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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learning How to Be Theoretical: A Critical Analysis of Understanding and Applying Theoretical Perspectives in Academic Research

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| ABSTRACT
This paper focuses its discussion on helping students and young scholars to understand the significance of applying theoretical perspectives in academic research. In the humanities and social science fields, the ability to demonstrate theoretical thinking is a necessary skill that all should acquire in producing quality works; however, it has often been lacking and confused when put into practice, particularly among many students and young emerging scholars. With the organization of relevant literature, this paper is aimed to construct a clear and straightforward "roadmap" to provide the first steps of learning to be theoretical. Hopefully, with the aid of this paper, students and young scholars can find it helpful in making sense of theories, their functions and applications, and the necessary steps to conduct proper academic research.

| KEYWORDS

Critical Analysis; Academic Research; theoretical perspectives

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1. Introduction

How should we be theoretical in academic research? This is a frequently asked question that has often confused many young scholars and students who are beginning their postgraduate studies to enter the academic field. What we do know is that being theoretical is a necessity for good academic research and that all good research is guided by theories. Without it, a piece of research can hardly be one of satisfactory quality, nor can it stand firm when faced with challenges and critiques. To understand and answer the question (how to be theoretical?), we must first understand some fundamental principles and aspects of academic research itself. Starting our discussions on what is "research" and what is "theory", followed by a detailed analysis of the purpose and functions of "theoretical" and "conceptual" frameworks, this paper aims to demonstrate a learning process in making sense of how to be theoretical. Also, this paper would like to encourage students to criticality think about the importance of obtaining theoretical perspectives in academic research. Only after we obtain the correct understanding of the question asked can we learn to apply it to actual practice when conducting our own research.

2. What is "research"?

First, let us begin by asking and answering the fundamental question—what is academic research? It does not take more than an average university student to tell that research is to undertake the investigation process to find answers to a given question. However, proper academic research requires more than that. It is a structured inquiry that utilizes acceptable scientific methodology to solve problems and creates new and generally applicable knowledge (Golightley, 2005). Furthermore, academic research is a systematic process that follows particular rules and must be guided by theory and hypotheses that presume relations among the critically investigated phenomenon. The reasons for doing research may vary across fields and purposes—from finding answers, understanding topics, and examining aspects to generating new knowledge. Yet, the characteristics of all good research stay the same. Good research is always undertaken within a framework and designed to be objective; good research uses methods and techniques that are tested to be valid and reliable, and good research will always be guided by theory. The theory is always central to all forms of research. Without theory, research has no soul. After understanding this, the question then is, what is "theory"?

3. What is "theory" (and what is not)

As mentioned above, the theory is the soul of every research. The successfulness of our research primarily relies on whether or not we can correctly understand, apply, and incorporate theory throughout the process of our investigation. There are many different definitions of what a theory is. Still, some shared features define a theory's nature—to explain phenomena and make predictions. According to some scholars, a theory is a relationship of concepts that is linked together by propositions that have an underlying, coherent logic and related assumptions to show how and why a phenomenon occurs (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Likewise, other researchers have pointed out that a theory is a systematic view structured through a set of correlated concepts that guide the research structure (Liehr & Smith, 1999). It is important to note that just views or insights alone cannot make up a theory, as a theory must present conceptual connections. Furthermore, theories vary in their specifications (Garver, 2008). While some theories are idea-based, others can be application-based. Therefore, we must understand a theory first (including its arguments, backgrounds, applications, and critiques) before selecting it to apply to our specific research topic.

More importantly, we must also know and distinguish what is not a theory, as it can be confusing for many students when put into practice. Students often tend to confuse theory with hypothesis when writing papers and doing projects. A hypothesis is not a theory, as the two are distinctively different in purpose and function. A hypothesis is a specific prediction made to a specified circumstance, while a theory predicts in a general and broad context. A hypothesis is often nothing more than a speculative guess that is yet to be tested for its validity. In contrast, a theory has been extensively tested and widely accepted by scholars as well-established. The hypothesis only answers the "what" but not the "why". Whereas for a theory, answering and explaining the "why" is a basis. Besides hypothesis, another common mistake is to take the reference as theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995). When writing an article or research study, many students may think making reference to a list of theories can show their theoretical perspective. However, if we do not explain the logical linkage between these references to our research question, then it is not theoretical. Reference in itself does not equal to theory. When academic references are cited, their relationship with the new research framework must be demonstrated. Similarly, data presentation, variables, and constructs in a study are also not the same as theories (Sutton & Staw, 1995).

3.1 What makes a good theory?

If we understand a theory as a link that connects and creates relationships between concepts, then how should we identify a good theory when we come across one? According to John Wacker, a strong-standing theory should have the following four components—theory domain, formal conceptual definitions, explained relationships, and predictions (Wacker, 2004). Other researchers have further elaborated that a good theory must obtain uniqueness, so it is distinguishable from others, and a good theory must be generalizable to accurately describe a large class of observations on a model basis (Hawking, 1988). Therefore, from the above definitions and understandings, we can characterize a good theory as a well and carefully established outline of concepts and definitions in a specific domain, explaining why and how the relationships are logically tied together, so educated predictions can be made for future observations and researches.

4. Theoretical perspectives and why we need it

Theory-driven thinking is one of the essential skills we need to learn and obtain in academic research. Whether or not we have the ability to think theoretically and demonstrate theoretical perspective in the research process largely influences the end quality of our works. According to some scholars, the production of contributing research depends on the ability of its researcher to bring insight into the scholarship that can be applied to bring about fresh thinking (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Without theoretical perspectives, this cannot be done. Furthermore, it has been noted that being atheoretical is one of the main reasons why journal submissions are rejected for publication (Lester, 2005). Especially in today's highly competitive academic environment, where researchers are constantly under the pressure of "publish or perish", the lack of theoretical perspectives can often be fatal. We must understand that our ability to think and write theoretically has a tremendous impact on the quality of our works and chances of publication in the future. Thus, for young scholars and students aiming for professional academic careers, the theoretical perspective is a must-have that cannot be absent.

Simply put, all good research should be theoretical. Guided by a relevant theory, theoretical perspectives enable a researcher to connect with the existing knowledge of a field and help the researcher to generalize the various aspects and concepts instead of simply describing the observations. Furthermore, having theoretical perspectives in research also allows us to enhance the originality and utility of the study (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Meaning it can help us advance our understanding of a given topic in the sense of knowledge-reveling while making our research findings useful (either practically or scientifically) at the same time.

When putting into practice, it is important to note that using and embedding theories only in parts of a study is far from enough. Instead, theoretical perspectives and theory-driven thinking should be a constant awareness underpinning every research process. Specifically, theoretical perspectives should be demonstrated from the very beginning till the very end—from the selection of a research topic to the development of research questions, the choice of literature review, the design of research methods, and the

analysis plan of the research results (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The more explicit and integrated our theory-driven thinking is, the stronger our research will be. In practical paper writing, this ability can be demonstrated through the construction and implication of the theoretical framework.

4.1 Theoretical framework and its functions

Regarded as a "mandatory ingredient" in academic research (Adom, 2018), the theoretical framework is a structure that summarizes concepts and theories in the relevant field to work as a travel map to guide the researcher through the research process. Yet, a theoretical framework is not something we can find directly from literature, nor is it a readily available theory or a group of existing theories for us to take and use. Instead, a theoretical framework is something we need to develop on our own for each specific research topic and area. A significant process of learning how to be theoretical depends on if we can understand the significance of theoretical framework in doing research.

According to Grant and Osanloo, it can be helpful for students to think of the theoretical framework as the "blueprint of a housing construction". The researchers made a vivid analogy by referring the research process to the steps of building a dream house (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It is suggested that if we look at our research project as building our own house, then the theoretical framework plays a similar role to the blueprint of a house. In house building, the blueprint serves the function of guiding every step of the construction process. Including the location of the house, its exteriors, the floorplans inside, and all the electrical, water, and mechanical systems needed. In developing good research, the theoretical framework takes the role of guidance and serves as the structure to support the study's rationale (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). From identifying a topic to formulating a research question, from literature review to methodology and analysis, the presence of the theoretical framework should be in every process along the way.

Therefore, the theoretical framework is the foundation that our research is built upon. It consists of our understanding of relevant theories and concepts in the study field and acts as a map to ensure we do not deviate throughout the process. Like a blueprint of a house, the theoretical framework is supposed to define the scope of a study and make clear indications of how the researcher plan to approach the problem. Although the theoretical framework is rooted in theory, as mentioned before, it is not a summary of thoughts and ideas from the researcher to explain the research plan. Instead, the theoretical framework gathers the established ideas and concepts that already exist in a field of knowledge. In fact, what we need to do is to "borrow" them and relate them to our own specific proposed research. In essence, the theoretical framework comprises what the leading professionals in our field say about our research topic and questions, what and how we want to investigate, and the suggested steps to take when seeking the answer.

According to the Library of the University of Southern California, it may be easier to understand the function of a theoretical framework if students view it as the answer to two fundamental questions: "What is the research problem/question?" and "Why is your approach a feasible solution?" (USC, 2022). It is mentioned that to answer these questions; we must first conduct a thorough review of the relevant literature. So, to develop a solid foundation (theoretical framework) for our research project, a comprehensive review of up-to-date literature must be done first. Furthermore, the USC Library gave several strategies to help students develop an adequate theoretical framework. Firstly, we should examine our research problem before anything else. The research problem is the pillar that holds up our entire research, and it forms the basis for developing our theoretical framework. Second, we must brainstorm and ask ourselves about the key variables in our research, such as what factors caused/ influenced/contributed to the phenomenon? Thirdly, a thorough review of related literature is required to see how other scholars have addressed similar research problems. Next, we should make a list to group the related constructs and variables in the topic and categorize them as dependent or independent. After that, we can begin to review and select the theory that best explains the relationship between our studied variables and outline the relevance between the existing theory and our own research topic (USC, 2022).

5. Conceptual framework and its differences from the theoretical framework

In practice, it has been repeatedly noted that many students and even researchers tend to have difficulties distinguishing between a theoretical framework and a conceptual framework. It should not be hard to tell that the two terms are not synonymies nor interchangeable just from looking at their names. A theoretical framework is derived from theory, whereas a conceptual framework should be derived from concepts (Imenda, 2014). As the theoretical framework is a combination of "borrowed" ideas from already established scholarships, the conceptual framework is what we, as researchers, can create by ourselves by relating all the relative concepts and ideas in our minds as we engage in the research process. Defined by scholars, the conceptual framework is the researcher's explanation of how the research problem should be explored (Camp, 2001). It is a structure that we believe can best explain the phenomenon being studied.

Going back to the house-building analogy, if the theoretical framework is viewed as the blueprint of a house, the conceptual framework is then the interior floorplan of how information flows throughout the research project (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). By

linking together various concepts and beliefs, the framework is used to underline our assumptions about the problem, describe why our topic is worth studying, and the scholarships we agree and disagree with. Scholars further elaborated that the conceptual framework is not simply a string of concepts but a logically constructed structure that able our readers to visualize how we plan to approach the topic by presenting connected concepts and interrelated ideas. Therefore, the conceptual framework is not interchangeable with the theoretical framework. To emphasize this point, it is perhaps more straightforward if we look at some of the key differences between the two frameworks with a comparative table:

Theoretical framework	Conceptual framework
Based on existing and established theories	Based on concepts specific to the study
Provide a general/ border scope	Provide a more specific/ narrower set of ideas
Well-developed and widely accepted	Our own constructed/defined approach
Used as the scholarly foundation of our research	Used as the logical conceptualization of our research
Like the blueprint for building a house	Like the floorplan in building a house
Example: theories in International Relations (such as Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, etc.)	Example: related institutional and sociological concepts (including diplomacy, great powers, war, sovereignty, alliance, balancing, etc.)

5.1 Conceptualization and conceptual capability

The above table shows some of the comparative differences between the two frameworks. Although they are not interchangeable, they are equally crucial in the research process, especially in social science, where the logical flow of information in our research predominantly relies heavily on the constructed definitions and precise understanding of concepts. Suppose the theoretical perspective provides us with the appropriate lens to view our studied phenomenon. Then, in that case, our conceptual capability determines the clarity of our observations and how effectively we can communicate with our readers. In this way, it is particularly valuable and helpful for students in social science to acquire the skills of conceptualization.

In order to demonstrate theoretical thinking in social science, we must learn to write conceptually. To conceptualize is to specify exactly what we mean and do not mean by the terms we use in research (Sequeira, 2014). As language can often be vague and unspecific, it is crucial for there to be a unified understanding of the key concepts in research. Think of abstract terms such as "love", "happiness", and "greatness"; very different meanings and understandings are likely to form from different audiences when thinking about those terms. So, it is difficult to research those terms before a clear and shared understanding is identified (or conceptualized). Concepts are the end product of conceptualization. Without conceptualization, a researcher could be discussing a term in the context of their own understanding, while the audience (and particularity those outside the field) may generate a completely different understanding of that same thing. When that is the case, the research will likely be confusing, insufficient, invalid, and unreliable.

For example, say that we want to research the number of educated people in a city. What our audience might classify as "educated" could be completely different from what we classify as "educated". If there is no unified explanation—no conceptualization, then there would be no shared understanding available for the research to be conducted. The fundamental purpose of conceptualization is to make sure that the readers are on the same page with the researcher, so our research can stay on track theoretically and logically. In the growing trend of mixed methodology in social science research, the capability of researchers to conceptualize is ever more emphasized. Imagine what would happen to the results of a survey questionnaire if the researcher did not conceptualize it? The research would likely lose its validity and reliability because the surveyed participants would answer based on their own understanding of the key concepts instead of the researcher's.

6. Conclusion—making sense of how to be theoretical

Going back to our beginning question—how to be theoretical in academic research? Without any surprise, the answer to this question does not conclude in one sentence, nor can we find it by simply opening up a book. To me, learning how to be theoretical is similar to the process of earning a scholarship itself. It is much of cultivation that requires love, work, sweat, and tears, just like building a house from the ground up. Nevertheless, once we understand the necessary steps towards being theoretical, our learning process can be more coherent and less in the dark.

The first and foremost step in learning how to be theoretical is to make sense of theory and its functions in research, for the theory is the soul of our entire research. Every next step we take in research depends on our selection and understanding of the theory. Therefore, to select the proper and suitable theory, we must be able to distinguish a good theory. As mentioned earlier, a good theory should satisfy the following characteristics: systematic, domain-specific, explain the why and how of relationships between

concepts, and offer predictions. Different scholars have repeatedly empathized that a piece of work cannot be good without being theoretical. Having a single theory can never be enough to conduct good research, so we must use it as the foundation to construct a theoretical framework that can demonstrate our theoretical perspectives and theory-driven thinking. As Grant and Osanloo put it, we must draw the blueprint before building the house.

In a theoretical framework, we need to develop a structure that guides our research plan by relying on our field's already established scholarships of theories, thoughts, and ideas. In terms of how we understand and use those theories and how they relate to our own research question. At the same time, to be theoretical, we also need to conceptualize the terminologies in our research. To conceptualize is to define concepts so that our research process can stay on track without ambiguous understandings. As demonstrated through earlier examples, the ability to write conceptually is a required skill for any research to be theoretical and logically sufficient. Without conceptualization, our readers will have difficulties understanding and following the research, and our findings are likely to end up invalid and unreliable, thus atheoretical. This is why a conceptual framework is often required in addition to the theoretical framework; as the theoretical framework acts as a blueprint for building our research, the conceptual framework works like an interior floorplan that connects concepts and the flow of information in our research.

Overall, learning how to be theoretical is a necessary process that every student and researcher must go through in developing quality work. In other words, asking how to be theoretical is similar to asking how to conduct good research. The earlier we begin to think of these questions, the more prepared we are likely to be when conducting our own research project. The learning process of how to be theoretical is very much similar to a conceptualization process; suppose we can define and understand "theoretical" as a concept. Once we have done that, our next steps can be less dubious as we gradually make sense of it with continued literature reading and practical writing.

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