Connor Heaton
IST 530
What is Theory?

Matthewman Reading

Matthewman sets the stage for the entirety of the book in the introduction, and then takes a deeper dive into Technology, and the theory thereof, in chapter 1. He sets the stage by describing how it has been difficult to prescribe a definition to "technology" because of its ubiquitous nature. He then goes on to explain how, historically, technology had been viewed through different lenses: as an object, as an activity, and as knowledge. The author then gives an example of a "couch potato" which highlights why he views it as the intersection of all three viewpoints. A couch potato - some human-technology hybrid - surely required technology as an object to exist. The TV is an obvious example of technology being used as an object. Furthermore, the human sitting on the couch must participate in the activity of using the remote (a piece of technology) in the activity of changing channels. Additionally, the couch-potato must have the knowledge, at least very minimally, of how the remote communicates with the TV. If the couch-potato points the remote in the opposite direction of the TV and into the couch cushions, he will have a hard time browsing the channels.

What Theory is Not

As the title of this writing might suggest, there is little consensus as to what constitutes a "good" theory. However, there seems to be some agreement as to what a "bad" theory looks like. The authors make it clear that they do not claim to have an algorithm to follow that will result in a strong theory. Instead, they highlight different aspects of a journal that do not count as theory on their own, even though the author may have presented it as a theory. These five aspects are 1) references, 2) data, 3) lists of variables, 4) diagrams, and 5) hypotheses. The authors go on to clarify, however, that these elements may be **part** of a theory, but not a theory on its own. For example, a diagram may be used to help express parts of a theory that are hard to articulate, but the diagram on its own is not a theory. To constitute a theory, the author must use language to expand what is presented in the diagram or figure.

The authors briefly discuss scholars who argue against theory, such as John Van Maanen. Van Maanen essentially called for a pause in the publication of theoretical papers in hopes that it would result in a stronger foundation on which theories can be built.

I think this paper would have benefited from describing in more detail when a strong theory is required. I believe this would help address the dissenting opinions raised by scholars such as Van Maanen. If the authors do not feel as though a strong theory must accompany a quantitative journal, the benefit of including the previously mentioned section might be minimal as that was my largest area of concern in this regard.

Comments on What Theory is Not

      In this journal, DiMaggio mainly seeks to expand upon what Sutton and Staw put forth in the previous writing. DiMaggio agrees with Sutton and Staw that there is not one, ground truth definition of what makes a good theory, but shares his own opinions as to why. One of his prominent reasons is that a "good" theory can mean a variety of things, to different sets of people, at different periods in time. He asserts that, in addition to serving many purposes (covering laws, enlightenment, and narrative), theorists encounter more difficulties when trying to put their theories into words. One example he gives of this is the decision of writing at a high level to make the journal more accessible, or more comprehensive to cover all the minor details.

      Towards the end of the paper, DiMaggio touches upon how a lot of what determines how a theory is perceived is determined by the societal norms of the time. What a writer puts forth can be perceived differently than they intended it to be. This issue can be exacerbated at the publication gains more popularity and more (non-experts) read the paper.

      The issue of public perception reminded me of an excerpt from the Matthewman reading which reads "Contrary to common sense, the best-designed technology does not necessarily win." While Matthewman was discussing technology and this journal discusses theory, I believe the same can be said about theory. If the theorist is unable to articulate his theory well enough to his peers, or if other politics are at play, their theory may never receive the recognition it deserves.

What Theory is Not, Theorizing is

      In this response to Sutton and Staw, Karl E. Weick seems worried that the five markers for what theory **isn't** could discourage young researchers from eventually arriving at a complete, well-crafted theory. He is largely in agreement with Sutton and Staw that the five elements the duo described do not, in isolation, constitute a theory. However, he feels strongly that these 5 elements are possibly stepping stones to a full-fledged theory. Here, he makes a distinction between theory and theorization, and asserts that these 5 elements of non-theory may fall in to the theorization domain. He makes it clear that he doesn't disagree with Sutton and Staw in their call for stronger theory, but doesn't want to discourage researchers from embarking on the theorization process.

      He argues that theories fall on a continuum of weak to strong, and rejects that purported theories can be put in discrete "theory" and "not theory" buckets. It my opinion, theories could also be at different places in the continuum when viewed by different fields, similar to the message echoed by DiMaggio.