

Fertility Versus Generality of Theories

In their influential book, *An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences*, Charles Lave and James March propose that a hallmark of a good theory is its **fertility**. By this, they mean a theory's ability to generate surprising, non-obvious, and thought-provoking implications. A fertile theory is one that produces a rich set of consequences and new predictions that were not immediately apparent from its initial formulation.

This concept is part of a broader framework for evaluating theories, where the goal is not just to explain a known phenomenon but to extend our understanding in novel and unexpected ways. For Lave and March, the process of theorizing is an act of imagination, and a fertile theory is one that stimulates further thought and inquiry.

Fertility vs. Generality: A Key Distinction

While both fertility and generality are desirable qualities in a theory, they are not interchangeable. Lave and March emphasize a clear distinction between the two:

- **Generality** refers to the **breadth of a theory's applicability**. A general theory can be applied to a wide range of different phenomena or situations. For example, a theory of decision-making that applies to consumers, voters, and organizations would be considered general. The aim of generality is to have a single, encompassing explanation for diverse observations.
- **Fertility**, in contrast, is about the **depth and richness of a theory's implications**. A fertile theory takes a specific phenomenon and uncovers a host of unforeseen consequences and predictions. It's not about how widely the theory can be applied, but about how much new insight it can generate within its domain.

To illustrate the difference, consider a simple theory of human behavior. A **general** version of this theory might be applicable to various social settings. A **fertile** version, however, would, when applied to a specific setting, yield a series of surprising and testable hypotheses about behavior in that context that were not initially obvious.

In essence, a general theory seeks to be a master key, fitting many locks. A fertile theory, on the other hand, is like a key that not only opens a specific lock but also reveals a hidden treasure map behind the door, pointing to further discoveries. For Lave and March, the true power of a theory lies not just in its ability to explain what we already see (generality) but in its capacity to show us what to look for next (fertility).