Middle Range Theory is, at its most basic level, a set of theories or propositions that bridge the gap between the empirical observation and broad, often abstract and untestable, general or high-level theories. Unfortunately, as Raab and Goodyear point out there has been substantial confusion as to the goal, as well as the meaning, of middle range theory in archaeology. This confusion largely results from the broad acceptance of an ill-defined concept.

Middle range theory was first developed in sociology by R. K. Merton in the late 1940s as a means of dealing with problems inherent in the new sociological emphasis on abstraction. There was an increasing desire among sociologists of the time for a unified sociological theory that ultimately became so broad as to render it empirically untestable. Merton argued that middle range theories could be developed to test subsections of these high-level, abstract theories. Thus, middle range theory was developed to guide the empirical investigation of higher-order theories. The goal of this new level of theorizing was to generate the theories that were sufficiently abstract to allow behavioral generalization, and yet were satisfactorily grounded in reality, so that they could be empirically verified.

In archaeology, the concept of middle range theory has been applied haphazardly and often without reference to formal definition or knowledge of its sociological foundations. Perhaps two of the most substantial archaeological investigations oriented toward developing middle range theory are Lewis Binford's *Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology* (1978) and *Bones: Ancient Men and Modern Myths* (1981). In the first of these two works, Binford documents the relationship between modern Alaska native hunting activities and the different types of bone assemblages that result from different site functions, hunting conditions, and meat processing. In the later work, he documents many natural processes that influence the character and condition of faunal assemblages and applies these inferences to the interpretation of the Plio-Pleistocene archaeological record. Both are successful at making bridging arguments that relate the empirical archaeological record to culture theory.

Unlike most similar studies, Binford makes it very clear that, although the building of middle range theories is necessary for obtaining a clear understanding of the dynamic processes that created the archaeological record, the ultimate goal of these studies is still the elucidation of prehistoric human cultural behavior. This conception of middle range theory in archaeology is thus very similar to Merton's calls for bridging arguments in sociology. Unfortunately, many archaeologists have seen Binford's methods of studying site-formation processes as an end in themselves. In many cases, the development of middle range theory has become the research goal rather than the means to connect archaeological data with high-level, abstract explanations.

A concrete example of an appropriate development and use of middle range theory along the lines of the original sociological foundation may serve to better define its usefulness. We can envision a theory of the origins of sedentary communities or villages that purports a relationship between sedentism and warfare. The theory states that "people will become more sedentary as a result of increasing violence and warfare." As such, this theory is not testable archaeologically. However, a number of middle range theories might be developed that are testable and that will allow us to evaluate the original theory. These include statements about the relationship between settlement strategies and defense, the relationship between economy and sedentism, the relationship between population size and social stress, and so on. Hypotheses are then derived from each of these middle range theories that are testable archaeologically. Thus, we are able to evaluate an untestable, high-level theory by reducing that theory to a number of middle range, testable propositions.

As indicated previously, a considerable amount of middle-range theorizing in archaeology is done without reference to the concept itself, mostly in the form of studies of site formation processes. Although such studies increase our interpretive abilities, they contribute little to the advancement of our understanding of human behavior. What is needed are not more such investigations, but a reinvestment in the desires and early expectations of the "New Archaeology" of the 1960s and 1970s. Archaeologists today spend the majority of their research efforts on the specific rather than the general, on the empirical rather than the theoretical, on the interpretation rather than the behavior—this must end. Middle range theory has an important role to play in the
future of archaeology as we return to the “big-picture” issues of human history. Broad theories of the rise of social inequality, agriculture, warfare, and early empires will not, in and of themselves, be testable. But a proper understanding and use of middle range theory will allow the development of testable propositions and hypotheses that will bridge the inevitable chasm between what we believe is the explanation, and what we actually observe in the archaeological record.[See also Critical Theory; Cultural Ecology Theory; Culture Historical Theory; Ethnoarchaeology; History of Archaeology, Intellectual; Marxist Theory; Post-processual Theory; Processual Theory; Science In Archaeology; Theory In Archaeology.]

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