

## The meanings of theory

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## Summary

I give some of the main meanings of theory – generalising theory, personal theory, bodies of explanation, scientific theory and Grand Theory – and discuss what theory is for in a piece of research: is it a product or a tool? Should theories be seen as the purpose of our inquiries, or should they be seen as instruments that help our understanding of phenomena? I also discuss how theory may be drawn out of a piece of inquiry.

I hope this will help students and practitioner-researchers in:

- a) understanding why theory is taken to be important; and
- b) developing it from their research.

## Five meanings of theory (... and there are others)

When people talk about theory in education, there is no one meaning. In fact, Chambers (1992) asserts that he can distinguish no fewer than nine meanings in the way that the word is used in

education. For simplicity, I outline five meanings here (the following is adapted from How to do your Research Project (Thomas, 2009)):

Theory can mean ... *A generalizing or explanatory model.* Theory tries to distil a range of specific findings or observations into general propositions that explain these findings.

Theory can mean ... *The 'thinking side' of practice.* Especially in the applied side of the social sciences (such as teaching and social work), theory or 'theorising' means thinking and reflecting on practice. It is sometimes called 'reflective practice'. This has also been called 'personal theory' or 'practical theory'. When people talk about this 'personal theory' they mean conjectures, personal thoughts and insights that help people to make sense of the practical world. Many people suggest that in practical fields (such as teaching, nursing or social work) the enhancement of this practical theorisation, coming from our own experience, is what professional development should ultimately be about. The idea is not new: the Greeks had words for this kind of practical theory: *phronesis* and *techne*.

Theory can mean ... *A developing body of explanation.* Here theory means the broadening bodies of knowledge developing in particular fields. A body of knowledge may be wide, as for example in 'management theory' or 'learning theory', or tight, based around a particular set of ideas, as for example in 'Piagetian theory'.

Theory can mean ... *Scientific theory.* Theory here is modelled on the idea of theory in the natural sciences. It may ultimately exist in the form of ideas formally expressed in a series of statements. With these statements you are able to predict and explain. As social science progresses it seems less hopeful of discovering this kind of theory.

Theory can mean ... *Grand Theory.* 'Grand Theory' is a term used mockingly by the great sociologist Wright Mills (1959) to describe social scientists' expectation that their disciplines should attempt to build systematic theory of 'the

nature of man and society' (p 23). The theories of Marx and Freud are examples. Wright Mills saw this effort as an obstacle to progress in the human sciences. I take it as given that Grand Theory is not what is generally wanted in social and educational research nowadays. You certainly will not be aiming to develop Grand Theory in your own research, though you may use Grand Theory as a framework or stimulus for it.

Perhaps the most straightforward statement that can be made is that 'theory' refers to thinking, abstraction and generalising. Having said this, thinking, abstraction and generalising are different in different kinds of inquiry. I discuss this further elsewhere (Thomas, 2007; 2009; 2011).

### **Is theory a product or tool?**

The five meanings above are helpful (I hope). But you should know also that one of the great debates of social science has been about whether theory should be a product or a tool. In other words, should theory ...

- a) be the aim of our endeavours – an ultimate product of our inquiry – on the assumption that it will enable us to explain and predict more? Should we be trying to develop more and better theory with this aim in mind? Or should it ...
- b) be a tool, devised and used simply for the purpose of helping to explain something that we are currently researching.

As the latter, it will be fashioned and used for the purpose in hand. It will have been manufactured merely to explain a particular phenomenon. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu favours this latter kind of theory. He says:

There is no doubt a theory in my work, or, better, a set of thinking tools visible through the results they yield, but it is not built as such ... It is a temporary construct which takes shape for and by empirical work.

Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1989, cited in Jenkins, 1992: 67

So, for Bourdieu, theory emerges and disappears in order to help us do our research and explain the findings we are making. And it is temporary, like a shooting star, briefly lighting our way. It should not, in other words, be the aim of research. Another great sociologist, Howard Becker (1998: 3), talking of his highly respected tutor Everett C Hughes, explains Hughes's 'take' on theory, which is similar to Bourdieu's:

His [Hughes's] theory was not designed to provide all the conceptual boxes into which the world had to fit. It consisted, instead, of a collection of generalizing tricks he used to think about society, tricks that helped him interpret and make general sense of the data.

This idea of generalising tricks is a key one in the theory of educational and social research. It is about your ability to suggest meaningful explanations concerning your findings and how these fit in with other research that you have reviewed. How does it all mesh together? What insights can you come up with? What explanations can you offer? 'Generalising' here means 'finding the essence of', 'finding links between', and it is often what is meant by theory in social science. Unfortunately, when you are at the beginning of an academic career and have little in the way of a broad resource of alternative viewpoints and ideas to make links between, this can be the hardest of all tasks. It's a question of demonstrating that you have

- done reading
- weighed up ideas
- reviewed ideas critically
- seen links and themes

Often students make the mistake of undertaking these processes only in the last few lines of an essay or the last page or two of a dissertation. Try to extend the process of thinking about what you have done and what you are finding beyond this minimal synthesis so that it becomes not just these concluding lines. If you can do this – if you can make it also at the centre of what you do throughout the process – you will have demonstrated something important to the reader. You will have demonstrated something not only about what you have discovered in your research and why you think it is important, but also about how you think about knowledge, and how you think knowledge can be used.

In sum, seeing theory as a tool is about the ways in which ideas can be drawn together, links made, explanations offered. It's about:

- ... discovering links between your own research and that of others
- ... synthesising, analysing and generalising

- ... abstracting ideas from your data and offering explanations
- ... having insights.

## **Drawing out theory**

In ‘theorising’, you are showing that you are more than a reporter or a copy typist. You are doing more than simply describing – more than painting a picture. Rather, you are analysing and synthesising and already constructing potential explanations for your forthcoming findings. In other words, with theorisation you are showing that you can offer explanations – you can suggest ‘how’ and ‘why’ – as well as simply describing.

Drawing out ‘theory’ isn’t just about making links to ‘big’ theory, it is about making connections, identifying issues and offering reasoned explanations. When you come to think about actually drawing out theory – seeing links, generalising, abstracting ideas from your data and offering explanations, connecting your findings with those of others and having insights – how do you do it? You don’t say ‘I am drawing out theory’; rather, you provide evidence of the process in your thinking and writing.

The way that you draw out theory hinges around your own knowledge of your subject and how your findings sit in relation to this knowledge. Your knowledge, your familiarity of your subject, will in turn depend on your reading and understanding of the existing research and debate. Links and associated ideas will have occurred to you throughout your research, and when you discuss your findings, you tie up issues, cement connections, and make explicit the clusters of ideas in your own work and that of others. These connections may be to existing bodies of knowledge or models of explanation or even to formalised ‘theory’ (such as Marxist theory, Freudian theory, behavioural theory or construct theory), or they may be to points of interest or ‘trouble’, as Bruner (1997: 142) puts it, in the literature. You articulate continuing paradoxes, or perhaps offer tentative explanations for differences that continue to exist between your own analysis and that of the literature. All of this generalising process is the drawing out of theory.

It’s as if your head is a giant sorting machine for the mass of data, yours and that of others, that has been pumped into it during the course of the research. It’s all swilling around in there, but it mustn’t simply swill out onto the paper in front of you. Rather, your head must provide little crystallisation points to which ideas (‘theories’) can attach themselves. And these little starting points, these tiny crystals, these inspirations, will – if you work hard at it – grow by the accretion of other ideas and insights. In this process is the development of theory.

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