

THEORIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

How to choose them

How to use them

!Unfinished. Work on this presentation has begun recently and will never end.

Introduction

- ❖ This presentation has an outspoken cross-disciplinary approach ...
- ❖ With a special focus on history, development, and research on Africa ...
- ❖ The use of theory as such is advocated...
- ❖ And several auxiliary sciences and ancillary approaches are presented...
- ❖ African Studies and Development Theory are outlined...
- ❖ Together with divergent views on colonialism and imperialism

What is Theory

- ❖ Glimpses of the past or present - if seen as a single whole - are called theory
- ❖ Theory is a set of propositions, which together describe and explain the phenomenon being studied at a higher level of abstraction than the specific facts and empirical generalisations
- ❖ A system or framework for interpretation with greater validity than its individual elements
- ❖ A set of essentials, with an indication of how and to what extent these are connected, and on what grounds, the theory can be said to be applicable
- ❖ Theory elucidates the data by deduction, in the if - then sense

The temptation of theory

- ❖ There is no clearly marked boundary between science and ordinary thought
- ❖ The abstract and “indefinable” is actually the easiest to characterise; the near and concrete is always too complicated to define
- ❖ In social science, theories have a double appeal; they offer a release from the thrall of detail, and a scheme to which facts may be attached...
- ❖ This is also the danger of the “grand narrative”, which even theory-lovers seem keen to criticise

Why is theory necessary?

- ❖ Because present appearance does not necessarily resemble nature, past, or future
- ❖ It makes it easier to distinguish between manifestation/mode and essence/substance
- ❖ Some form of theory will be present in any case in your work as an implicit combination of your worldview and overall attitude towards the profession
- ❖ Without structure, knowledge is just a pile of data and observations with no coherence or understanding
- ❖ Theory is usually part of the premise for a valid argument

Freethinkers like theory because...

- ❖ Theory will make you aware of your own biases, together with those of others
- ❖ It allows you to consider excessive problems in an abstract way...
- ❖ And frees you to think critically or speculatively, instead of being trapped into describing what exists
- ❖ A critical approach rests on the ability to momentarily escape from the concrete existent

Reasons, why we may wish to escape theory

- ❖ Simplistic descriptions do not work easily, if what they are describing is not itself coherent
- ❖ Pains and pleasure, hopes and horrors, intuitions and apprehensions does not have much form or pattern
- ❖ Conformist theory can restrict freedom of thought, because our political and theoretical vocabulary has become increasingly “closed”
- ❖ Fancy new theories or professionally established conventions may work as ideological restraint
- ❖ Middle range theories neither reveal the real reasons for the research nor explain the concrete results
- ❖ The ultimate goal - the creation of new, general theory - can be controversial and difficult to sustain

How to view and choose theory

- ❖ Read broadly to see how other researchers have approached your subject
- ❖ What did the thinker/s mean? Get acquainted with concepts and vocabulary
- ❖ What was the theorist's background, agenda, role, and situation?
- ❖ How has the theoretician's "school" been used by the establishment or by alternative forces?
- ❖ How relevant is the theory for your specific task and source material?
- ❖ Do not choose a theory just because it is common or fancy in your institutional set-up

Possible theoretical framework I

Start with narrating the history of the problem and the way it has been viewed/investigated so far by others

Theory can involve several levels of abstraction:

- ❖ Overall theoretical foundations such as
 - Rationalism, empiricism, positivism
 - Rostowian modernisation theory
 - Dialectical and historical materialism
 - New or critical realism
 - Social constructivism, phenomenology
 - Behaviourism, social psychology, praxeology
 - Linguistic structuralism, post-modernism, semiotics, discourse theory, the linguistic turn

Possible theoretical framework II

- ❖ Middle-level theories derived from...
 - Political science
 - Sociology
 - Historical anthropology
 - Cultural studies
 - Or cross-disciplinary extracts
- ❖ Such as...
 - Action research
 - Empowerment theory
 - Participatory approaches
 - gender studies

Possible theoretical framework III

- ❖ Concrete theories applied for the purpose
 - Conventions on democracy, social, and cultural rights
 - Functional frame analysis
 - Thoughts on qualitative versus quantitative approaches
 - Actor-network-theory
 - Community capacity building approaches
 - Participatory Rural Appraisal approaches
 - Carefully selected post-modernist inspirations
 - Own hypotheses...

A few further angles on social science analysis

- ❖ Humanistic idealism
- ❖ Religious dogma
- ❖ Liberal laissez-faire cynicism
- ❖ Malthusianism, social Darwinism
- ❖ Structuralism based on social class reasoning
- ❖ Essentialism, foundationalism
- ❖ Genealogical approaches
- ❖ Post-colonial discourse theory, Orientalism
- ❖ Search for causal explanations for regularities
- ❖ Use of the discipline for the sake of social progress
- ❖ Political / research policy implications of the analysis

Branch-specific approaches

- ❖ Schools inside, e.g., the historical profession
 - Conservative history, Toryism
 - Whig history
 - Historicism
 - Empiricism
 - Annales School
 - Historical materialism, Soviet Marxism
 - Socio-economic structuralism
 - English Marxists, social history
 - The Bielefeld school, gesellschaftsgeschichte
 - ... and more ...

MARXIST POLITICAL ECONOMY

- ❖ Important reasons for the differences between historiographic directions are hidden in political economy
- ❖ Differences in political opinions reflect social developments in society in a relatively simple and direct way
- ❖ The main divergent historical schools may be considered as history ideologies
- ❖ While structures can be understood only through human action, practice must simultaneously be explained from conditional structures

SOCIOLOGY

Differs from History in:

- ❖ Present solutions rather than past accounts
- ❖ More quantification and formalisation
- ❖ Models rather than acting humans
- ❖ More nomothetic than ideographic
- ❖ Abstract analytical concepts more important
- ❖ Sometimes an utopian-critical attitude to society
- ❖ However, often use of empirical findings for building theories rather than use of theories as starting point

Feasible methods that could be applied I

Research methodology will depend on objectives and professional tradition

- ❖ Multidisciplinary contexts
 - Qualitative interpretations, constructions of meaning...
- ❖ Sociology / Gender Studies / Social Psychology
 - Conflict matrices, focus group discussions, opinion polls, generational approaches, behaviour observation, abstract philosophical discussion as method...
- ❖ Anthropology / Ethnography
 - Case studies, fieldwork techniques, participatory appraisals, action research, qualitative questionnaires, key informants, particular findings...
- ❖ Development Economics / International Relations
 - Wealth ranking, social maps, macroeconomic statistics, quantitative evaluations, graphics, poverty indicators, capacity building estimates...

Feasible methods that could be applied II

- ❖ Human Right Studies / Policy Studies
 - Law studies, legal cases, conventions, practices, conducts, contextualisation, generalisation...
- ❖ History
 - Archival studies, discourse analysis, source criticism
 - Usually idiographic rather than nomothetic approach
 - Complexity comprehended through concrete examples
 - Combination of diachronic and synchronic perspectives
- ❖ Literary Studies / textual studies
 - Document studies of ideas, identifying ontological, epistemological, and normative aspects
 - Characterisation of analysed works into tendencies
 - Modes of explanation in overall conceptual framework
 - Effects on society

How to criticise theory and science

- ❖ Internal and external influences on science
- ❖ Continuity and change in science
- ❖ Kuhn's paradigm changes
- ❖ The generation concept
- ❖ The political culture of science
- ❖ Habermas and the utopia of the equal debate
- ❖ Social constructionism
- ❖ Coming up...

POST MODERNISM

- ❖ The linguistic turn, cultural semiotics
- ❖ Foucault's influence and the power of discourse analysis
- ❖ Bourdieu's sociology of knowledge
- ❖ Post-colonialism
- ❖ Traditional source criticism versus post-modern insights
- ❖ Coming up...

THE ROLE OF HUMAN AGENCY IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

- ❖ Norbert Elias's civilisation theory
 - Gradually people became more conscientious
 - From outer-controlled to inner-controlled
- ❖ Social psychology and behaviourism
- ❖ Social constructivism / constructionism
 - Themes: embeddedness of cognition; society/nature; the relationship between idea and materiality
 - Coming
- ❖ Coming up...

COMBINING THEORY AND METHOD I

- ❖ Opening search for perspectives, can not be narrowed down to immediately applicable methods and angles...
- ❖ But has to consider larger, overlapping, theory complexes...
- ❖ It has to be an open qualitative analysis: explorative research aimed at developing suggestions...
- ❖ Which then to some extent can be tested for generality through empirical text-studies

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF METHODOLOGICAL ECLECTICISM I

- ❖ Different ideas, concepts, explanations, models and theories are selected and put together
- ❖ Types of knowledge are integrated to create a more complex framework for understanding
- ❖ Exceedance of individual disciplines and integration of information across boundaries are knowledge-productive
- ❖ Demonstrate complex relationships and connections
- ❖ Present new angles and contexts of comprehension
- ❖ Take advantage of conceptual interdisciplinarity

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

- ❖ Broad, multidisciplinary approach often mixing anthropology, sociology, and economy
- ❖ Attempts to save the world and at the same time...
- ❖ Focus on limited, measurable situations in their totality through case studies
- ❖ Often mixing micro and macro-perspectives
- ❖ Practical application in relation to administration of development aid
- ❖ Open to contradictory ideological use

DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Usually a conglomeration of theories

- ❖ Modernisation theory
- ❖ Dependency theory
- ❖ World systems theory
- ❖ Theory of uneven and combined development
- ❖ Development economics theories

HISTORY OF AFRICAN STUDIES I

- ❖ Entangled with Western politico-economic engagement in Africa
- ❖ Christian missionary accounts helped discipline education and culture
- ❖ Western civilisation theories suppressed subaltern discourses
- ❖ After independence, extension of centres in the North to uphold indirect understanding and control

HISTORY OF AFRICAN STUDIES II

From:

- ❖ An open-mindedness about the potential for African states to deliver public goods
- ❖ A believe on the ability of the social sciences to apprehend African realities

To:

- ❖ A deflated sense of what African states can deliver
- ❖ Doubts on the extent to which the social sciences are capable of explaining complex phenomena

HISTORY OF AFRICAN STUDIES III

Emblematic institutional development that mirrors African history:

- ❖ Early, heady post-independence optimism
- ❖ Internal civil wars and coups d'états
- ❖ Carefully-managed presidential transitions
- ❖ Closeness to the policy world made Nordic African Studies more robust
- ❖ Coming up...

HISTORY OF AFRICAN STUDIES IV

Themes with a high degree of continuity over time:

- ❖ Gender, religion, Pentecostalism, popular culture, traditional rulers, and urbanism

After 1989, less room for:

- ❖ Underdevelopment, anti-colonialism, pan-Africanism, popular political international solidarity, inequalities, class, workers and peasants, and the role of the state

Have become more popular issues, lately:

- ❖ Identities, pre-colonial polities, ethnicity, diasporas, general poverty, development aid, good governance, trade and investment, health, African patriotism, regionalism, localism, globalisation, and international migration

UNDERSTANDINGS OF AFRICA

- ❖ The “noble savage” used by feudalists in opposition to Enlightenment in Europe
- ❖ The “barbaric wild” as opposite to the enlightened European
- ❖ The backward negroid race as social Darwinist legitimatisation of extortion
- ❖ The “invention of tradition” by colonial administrators
- ❖ The “imagined societies”, where African leaders share a common responsibility for the atrocities
- ❖ Said’s Orientalism and Africans seen as “the other”

AFRICAN IDEAS

African philosophers and political ideas

- ❖ Inclusivity, openness, collectivism
- ❖ Ubuntu
- ❖ Pan-Africanism
- ❖ Amilcar Cabral
- ❖ Franz Fanon
- ❖ African socialism
- ❖ Desmond Tutu's humanism
- ❖ Mandelalism, rainbowism
- ❖ African renaissance
- ❖ Coming up...

THEORIES

End of history