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Theory's role in a Research

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1. Introduction

In the Logman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the word “theory” is defined as:

- *An idea or set of ideas that is intended to explain something about life or the world, especially an idea that has not been proved to be true;*
- *General principles and ideas about a subject;*
- *An idea or opinion that someone thinks is true but for which they have no proof*
(Longman 2003).

Wildly speaking, in the scientific field the word “theory” is used as a plausible general principle or body of principles offered to explain a phenomenon. In a more philosophical context, what is expected from a theory is a model capable of predicting future occurrences or observations, being tested through experiment or otherwise verified through empirical observation. In many definitions also a constraint is added: that a theory describes the natural world, though it is often unclear whether this is a definition of the natural world or a constraint on what a theory can be.

General models and theories (definition in the next paragraph), are predicated in a way that constrains how scientists theorize and model a phenomenon and thus arrive at testable hypotheses.

2. Theory and its place in the hierarchy of a research process

In the humanities, the term “theory” is used with a different meaning. For example, the term “social theory,” relevant for this paper, refers to the use of theoretical frameworks to study and interpret social structures and phenomena within a particular school of thought. An essential tool used by scholars in the analysis of society, social theories are interdisciplinary, drawing ideas from and contributing to disciplines such as anthropology, economics, history, human geography, literary theory, mass communications, philosophy, sociology, and theology.

In his book *Doing Qualitative Research*, David Silvermann describes an ideal hierarchy of steps involved with doing social research, placing Theory after Models and Concepts, but before Hypotheses, Methodology, Method and Findings (Silvermann 2000). It is appropriate to briefly define the other terms in order to understand the specific position of Theory in this hierarchy proposed by Silvermann.

Models provide an overall framework for how we look at reality, approaching in different ways its ontology (nature of being) and epistemology (investigation of what distinguish justified belief from opinion). Examples of models in social research are:

- Functionalism: looks at the functions of social institutions;
- Behaviorism: defines all behavior in terms of “stimulus” and “response”;
- Interactionism: studies how we attach symbolic meanings to interpersonal relations;
- Ethnomethodology: encourages the researcher in looking at people’s everyday ways of producing orderly social interaction.

Concepts, according to Silvermann, are essential to define a research problem and can be described as clearly specified ideas deriving from a particular model, like for example “social function,” the aforementioned “stimulus and response,” etc.

Theories arrange a set of concepts to define and explain some phenomenon. Theories consist thus of plausible relationships produced among concepts and set of concepts, providing both a framework for critically understanding a phenomena and a basis for considering how what is unknown can be organized. Theories, as Silvermann underlines, provide the impetus for research. Differently from *hypothesis*, theories are just particular ways to look at a phenomena, and as such they cannot be disproved. In fact, hypothesis are tested in research and we assess them by their validity or truth. Eventually, the difference between *methodology* and *methods* is that while the first defines how one will go about studying any phenomenon (e.g. qualitative or quantitative approach), methods are specific research techniques (e.g. statistic correlation, observation, audio recording...). Deacon et al. add:

“[...] research methods are not just tools of the trade. They are ways of gathering the evidence required by competing definitions of what counts as a legitimate and worthwhile approach to the investigation of social and cultural life. In our view, many of the most interesting questions facing communications research are best tackled by combining different research methods (Deacon et al., 2007)”

Why, then, we need theory in research? Silvermann states:

“Any scientific finding is usually to be assessed in relation to the theoretical perspective from which it derives and to which it may contribute (Silvermann 2000)”

Moreover, it must be remembered that data collected on the field are not intrinsically right or wrong, rather they are more or less useful according to the research questions:

“Research questions are inevitably theoretically informed. So we do need social theories to help us to address even quite basic issues in social research” (Silvermann 2000).

3. History of Social Theory

In general, social theory has appeal because it takes the focus away from the individual (the way in which most westerners look at the world) and focuses it on the society itself and the social forces which influence individuals' lives. This sociological insight has appealed to students and other scholars dissatisfied with the status quo because it looks beyond the assumption of societal structures and patterns as purely random.

The history of Social Theory dates back to the 19th century with the work of August Comte, considered by some as the “father of sociology,” who laid the groundwork for one of the first social theories, Social Evolutionism. During the same century other three classical theories emerged: the Social Evolutionism Theory, the Social Cycle Theory and Marxist Historical Materialism Theory. Marxism, of course, became more than a theory carrying deep implications over the course of the 20th century history.

Classical theories had one common factor: they all agreed that the history of humanity is pursuing a certain fixed path.

In modern times, generally speaking, social theory began to stress free will, individual choice, subjective reasoning and the importance of unpredictable events in place of the classic determinism. Most modern sociologists deem there are no great unifying “laws of history,” but rather smaller, more specific, and more complex laws that govern society.

Scholars and historians most commonly hold postmodernism to be a movement of ideas arising from, but also critical of elements of modernism. The term "postmodernism" was brought into social theory in 1971 by the Arab American Theorist Ihab Hassan in his book *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (Berberoglu 2005). In 1979 Jean-François Lyotard wrote the short but influential work *The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge*. Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes were other influential authors in developing postmodern theory in the seventies. According to Alvesson and Deetz:

“Postmodernism is in many ways [hard] to delimit. In the social sciences, the term has been used to describe a social mood, a historical period filled with major social and organizational changes, and a set of philosophical approaches to organizational and other studies. (Alvesson, Deetz, 2000)”

Talking about the work of the above-mentioned authors, they continue:

“Their themes include focusing on the constructed nature of people and reality, emphasizing language as a system of distinctions which are central to the construction process, arguing against grand narratives and large-scale theoretical systems such as Marxism or functionalism, emphasizing the power-

knowledge connection and the role of claims of expertise in systems of domination, emphasizing the fluid and hyper-real nature of the contemporary world and the role of mass media and information technologies, and stressing narrative/fiction/rhetoric as central to research process. (Alvesson, Deetz, 2000)”

In Alvesson and Deetz opinion, both critical theory¹ and postmodernism open new discussions. Their position is confirmed also in Adorno and Horkheimer (1979, 1947), where critical theory is said to show how modernism was based on myths, had acquired an arbitrary authority, subordinated social life to technological rationality and protected a new dominant group's interests. Again, both critical theory and postmodernism see their work as responses to specific conditions, describing Western development as one where a progressive, instrumental modernism gradually eclipsed traditional society with fairly clear payoffs but also great costs.

3. Applied Models

It is worth mentioning in this paper that the term “theory” do not only include abstract constructs or philosophical approaches. Sometime, like for example when studying issues related to Media or Marketing, applying existing economic, practical or business models can be the only way to discuss over a topic on an informed basis. This practice is elsewhere known as Applied Science.

¹ Which approach has been summarized by Brookfield (1987) in four points: a) identifying and challenging assumptions behind ordinary ways of perceiving, conceiving, and acting b) recognizing the influence of history, culture and social positioning of beliefs and action c) imaging and exploring extraordinary alternatives d) being appropriately skeptical about any knowledge or solution that claims to be the only truth.

Applied models try to simplify a phenomena and break it down into separated categories, showing with the maximum clarity their network of dependance from each other.

4. Critique of Social Theory

A frequent criticism of social theorists is their tendency to tackle very large-scale social trends and structures using hypotheses that may not be easily proven, except over the course of time. Extremely critical theorists, such as deconstructionists or postmodernists, may argue that any type of research or method has inherent flaws. Often, however, thinkers may present their ideas as social theory because the social reality that those ideas describe appears so overarching as to remain unprovable (such as, for example, anarchy social theory).

5. Conclusion

What is then the role of theory in research? Deacon et al. warn us that:

“Social research has always been awkwardly involved with charges of social engineering. [...] Research applied to policy issues, or funded by government to assist in policy formulation or implementation, is not inevitably tainted or unethical. Indeed, many would argue that if research has no such potential application it is indulgent and irrelevant - it is better to have policy informed by valid and sound research than by whim or prejudice. (Deacon et al 2007)”

However, it is sufficient to watch at the consequences of some of modern social theories (e.g. Marxism) to notice that words are not inoffensive or neutral. This tells us that if it's

true that theory can be used to frame and understand phenomena, it cannot be understood as an infallible law independent from space and time, coming before everything else. Theory is research is then a helpful tool to interpret reality, not something reality must conform to.

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