higher forms of theorizing, focusing particularly on the opportunities that arise for theorizing from a focus on ‘neglected cases’. After situating the paper in a broader sociological turn in discussions within sociological theory, I will explain in more detail what I mean by neglected cases and what I mean by theorizing. I will argue that because of the way concepts and categories are linked to privileged cases, cases that have been neglected vis-à-vis specific categories have a significant potential for helping us to examine and challenge assumptions associated with existing concepts; they help us to reveal the range of properties bundled by existing concepts and allow us to develop a more precise vocabulary for the universe of social phenomena, which is the basis for description, explanation and critique. Based on the distinction between ‘privileged’ cases on the one hand and ‘neglected’ cases on the other hand, the paper also discusses strategies for the reflective use of privileged cases for theorizing.

## Nonheroic starting points

This paper and, in my reading, is special issue as a whole starts from an orientation that is sociological about sociological work. We are taking an observational stance towards sociological practice and ask how these observations about existing practices can be used to improve not just sociological work in general but sociological theory specifically.

In my contribution, I propose a focus on case selection as a specific dimension of sociological research, which can stand alongside a focus on the media used (Guggenheim 2015, 2023), founding scenes (Farzin and Laux 2014; Farzin 2014; Farzin and Laux 2016), figures (Schlechtriemen 2023), and standpoints (Go 2023a, 2023b). Complementing recent accounts of ‘casing’ as a practical accomplishment in individual studies (Tavory and Timmermans 2009; Wagenknecht and Pflüger 2018; Bergmann 2014; Soss 2021), I am focusing specifically on patterns in collective practices.

There is already a rich methodological discussion about case selection, which addresses normative questions very directly, often based on consideration of past best practice (Ermakoff 2014; Flyvbjerg 2006; Ragin and Becker 1992; Forrester 1996; Chen 2015; Goertz and Mahoney 2012; Elman, Gerring, and Mahoney 2016; Gerring 2017). Within these discussions, the focus on the sociology of sociology invites readers on a little detour. What, if anything, might we learn about what we should do, from observations about what we are actually doing, not just in the best papers, but across the range of papers that are being produced? I want to discuss choices for individuals in light of observations about patterns in everyone else’s choices.

The sociological orientation towards sociological work provides a starting point that is nonheroic and pluralist: If the sociology of art, de-centers the individual artist, the sociology of sociology de-centers the sociologist and also the theorist. I would note that there is a range of theoretical approaches and there will continue to be a range of theoretical approaches. Each of these will help us see some things, and not others. Within each, there will be further improvements and some lessons learnt. Within each, there will be better work and worse. Individual visions can move things forward and can help us see where a certain path leads. They can serve, to some extent, as their own theories' good and bad examples. But most claims of new beginnings are exaggerated, building on, reshaping and recombining old ideas and philosophical currents, tending not to do justice to what was there before in previous research.

The dimension of case selection cuts across different theoretical approaches and schools as do some of the other dimensions in this special issue. By claiming case selection is a dimension of research that 'cuts across different theoretical approaches', I also mean to claim that reflection on problems relating to this dimension has relevance across theoretical approaches and to express scepticism that the problems relating to it can be escaped by school-specific solutions or by new and better epistemologies or ontologies. These are usually proclaimed in the abstract and usually invite allegiance in the abstract; their relationship to the strength of diverse traditions of research practices often remains underspecified.

### **Privileged cases, neglected cases, and other related candidates**

To the extent that some cases are privileged in the way I describe, other cases appear as neglected cases. I would note that in this argument, cases are not seen as privileged or neglected in themselves. Cases are privileged or neglected with regard to certain categories: gay couples, for example, were discussed, even central, in the sociology of sexualities but have long been neglected in the sociology of the family. India has been a prominent case in the sociology of development and the sociology of South Asia (compared to Bangladesh, for example), but has long been neglected in Anglo-American political sociology and the sociology of elections as Banerjee (2021) has recently argued. The Haitian revolution is now central to postcolonial theory (Buck-Morss 2000; Go 2013; Lawson 2015; James 1938; Dubois 2014) but remains neglected with regard to the category of revolution within comparative historical sociology.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that some cases are privileged does not mean that other cases are not featured at all. If research in a field is shaped by privileged cases in the way I hypothesize, we want expect studies based on neglected cases to appear but we want expect them to feature in selective ways and to have limited impact in shaping relevant categories. One common way for neglected cases to feature is as sites of application, when insights gained from privileged cases are applied to other cases or when insight from theories are applied to other cases.

This dynamic between privileged cases and neglected cases can be illustrated well with the ways the global South has been incorporated into knowledge production historically centred on the global north. Raewyn Connell has described one version of this well in his analysis of the phenomenon of 'x in Australia' (Connell 2007), a rhetorical pattern whereby insights from metropolitan sociology using metropolitan data was reproduced

in Australian sociology in contributions that were not accorded and also didn't accord themselves a lot of space for 'talking back' to metropolitan sociology.

But the asymmetric pattern of privileged cases versus neglected cases is not limited to this instantiation, and is not reducible to asymmetries that reflect extra-academic power dynamics. Cases can be privileged due to a range of factors, including larger ideologies such as Eurocentrism (Chakrabarty 2000), but also other schemas shared in the general population or among researchers, aspects of the institutional organization of the social sciences and mundane factors such as the availability of data sources (Krause 2021, 44–51). The pattern of insight-generation versus application repeats on the specific dimension of case selection: Scholars might apply research on deprofessionalization among doctors to teachers, for example, or apply research on gentrification in large, iconic cities to smaller cities but they more rarely do so the other way around.

The methodological discussion about case selection in sociology and history has resulted in some proposals about the kind of cases that are particularly promising for research; I would like to clarify how 'neglected cases' relate to some of these other candidates, and in particular how they relate to different conceptions of 'anomalous cases'.

One proposal for the epistemic gains provided by studying 'anomalous cases' is offered by Carlo Ginzburg. He writes: 'Anomalous cases are especially promising, since anomalies, as Kierkegaard once noted, are richer, from a cognitive point of view, than norms, insofar as the former invariably includes the latter – but not the other way round' (Ginzburg 2014, 97).

I would point out that there is an ambiguity in Ginzburg's discussions of anomalous cases here and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> It is not quite clear from his accounts, what kind of 'norms' or 'standards' are relevant to the definition of the 'anomalous' cases, which he commends for further study. Is it the social norms of the society under study, or is it the norms and conventions among contemporary scholars? Ginzburg at times clearly refers to the breaking of societal norms by the people he is studying as the reason for why it is interesting to study them – Ginzburg, a founder of micro-history is, after all, well known as a scholar of trials against those labelled 'heretics' or 'witches' by the catholic church in mediaeval Europe. At other times, Ginzburg highlights the importance of breaking with the dominant norms of a historiography, which has focused on standard political history in locations that have been considered 'central' or 'significant'. The same ambiguity can be found in Ermakoff's (2014) discussion of 'anomalous' cases; his example of an anomalous case is Agnes, a transgender woman, who had played an important role in the work of Harold Garfinkel. Agnes disrupted societal norms around gender at the time, and may be said to be an anomalous case in the first sense discussed above; but she has shaped the sociology of gender as a central case.

My discussion of neglected cases (in relation to privileged cases) focuses specifically on neglect by scholarly observers. What are 'neglected' cases in society – we should perhaps more accurately say 'marginalised', 'criminalised' or 'minoritized' cases – are not necessarily neglected cases in the social sciences; sociology in particular has a long tradition of focusing on cases in the 'marked' rather than 'unmarked' normalized categories (see Brekhus 1998); these inner-academic histories need to be taken into account if the goal is to intervene into and improve academic knowledge.

There is a further ambiguity in discussions of anomalous cases, which I want to address: I argue we should be clearer about the distinction between phenomena that

are anomalous vis a vis a *category* and phenomena that do not fit an established *explanation* or a *pattern* that has been identified. My argument focuses specifically on the former, which Kuhn also includes in his discussion of the discovery of oxygen (Kuhn 1970, 52–65). Neglected cases in this sense are thus not ‘exceptional’ cases (Ermakoff 2014), which implies a rule; nor are they necessarily extreme (Chen 2015), or exemplary (unless we make them so in the service of one particular argument or another).

I discuss strategies based on neglected cases as strategies that can complement other strategies and other criteria of case selection. As one strategy among others it has certain advantages. Partly because it is based on an assessment of patterns in the distribution of attention rather than an ex-post reconstruction of best practice, it is quite accessible for researchers. Many researchers will be able to attest to the fact that it can be rather hard to get to someone else’s past best practice from any point in a complex empirical research project as unfolds in time. By contrast, starting from any given case, it is quite possible to reflect on how that case is situated vis-à-vis patterns of attention and neglect in relevant research fields. Starting from any given category or concept of interest, it is possible to consider the role of privileged and neglected cases, if any.

In a context, where it is widely recognized that new knowledge or scholarly contributions are produced by intervening into previous social scientific knowledge (see e.g. Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Timmermans and Tavory 2014), my observations about privileged cases and neglected cases provide one particular set of hypothesis about the structure of that previous knowledge. There is of course an ambiguity in how neglect can be measured and established. The demand for novelty in scholarly research produces claims of neglect all the time. But not all claims to neglect will be regarded as valid after scholarly discussions and debates. These claims and the assessment of claims in light of evidence are already a part of scholarly practice. The relevance of thorough literature reviews to methodological questions becomes clearer when we consider the importance of collective, as well as of individual methods.

## Theorizing as conceptualization

There are some advantages simply to including neglected cases in research. In the spirit of a conversation about methods on a collective level, research on neglected cases is less likely in some sense to lead to duplication. Attention to these cases may produce needed local knowledge.

But in some fields, neglected cases are already valued very strongly in and of themselves; as I have argued elsewhere, the logic of coverage is already complementing a logic of privileged cases (Krause 2021, 25–27). If theorizing from neglected cases is worth discussing in its own right, it should have to be different from the logic of coverage. It should also have to demonstrate contributions beyond claims of the science-political value of the visibility of certain cases. This is not to deny the subtle shifts that can be enacted in some contexts simply by being intentional about the choice of examples and by choosing neglected cases. But we should have a conversation also about helping people draw more explicit lessons and insights from our research about neglected cases.

What does it mean to theorize from neglected cases, as opposed to just do good research on neglected cases (which might also be a good thing)? What are the specific advantages of neglected cases for theorizing? The answer will depend to some extent on what we mean by theorizing. Here we can build on an established conversation, which has made a shift from discussing what theory is (Abend 2008; Corvellec 2013; Czarniawska 2013) to what theorizing is (Swedberg 2012, 2016; Vaughn 2014, Krause 2016b; but see Anicker 2019, Guggenheim 2023).

Theorizing is sometimes equated with explaining, and with a particular kind of explaining, which establishes a link between two or more variables, which Abbott has called linear causal (Abbott 1988; 2005). This view of explanation is based on 'a set of implicit assumptions which privileges a clear separation between cause and the outcome, conceived as things and a linear model of causality. In addition, it is usually thought to be important to establish how important variables are in relation to other variables' (Krause 2016b, 47).

I have argued that a narrow focus on a very specific notion of explaining has placed a limit on our understanding of the range of strengths that social science work has had and can bring. Equating theorizing with linear-causal explanation has undervalued the development of new concepts as within that tradition 'the development of concepts [has been seen mainly] as a preliminary step for the real business of measurement and explanation' (Krause 2016a, 27).

This view that classification and conceptualization is only a preliminary step for measurement, and explanation, has a history in a version of the philosophy of science, which is heavily oriented by an idealised view of physics, as opposed to for example biology (Marradi 1990; Mayr 1982). The power of this view in the social sciences does not rest on philosophical underpinnings alone; it is also sustained by the practicalities of research that relies on data, which is already categorised and coded, such as that circulating in large data-sets. (Krause 2016a, 27)

It is simply easier to work with data that is already coded on its own terms; if the end-goal is seen as linear-causal explanation, it might seem like there are relatively few trade-offs to consider.

My aim is to look for benefits to theorizing from neglected cases in the broadest sense. This includes conceptualization as an important end in itself and as an important aspect of sociological description, different kinds of explanation and sociological critique.

It should by now be clear that the most common way of linking neglected cases to theories does not really qualify as 'theorizing from neglected cases' in the terms of this paper. I have discussed the selective incorporation of neglected cases through application of insight established from other cases. This takes a specific form in conversations labelled as 'theory': When authors are canonized (Connell 1997; Bargheer 2017) and approaches are established, they are accompanied by a wave of papers, which apply existing theories to cases that have yet to be analysed in its terms and can therefore be said to be neglected within it. It was, for example at some point (and to some extent still is) routinely claimed by Foucauldian scholars that no one had looked at 'X' as a form of governmentality, or by ANT scholars that no one has analysed 'Y' in the terms established by laboratory studies (see Guggenheim 2012). Exercises of application are of course an essential part of understanding a theoretical approach and of learning about what it does and does not allow us

to see. Yet, if there is no other insight gained than that it is indeed possible to apply Foucault or ANT or any other theory to a given case, it may not always be necessary to publish the resulting materials as contributions to research.

## Neglected cases and conceptualization

I have argued that conceptualization is a particularly important part of theorizing; neglected cases happen to be particularly useful to examine and develop our conceptualizations. There is a deconstructive contribution of neglected cases and a constructive one. In their deconstructive contribution, neglected cases help us understand, examine and challenge the assumptions of a category. They help us see how categories bundle properties in specific ways, in ways that are sometimes limiting. More constructively, neglected cases help us to make new distinctions that help us describe and explain different types of social phenomena.

The deconstructive contribution is expressed well in Ermakoff, who writes: ‘They [cases that impress us as exceptional] play a critical role when they catch assumptions and expectations off guard. As they call into question standard categories, cases that strike us as peculiar challenge grids of classification and analysis’ (Ermakoff 2014, 223/224). We can develop this point more fully when we more fully distinguish between exceptions vis-a-vis descriptive assumptions and expectations vis-a-vis explanatory expectations and focus specifically on the former as I have suggested above.

The potential of neglected cases to challenge categories has a basis in the way categories are used and understood: scholars in the empirically oriented philosophy of science have pointed out that categories, among scientists as well as in the general population, are shaped by central members rather than by formal definitions (Giere 1994). These fundamental cognitive factors are reinforced by other social factors that privilege some cases over others (Krause 2021, 44–51). Central members suggest a range of properties, which tend to align in it. Neglected cases help with unbundling the list of properties associated with central cases. This is in line with Lazarsfeld and Barton’s call to work from a typology back to the different sets of attributes that lie behind it. As Lazarsfeld and Barton (1951) observed, typologies are often not conscious of their own principles of division.

Let me give two examples for the deconstructive potential of neglected cases from two different areas of research: As observers within the field of sexuality studies have noted, much research on LGBTQ issues had focused on gay men in large, iconic cities (Stone 2018). This has some good reasons in the historical role these cities have played for gay men: as Amin Ghaziani has shown, port cities have historically brought men together through a particular form of work and attracted internal and international migrants also by offering both freedoms and forms of social protection that were not available elsewhere (Ghaziani 2014). But the association of gay men (and indeed early queer studies) with a certain group of gay men in certain places has led to the reproduction of unexamined assumptions. Wayne Brekhus’ (2003) study of suburban gay commuters reminds us to separate sexual orientation on the one hand from place and life-style on the other hand. More recently, Japonica Brown-Saracino’s *How Places Make Us* also draws out the variation among LBQ practices and identities by studying communities in a range of middle-sized cities, which are



not only neglected in discussions of sexualities but also neglected in urban studies (Brown-Saracino 2018).

Within urban studies, I note that cities, conceptualized based on the growing Western metropolis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, have been associated with density, growth, internal differentiation, social distance, a certain type of mentality, coolness and political liberalism (Robinson 2006). This bundle of assumptions has been questioned using a range of neglected cases. The case of LA had questioned density (Dear and Dishman 2002), shrinking cities can question growth (Oswalt 2005, 2007), Soviet Monotowns functional differentiation (Liubimau 2019), boring cities coolness (Roth and Wieland 2001), hyperprivatized cities in authoritarian contexts ‘urbanity’ and political liberalism (Sassen 2010).

Categories transport assumptions about what its members are like, which it is hard not to reproduce while relying on them for communicating with each other. Neglected cases help us examine and challenge these assumptions. We learn that assumptions are wrong and this allows for a particular kind of generalization: The ‘not all’ type of generalization, which is sometimes made fun of, sometimes misused, but is not always trivial: In certain context, it may well be worth noting that not all cities are tolerant, that not all cities are growing or that not all cities are interesting places. Conversations about political institutions have been enriched by work that highlights that not all parliaments are democratic (Sablin and Moniz Bandeira 2021) and not all forms of internationalism are progressive (Steffek 2015).

From this basic benefit – concept ‘X’ seems to suggest ‘Y’ but case ‘T’ shows this not to be the case – a number of routes open up for further epistemic gains: In challenging assumptions associated with the bundling of properties, neglected cases can also challenge assumptions, which are *explanatory* assumptions even though they are not translated into the language of proper social scientific explanation (see Goertz 2012). If we think cities are both dense and liberal, we assume there to be some kind of link between those two properties. It is hard *not* to think that density causes tolerance. This means that the question of causation, whether understood probabilistically or in some other way, does not arise in a proper way, even when it perhaps should.

### **The underlying matrix of properties and the symmetrical constructions of research objects**

Paul Lazarsfeld specified four steps in the establishment of variables in sociology: ‘an imagery of the concept, the specification of dimensions, the selection of observable indicators and the combination of indicators into indices’ (Lazarsfeld, quoted in Cicourel 1964, 15). The first two steps seem to me to be at the heart of theorizing-as-conceptualization; I have argued that neglected cases can help to specify the dimensions of a concept by challenging the bundling of properties associated with established categories, which are dimensions of variation among observed phenomena in the world.

I would further argue that the specification of dimensions can, and at times should have an effect back on the imagery of the concept. Neglected cases can contribute to building new categories, which can encourage a more open-ended investigation of how these properties are combined in the world. The hope need not be that this language

completely replaces other terms, only that there is reasonable hope of genuine contributions if the paths suggested by these terms are *also* pursued.

To avoid the misleading bundling associated with the term ‘city’, for example, Herb Gans has proposed to replace the sociology of cities or urban sociology with a sociology of different kinds of ‘settlements’ (Gans 2009; Krause 2013), which would allow to examine variation along different dimensions with an open mind. Starting from working class (Young and Willmott, Stack 1974) and queer families as a neglected case in the traditional sociology of the family (Stacey 1990; Stacey 2005), scholars have also experimented with terms that better reflect the range of ways of organizing intimacy and close social and biological ties, turning to new formulations such as ‘cultures of kinship and care’ (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004), which also draw on the anthropological tradition through the notion of kinship (Stacey 2005; Mizielska 2023), a tradition that has long been engaged with the challenge of recognizing diversity in its conceptual framework.

We note from the examples above that the baggage of categories often has a normative dimension. To reflect this, we might call the categories used to move beyond built-in normative ideas towards an examination of variation that includes normative judgements as much as possible in what is observed properly constructivist or symmetrical concepts, using a term established by the sociology of science (Bloor 1976). Though late as an area of symmetrical investigation (compared to the sociology of art, culture and religion), its call to ‘study true knowledge on the same terms as false knowledge’ (sometimes using knowledge-production to replace the term science) has renewed constructivist work in a range of areas in recent years.

The continuous development of categories is an end in itself in each area of investigation and in each theoretical tradition. Efforts in particular areas also contribute overall to a better framework for describing social phenomena. It helps with the conceptualization of both explananda and explanans for explanation in a range of traditions, such as to linear-causal explanation, narrative forms of explanation, and functionalist explanation (see Pickvance 2001).

In one particular mode of explanation, good description can fall together with good explanation: explanation via conditions of possibility (see Krause 2016a; Abend 2022). In this latter mode of investigation, a particular phenomenon is examined in comparison to other phenomena in order to specify its form. In dialogue with other observations, we can ask: ‘What would have to be different for this to be different from what it is?’ Naming conditions of possibility does not allow us to assess the relative impact of competing factors. But it gives us an overview of possible leverage points, analytically and perhaps practically. It can help us avoid the common tendency to neglect what is constant across cases and/ or to focus on ever smaller and more narrowly conceived outcomes as objects of explanation.

Cognizing variation in new ways is also accorded an important role in the project of critical theory. The most fundamental operation of critique is not to say this is bad but to say ‘It is not necessary. It could be otherwise’ (Calhoun 2001). By challenging assumptions, neglected cases highlight the possible range of combinations of properties. This tradition specifically highlights the analytical role of possible as well as actual neglected cases. It puts a certain normative emphasis on the need to understand social forms in their diversity. If we miss variation, it is argued, we fail intellectually but we also help lend the existing social order an air of inevitability.

## Theorizing from privileged cases

Scholars of neglected cases often note that they are asked to justify their case when scholars of privileged cases are not, or that they are asked to justify their cases in more detail and against more opposition. Research on the cognitive baggage of categories and observations from various subfields would seem to suggest that these impressions reflect a real pattern (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Kennedy and Centeno 2007; Merilainen et al. 2008; Stöckelova 2015).

What follows from these observations? How should scholars, how should scholarly communities respond to this asymmetrical demand for justification? I would suggest that in response to asymmetrical demand for case justification, we shouldn't normally do away with such justification. Rather, we should generalize the demand for justification. This seems particularly important if we are distinguishing theorizing from neglected cases from general research on neglected cases.

Whatever intellectual work scholars of neglected cases are doing in response to demands for justification already makes the research stronger in substantive terms. Research on privileged cases in turn can be improved by justifying its research objects as cases among others. This applies to cases sponsored by schemas in the general population, schemas within scholarly communities, ideological factors, or by strength of academic institutions. It seems particularly relevant to national context as a dimension of all cases.

Sociologists working within any country can tend to present their findings on data collected in their country in a way that takes the national context of their research for granted. At conferences that function as international conferences, sociologists particularly from countries that are centrally positioned in the global field of science (Beigel 2014; Heilbron 2014) can sometimes show themselves to be unpracticed in thinking of their national context as a dimension of case selection at all. Scholars who present research on the US, for example, may simply refuse to engage with questions as to how their findings might translate to other cases, reiterating 'my research was about the US'. An initial awareness of 'homelandism' (Steinmetz 2019) may express itself in vague and slightly defensive comments such as 'this is about the US but I think it applies elsewhere'. A more serious response would be to take a few more active steps towards self-provincialization: This involves acknowledging that the research involves a case that is particular in a number of ways, including in terms of the national context. It involves asking: What is specific about the case, what are its properties, how is it extreme if at all (Chen 2015), what can be learnt from it? Researchers might reflect on whether and how their case has attracted attention, why it deserves further attention in a local, national or global context, and how they are making use of the wealth of previous literature on this case.

*Justifying* a case is best conceived of not as a response to a critique or attack or disinterest in the reader – regardless of the actual attitude of the interlocutor. It can be thought of more as a response to comparative curiosity and a desire to learn. The routine formula that 'further research would be needed' to explore other cases, could be filled with some content in terms of preliminary observations or hypothesis. This strategy does not necessarily involve primary research on other cases. Rather, it can draw on secondary literature in the spirit of asymmetrical comparison, a comparison that is not equally well-

informed about all cases (Krause 2016a). Indeed, scholars, including particularly scholars of central cases, could and perhaps should be asked routinely what they have learnt from reading about other cases.

## The relational response

It might be argued that my analysis of the problems associated with asymmetric attention as well as my proposals for engaging them are failing to address the fundamental underlying issue, which might be named as the reification involved in turning empirical materials into cases of categories. A range of approaches including field theory, network theory, actor-network theory, systems theory, ecological approaches and post-colonial theory, and Marxism could be claimed to have addressed this issue by dissolving the ‘case’ into relational entities. Before concluding, I would like to discuss how these relational strategies relate to my arguments.

These approaches give important impulses in many research fields on their own terms. Many examples could be used to illustrate the truth also of the claim that relational approaches have precisely responded to the problem of privileged cases: Abbott, for example, has used an ecological approach to investigate the system of professions partly as a correction to the traditional focus of the sociology of professions on doctors (Abbott 1988). In a different example, a field-theoretical study of international humanitarian NGOs can provide an alternative within a discussion that has focused a lot of attention on one organization, Doctors without Borders (Krause 2014). Critical urban scholars speak of ‘planetary urbanization’ to get away from the focus on iconic cities (Brenner 2013; Brenner and Schmid 2012) in urban studies from a relational Marxist perspective. Scholars associated with post-colonial theory insist on the importance of the Haitian revolution in relation to the French revolution and call for connected histories more broadly (Said 1998, 13; Bhabra 2014).

But these studies and these approaches do not in themselves do away with the problems of case selection and the problems of model cases. It is true that in all these examples, relational approaches do more than just include a neglected case to improve existing categories; they establish new epistemic objects, which incorporate the old epistemic object in a relational way. But they establish epistemic objects, such as system, field, empire, or assemblages, which are again often understood through particular, privileged cases. Field theory, for example, was initially understood through the French field of art (Bourdieu 1996), not the Nigerian field of literature, for example (but see Griswold 2000); empire is often, in anglo-american discussions, the British Empire and not the Russian, Ottoman, Chinese or Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Moreover, these new relational, epistemic objects can also serve as privileged stand-ins for even larger categories, in ways that we can question. The field of humanitarian relief, for example, can become a very selective and western-centric stand-in for ‘international civil society’ or ‘the international’ in ways that can be fruitfully criticized drawing on work examining transnational anti-colonial resistance or solidarity within the labour movement (Goswami 2012; Von Eschen 1997; Slobodian 2012).

Here it is worth noting that, though some authors and approaches claim the mantle of relationality more explicitly, relational thinking has long been the basis of a number of social science disciplines.<sup>3</sup> It can be argued and it is indeed often argued that all units

of analysis, such as interaction, race, roles or organizations, are to be understood relationally.

Re-emphasizing this can be of value in a context where categories often get reified in everyday writing and research practices; shifting the epistemic object can also be of value as discussed above; but as we accept the challenge to describe and explain diversity and variation in the world with regard to concepts and categories, the problems of case selection will recur. Epistemic objects created by these approaches can again produce selective understanding or industries of application, or they are an opportunity to further develop their conceptual categories, also through neglected cases, as described here.

If relational approaches can *seem* to present as doing away with the problem of case selection, it is because they at times do away with the problem of empirical variation in the world through theoretical fiat. This can be observed in some approaches as a mode of always referring back to the original author ('Bourdieu must have already been right about all forms of variation yet to be described'), or as an actual claim of totality found in some versions of critical theory, which makes it wilfully, and in my view wrongly, resistant to any empirical provocation.

## Conclusion

I have discussed opportunities for theorizing that arise from reflection on the role of privileged cases and of neglected cases. Privileged cases and neglected cases can be identified in existing academic research in relation to particular categories for epistemic targets, categories for objects, which we are trying to understand.

Neglected cases can help improve our conceptual language for capturing social phenomena. This is important as good description and the elimination of bad description is the basis of all other forms of insight in the social sciences.

These benefits can be pursued without an exclusive focus on the neglected case. A study of any case can be improved by reflecting on neglected cases within a research field. A study of a privileged case, or of a set of selected cases, can be improved by considering the full range of relevant cases. While a lot of attention in methodological discussions is understandably focused on the selection of cases for in-depth study, the selection of a case or a set of cases should not be taken to release scholars from a responsibility to be ready to consider or discuss the range of other cases that would also be possible to include.

The sociological or nonheroic perspective provides some specific steers for the normative questions, which then arise less as questions about the one true path to follow in the name of science (or critique) but as questions about how to intervene in existing landscapes of research. Considering existing landscapes of research may lead us to consider the range of values that may be pursued, which may sometimes be in tension with each other. It adds criteria that emphasize more strongly than the emphasis only on 'originality' as an absolute requirement how output can be evaluated in relation to all other output, such as the avoidance of different kinds of duplication and the remedy of geographic, case-based, and school-based provincialism. Jennifer Robinson has used the term 'tactics' (Robinson 2022) concerning theoretical and methodological choices, which I think captures well the shift in perspective from the heroic to the nonheroic in that sense.

If we consider presentism in sociology and persisting geographic limitations alone (yet claim that sociology has a unique way of making analytical use of cases and a unique set of aims, which will not be pursued in the same way by historians, anthropologists or specialists in area studies), it is clear that there is considerable scope for capturing the range of forms of human (and non-human) organization and with that to also improve our understanding of whichever contemporary context we are seeking to speak to.

## Notes

1. I thank Colin Beck for conversations about this matter. See Beck (2017).
2. Carlo Ginzburg, *Lezioni sul Metodo Storico* [Lectures on the Historical Method], Lecture Series at the University of Trento, 12th to 15th October 2022.
3. Indeed, it is not uncommon for any one of the above approaches (field theory, network theory, actor-network theory, systems theory, ecological approaches and postcolonial theory, Marxism) to claim the virtue of relationalism exclusively for their own approach without acknowledging other relational projects. See for example Latour et al. (2012).

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## Notes on contributor

**Monika Krause** is a professor of sociology at the London School of Economics. She is the author of “Model Cases. On Canonical Research Objects and Sites” (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

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