

Theory and research

What is a theory?

Theory is logically connected set of general propositions that establishes a connection between two or more variables. Theory - an explanation of a specific social phenomenon that identifies a set of causally relevant factors or conditions.

Four Parts of Social Theory

1. Assumptions 2. Concepts. Vary by level of abstraction (concrete versus abstract), single versus concept clusters, simple versus complex (e.g., classifications, typologies), and scope (narrow versus broad) 3. Relationships. Forms of relationships, propositions, and hypotheses 4. Units of analysis

What is a parsimony?

The idea that simple is better; everything else being equal, a social theory that explains more with less complexity is better.

Theory and research (cont)

What is an ideology?

A nonscientific quasi-theory, often based on political values or faith with assumptions, concepts, relationships among concepts, and explanations. It is a closed system that resists change, cannot be directly falsified with empirical data, and makes normative claims.

Four parts of social theory and their parts

Assumption.

An untested starting point or belief in a theory that is necessary in order to build a theoretical explanation.

2 types of assumption

background assumption: It must exist for us to continue inquiry. "tractable" assumptions (i.e., they have traction and allow us to take an argument further).

Theoretical concept.

An idea that is thought through, carefully defined, and made explicit in a theory

Level of abstraction of concepts

ranges from empirical and concrete, often easily observable in daily experience, to very abstract, unseen mental creations

Four parts of social theory and their parts (cont)

Concept cluster.

A collection of interrelated concepts that share common assumptions, refer to one another, and operate together in a social theory. (Cluster - a group of similar things or people positioned or occurring closely together

Concept classification

Simple concepts have only one dimension and vary along a single continuum. Complex concepts have multiple dimensions or many subparts.

Types of concepts

A theoretical classification or quasi-theory that is created by cross-classifying or combining two or more simple concepts to form a set of interrelated subtypes.

Scope of concepts

. Some are very narrow and apply only to specific social settings or activities or are restricted in time or place. We cannot easily use them beyond a particular setting. Other concepts are very broad. They apply to many diverse settings or activities across large expanses of time and space. Broad concepts tend to be more abstract than narrow ones.

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Kinds of relationships

a theory may tell us whether a relationship is strong or weak, direct or indirect, positive or negative. one concept accelerates or decelerates/diminishes the other or that its impact is immediate or delayed. Good theories indicate whether one concept is a necessary precondition for another concept or only sufficient. Sometimes a theory states that one concept relates to another but only under certain conditions (these are called contingent relationships). A theory also specifies the form of explanation in which a relationship operates.

Units of analysis

The units, cases, or parts of social life that are under consideration

Theory and research (cont)

Five major factors

1. Direction of theorizing. Either deductive or inductive
2. Level of analysis. Either micro, macro, or meso
3. Theoretical focus. Either substantive or formal theory
4. Form of explanation. Either causal, structural, or interpretative
5. Range of a theory. Either an empirical generalization, a middle-range theory, or a framework

Theory and research

Direction of theorizing

- Deductive
- Inductive

Theory and research (cont)

Level of Analysis

- Micro-level theory** Social theory focusing on the micro level of social life that occurs over short durations (e.g., face-to-face interactions and encounters among individuals or small groups).
- Macro-level theory** Social theory focusing on the macro level of social life (e.g., social institutions, major sectors of society, entire societies, or world regions) and processes that occur over long durations (many years, multiple decades, or a century or longer).
- Meso-level theory** Social theory focusing on the relations, processes, and structures at a midlevel of social life (e.g., organizations, movements, and communities) and events operating over moderate durations (many months, several years, or a decade).

Theoretical Focus

- Formal theory** A type of theory that is general and applies across many specific topic areas.
- Substantive theory** A type of theory that is specifically tailored to a particular topic area.

Theory and research (cont)

Forms of Explanation

- theoretical explanation** (A logical argument or "story" that tells why something takes a specific form or occurs and does so by referring to more general ideas and abstract principles)
- Theoretical framework** A very general theoretical system with assumptions, concepts, and specific social theories.
- Causal explanation** A type of theoretical explanation about why events occur and how things work expressed in terms of causes and effects or as one factor producing certain results.
- Causal mechanism* The part of a causal explanation that specifies the process by which the primary independent variable(s) influence the primary dependent variable(s).