
The Good, the Popular and the Bad: Different Shades of ‘Theory’ Use in Educational Research

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‘Theory’ may refer to a system of ideas, principles or frameworks which are overarching, and serve as an anchor to understand and generalise about particular instances and experiences. It also provides conceptual and analytical frameworks which govern the ways in which questions are asked, the research methodologies and methods we choose, as well as writing practices. While the ‘doing of research’ often takes precedence over foregrounding our theoretical underpinnings, it is meaningful to understand where our ideas come from, whether current or past, and how these considerations contribute to what we deem ‘research worthy’.

Often researchers explicitly refer to theory in the form of a conceptual framework at the time of devising research questions. However, it is also instructive to think about the whole process of research inquiry as necessarily involving theory of some kind. Assumptions in the research process are implicit. They draw from the canons of disciplines—their preferred methods, conventions and writing styles. As novice researchers, enculturated into these ways of thinking, it is difficult to shift the frame to other ways of thinking, doing and writing. Often the doing of research takes precedence over examining our philosophical leanings. Dominant

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cultures of doing research—often traced to Positivism, while not drawing solely from it—discount the role of individual beliefs and values in the process of planning and doing research. Ethical considerations under such a worldview could be secondary to the goal of addressing the objectives of the research. However, such a premise leads to problematic questions, approaches and frameworks. The assumption that one can ‘leave out’ researchers’ worldviews drawing from disciplinary traditions as well as contextual attributes, therefore needs re-examination.

This article reflects on some broad ways in which theory governs various choices that are made while developing, carrying out and writing up a research study. The narrative and reflections draw upon several insights from the work of Pryke et al. (2003). The approaches and inclinations will be further categorised as the good, the popular and the bad, while attempting to avoid being narrowly judgmental or prescriptive. The steps categorised here, might seem linear, but are viewed simultaneously, since there is often a sense of the whole that researchers seek to visualise while formulating a proposal. There is also a drive towards closure that the research hopes to accomplish by way of insights, findings or implications which has a bearing on the entire process.

What Does the Framing of Research Questions Involve?

At the heart of framing good research questions is the hope that it will help us conceptualise a study to understand the world better. At the same time, it requires to be phrased in a manner that makes the research doable, making it a pragmatic process. This tension between a utopian view of asking a question which when addressed will hopefully break new ground, and the pragmatic element of making it researchable, is laden with theoretical underpinnings. It is actualised in the manner in which we phrase our questions using the available tools of language (Rorty, 1982). The tools that language provides us also constrains our thoughts, thus enacting boundaries to our questions. It is important for a researcher therefore to understand how language operates, which also brings humility into the endeavour of asking questions. An implication is to also consider primarily non-verbal forms of framing, doing and communicating research: such as through visuals, performatives, physical installations, etc. At the same time, the questions need to fit in with the entry points that the world affords us. These possibilities are often tied to our prior

experiences with the world. In some sense, it anticipates what we are thinking about as a possible answer or as a hypothesis which is then subjected to the research process. What is interesting here is to actively consider this past that bears on us: a project that had been shelved earlier but is now able provide new insights. A combination of conditions now makes it possible to begin again: such as a new location, collaborators, renewed possibilities, etc. Our experience with the world also includes knowledge about previous work that has been taken up in our area of research. Part of the need to refer to previous research is to understand where the beginning maybe, what has happened before, and how our attempts draw us closer, but not to make a completely fresh start. In this journey what becomes difficult therefore, is to move away from one's 'training' or disciplinary moorings which tempt us to observe and understand the world in familiar ways. The attempt then is to craft research questions which enable new ways of understanding and describing the world.

Theory slips in, often unnoticed while making these decisions: using language, drawing from disciplinary conventions as well as training, and our past experiences. It can also influence us in the myriad ways in which we find a meaningful research problem or look at a question as a 'gap' in the existing literature. This gap does not present itself readily or immediately from reading the available existing literature. This review along with close observation of events in the world allows us to see the world differently, make connections that were not apparent so far, and to also find a meaningful research problem. By identifying such a peculiar, perhaps interesting combination of events in one place, the researcher has already brought a problem to the table (Pryke et al., 2003).

There are several cases which could be cited to understand these relationships, such as the following example from science education. Feminist and critical perspectives provide refreshing lenses to think about questions of exclusion in education (Barton, 1998). In science education, the question of sufficient and meaningful participation of girls from marginalised communities, is typically reduced to a lack of opportunities or problems in children's understanding. This in turn is attributed to the inadequate content knowledge of teachers as well as infrastructure in schools, leading to compensatory or special programmes addressing such deficits. While these programmes often focus on the content of science, and are meaningful in their own ways, it does not acknowledge an important contributor: the representation of science and the production of values in the curriculum, as well as pedagogic practices in the classroom. An analysis of underlying values in the curriculum

foregrounds privileged ways of knowing. It can also be traced to historical antecedents, such as to the social backgrounds of individual scientists as well as to discourses and contexts within which a scientific discovery was made and communicated. Hence, providing special education programmes for women and marginalised communities, focused on the content of science alone, maybe short-sighted. This example illustrates how a sociological framework could be used in science education to re-think the question: 'how do we bring more women into the doing of science?' The metaphoric re-description of the problem involved looking at the issue as not one of 'deficit', but of understanding the history of modern science.

What are the problems that give rise to possibly 'bad' or inadequate conceptualisations of questions? A beginner researcher may look at a question as being 'out there'. However, the question of language, disciplinary training, previous experience with the area, as well as practicalities of doing research and its intended audience, clearly underline the narrative of a *constructed* question. While idealism, in the sense of being uninhibited in one's choice of questions, is laudable, it can also lead to some very fanciful, and extremely trivial questions being asked. Is it fair then to expect novice researchers to come up with their own questions? Wouldn't this have far-reaching implications particularly when they involve substantial work like a doctoral study?

'Popular' concerns and questions in the relevant area may have good possibilities of being funded. They may also add to a much needed and growing body of research in the area. However, could it at the same time diminish other possibilities, or ways of bringing together a combination of conditions not considered earlier? An important implication is also that established researchers will need to acknowledge disciplinary assumptions and methods and introduce them to young entrants in the field, while critically reflecting on their positionality. Perspectives from other disciplines (besides the researchers' parent discipline) could orient the novice researcher into asking meaningful questions. Probably, part of the reason we have a proliferation of research into similar questions is owing to a utopian view alone (of the problem), and also our belief in the possibility of an original question beckoning from the field.

'Doing Fieldwork'

As is popularly characterised, 'doing fieldwork' is central to the research process, though it is not integral or required, to address

questions pursuing a theoretical line of inquiry. There are popular assumptions which drive the process of immersion into the field. One such is the linear nature of fieldwork that we may conceptualise, and the step-by-step process that the textbook requires us to implement. Collection of data brings with it a sense of purpose and tremendous satisfaction. However, what could be easily overlooked is the need to conceptualise what fieldwork involves, and what indeed constitutes data. How does the researcher's fieldwork help answer these questions of interest? What are the ethical issues that are likely to arise and will need to be emphasised?

(Pryke et al. 2003, p. 72) citing Outram (1996), describe these dilemmas poignantly while discussing the work of naturalists in the eighteenth century who were divided between the study of organisms in their natural habitat as opposed to a detailed study of preserved specimens and other artefacts. The classic debates and tussles between fieldwork and study or 'desk' research are relevant even today, since they do not have a simple resolution. Understanding the 'field' requires a certain engagement with its messiness, while also requiring some distance, allowing for reflection. Distance also ensures possibilities for concerted study on a topic while making comparisons and repeated engagements with an object, artefact, and field-notes. The field is also imagined as necessarily being out there, away from the researcher's neighbourhood, thereby endowing it with power. It can even be a trap, if the engagement is unreflective. However, both stages: in the 'field' and at the 'study' are necessary, since there is a process of transformation that takes place at both sites (Latour, 1999). Re-examination and reflection transform the fieldwork, while actively creating something more in the process: a 'reduction' of the field in a certain sense and also an 'amplification' in the manner in which it is the subject of intense study (ibid). Researchers' intuitions and inclinations are worth considering here in dialogue with conventions to make appropriate choices.

The idea of the field as 'out there' also connotes masculine activity, while the field itself is constructed as feminine (Driver, 2000). An important contribution from feminist critiques of the process, is to view the field as being composed of relationships between things in the world and the researcher. Qualitative methodologies such as ethnography, demonstrate how it becomes difficult to draw strong boundaries between what constitutes scholarly endeavour as opposed to fieldwork. Participant observation requires engagement with fieldwork as an insider, and it becomes difficult to define such separations.

Hence, distinctions between the ‘field’ and ‘study’, while useful to understand the unique contributions of different kinds of work, also need to be blurred. Thinking about what constitutes appropriate engagement with the field in order to answer questions of interest will be worthwhile instead. Often, these encounters cannot be predicted or written into what is being planned as fieldwork. What emerges through an exercise of engagement and imagination will likely produce ‘hybrid spaces’ (Bhabha, 1994), which helps us understand and address these questions better. The development of such hybrid spaces through informal learning experiences allows for the blurring of these conventional categories (Mathai, 2017).

What implications could be drawn considering the discussion above regarding the process of fieldwork, and what may constitute ‘good’ fieldwork? Fieldwork as a ‘given’ needs to be challenged. While research which emphasises encounters with the world are rich and often complex, such encounters tend to be conceptualised and re-imagined from conventional requirements. Disciplinary conventions are historically constructed. Tight boundaries in our conceptualisations are as problematic as the tight classifications of disciplines. Questions which are then pertinent to ask may include: Why is fieldwork required? How is it appropriate to the kinds of goals the project has? What constitutes data, and what constitutes sufficiency? While researchers do think about these questions, disciplinary conventions decide the priority accorded to such endeavours. While it is possible to privilege one over the other, using classic dichotomies such as the field and the study, theory and practice, etc., it becomes artificial and forced if accepted unreflectively. Collecting large amounts of data or engaging with critical analysis of texts alone, could both be problematic.

Understanding this intense engagement with fieldwork without strong pre-decided categories, also foregrounds questions of ethics. Ethical judgements involve appropriateness in a given situation. These judgements of appropriateness are better handled in methodologies involving participant observation and conducted in naturalistic settings. Where it is difficult to implement these, such as in experimental designs, the researcher’s empathetic sense is better able to handle ethical questions, rather than a blind adherence to normative considerations.

The Meandering Trap of Analysis

Analysis is a stage in the research process, which is most looked forward to, particularly after what is gruelling fieldwork. It can, however, involve

several daunting steps. An important question concerns the analytical categories themselves: where do they come from, and how does one use them? Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced ‘constant comparison’ to refer to the process of developing and using some categories, while continually testing them with the rest of the data to check if they can be meaningfully used. The intention is to enable all kinds of data to speak to each other meaningfully and form a coherent whole. The classic tension here is in converting the simultaneity of data into a linear narrative leading to a coherent written account. It is often difficult to match the clarity of theory with the messiness of empiricism. Also, too much analysis and a solidity of analytical methods could risk imposing an over-coherent view of the world. Disciplinary conventions too are harsh in these matters. Researchers are expected to be ready with every detail of their fieldwork—or what may constitute data to be ready for analysis and the writing process. Further, how does one neatly separate analysis from writing? This is easier done when the study is largely quantitative. However, there are very few studies of this nature in an age when mixed methods are widely employed.

Is theory an important part of the analytical exercise? The requirement of a relationship between theory and data may lead to attempts to ‘force-fit’ theory with data. Verification of a theory, though a worthwhile attempt, could easily slip into making unwarranted inferences from the data. This may ignore contextual irregularities which lead to a better understanding of the research problem rather than sweeping generalisations which match the theory. For instance, the assessment-driven culture which we are now part of (Gipps, 1999) reduces learning to narrowly conceived questions in paper–pencil tests; the associated performance of students in the form of marks; and the exclusion of ‘weak’ students from the system. While we cannot deny the truth of these practices and observations, it is often implied that testing or any form of assessment is problematic and should be avoided. Such positions could lead to teachers and children viewing assessments as though it could be dispensed with. But we also know that assessments of different kinds are central to understanding whether the objectives of the curriculum have been met. The ‘No-Detention Policy’ which is against detaining children in the same grade (GoI, 2009), is similarly misinterpreted despite its progressive intentions. Further, assessments for children with special needs are critical to ensuring that they are included within the system through provisions for additional support.

There are studies which allude to theory in the context of collected data, because it is commonly used by established scholars in the field and cited. Very few meaningful relationships are drawn, since it is a

convention to build connections with theory, particularly those being used and debated about frequently. Both these described attempts to 'force-fit' as well as use theory simplistically, could be termed 'popular', with varying degrees of usages.

The Finished Sense of the Written Word

'Writing up' is enmeshed with the entire process, often seen as the end phase of analysis. Writing styles, similarly, draw from established practices. Literature has been traditionally associated with imagination and fiction, involving language, which is poetic, figurative, etc. On the other hand, science is conventionally associated with clear facts written in plain and simple language. This separation between literary and scientific ways of writing was called into question by works like 'Two Cultures' (Snow, 2001). This has further led to problematic ways of writing in disciplines such as the social sciences. However, since literary writing was seen in the nineteenth century to be secondary to scientific writing, the 'realism' movement in literature also took root, to counter this 'decline' as well as to inculcate 'naturalism' in literature.

Is it appropriate then, to look at analysis and writing in such 'clear' terms? Is it possible to think of them as bereft of messiness and shorn of literary devices? Should writing and analysis be necessarily understood as the end product of research? Should it take on a voice claiming the authority of facts and exact findings to be communicated? Being conscious and reflective of our disciplinary inheritance which inform our writing conventions may do us some good. While one may agree to adopt a non-metaphoric language as one's own, this will need to be consciously chosen. Moreover, being mindful of how our journey as researchers and authors relates with the audience of our research, also has bearing on this process. Important questions raised then include: could we engage with our audience, mindful that they will be involved in a process of inquiry themselves while reading the research? Should writing be a terrifying activity, in which we do not wish to take any liberties, fearing our community of researchers? Could we, as writers, include the messiness of doing research, drawing from writing practices across disciplines to engage with our audiences, who are also important participants in the process?

In Conclusion...

There are multiple ways in which theory slips into our conceptualisations, the process of research as well as analysis and writing. What is invariably 'good' and meaningful is to strengthen a reflective exercise. We should pay adequate attention to the role of intuition, curiosity and engagement. A meaningful research study should also entail deeper engagement with inanimate objects during fieldwork and study, while being mindful of the audience. Simply conforming to what is handed down and mechanically adopted, or because it is in the 'popular' imagination, might invariably lead to what may be 'bad' research.

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