

# In praise of theorising: what is it and where does it come in?

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# Today

We will look at:

- Theory: what is it and why do it?
- Types of theory
- What is theorising?
- Importance of theorising
- How do it

# Why do theory?

- Organises our thoughts around something
- Transfers across context and time
- Interesting in own right
- It is the job

# Example: Vygotsky

Zone of proximal development (ZPD): gap between where you are and where you could be with help

- An idea, not a thing
- Powerful idea for teachers and teaching
- Articulates what is known but not said  
(not based on extensive data)



# But theory is not a single idea

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- explaining how two or more things may be related
- an explanation / meaning of a particular social phenomenon.
- the study of key thinkers (interpretations analyses, critiques, etc.)
- how to look at, grasp, and represent the world (methodology)
- how we should see the world
- how we act and structure the world

# Are these theories?

Piketty (2015) Capital in the 21st Century

$r > g$  (where  $r$  is the rate of return to wealth and  $g$  is the economic growth rate), other things being equal.....

# Davis Technology Acceptance

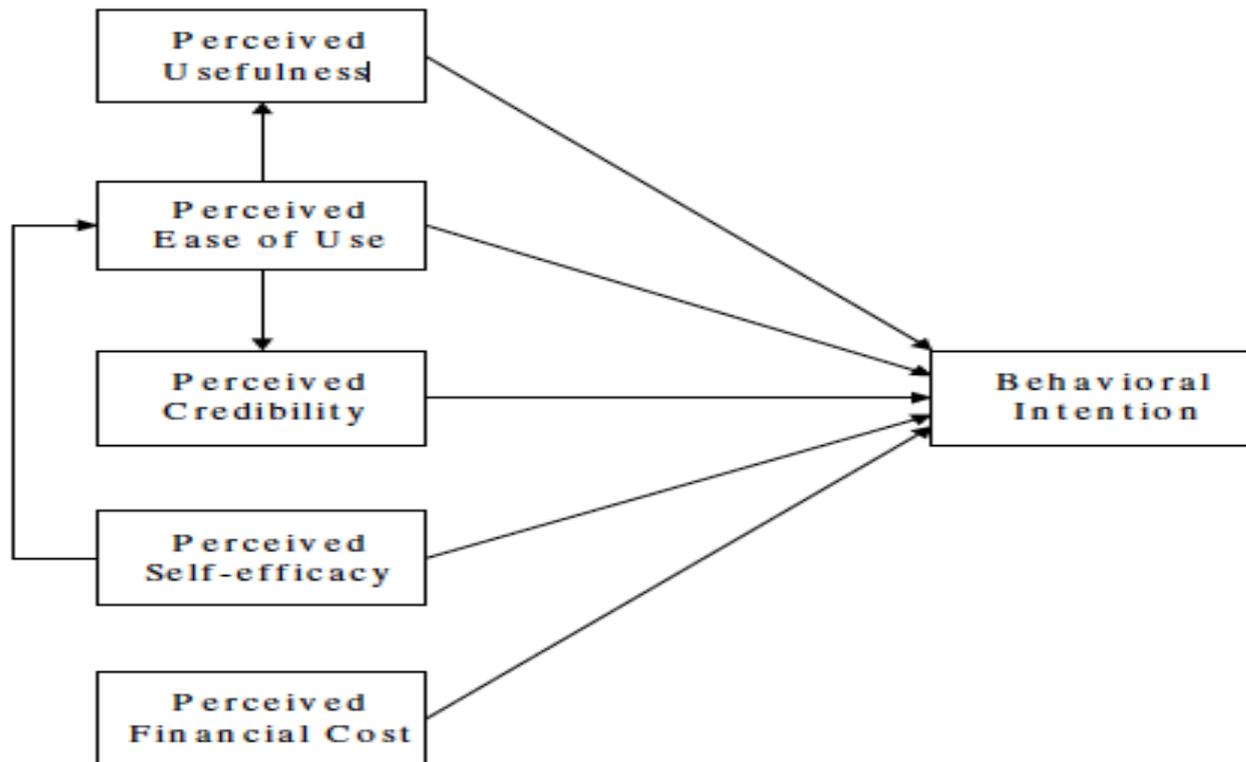


Fig. 1. Research model.

# A new concept

- Emotional capital: the emotional resources passed on from mother to child through processes of parental involvement

(Reay, 2000)

# How ought we behave?

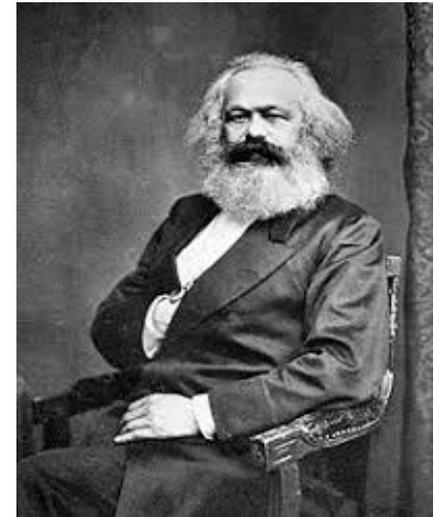
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- if everyone were stripped of their privileges and social status and made entirely equal, what kind of justice system would they want to be subject to?

John Rawls A Theory of Justice

# Reading great thinkers

Marx defines Capital's purpose as follows:  
“What I have to examine in this work is the capitalist mode of production, and the relations of production and forms of intercourse (Verkehrsverhältnisse) that correspond to it”  
(Fuchs, 2015)



# So theory

- Carries many different types of connotations, but we don't say that
- And people do not understand that other people use the word differently
- Thus it becomes a stick to beat up other researchers...(you don't understand X, you have misapplied Y, you have not read Z)
- And a source of confusion



# Is there anything core to these different conceptions?

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- Explains (not 'merely' descriptive) e.g. a distinction between laws and theories
- Often has a position on agency and structure
- Justified - carries a warrant
- Integrates different findings, often least complicated explanation
- Is transferable
- In social science connects to past work (to literature)

# What is theory ...for you

- Have your views on theory changed over the year?
- What different views of theory have you encountered?
- What view of theory excites you?

# Moving on to theorising

According to Swedberg, theorising

- Is what you do when you make a theory,
- Draws on your own personal (long) experience
- Is about discovery, distinct from / precedes justification
- Is based on observation in broadest sense
- Involves a mix of logic and intuition / creativity and a different way of thinking

# Theorising involves guessing

- Peirce (1929) 'Guessing' or abduction is intuitive not easily explained a leap of the imagination
- Stolen watch as an example



# Theorising as detective work

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Holmes on meeting Watson said 'ah you have come from Afghanistan'. Holmes explanation:

Here is a gentleman of a medical type, but with the air of a military man. Clearly an army doctor, then. He has just come from the tropics, for his face is dark, and that is not the natural tint of his skin, for his wrists are fair. He has undergone hardship and sickness, as his haggard face says clearly. His left arm has been injured. He holds it in a stiff and unnatural manner. Where in the tropics could an English army doctor have seen much hardship and got his arm wounded? Clearly in Afghanistan.      Sebok (1981) Walton (2015)

# Detective work

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# Reflecting

Stacey Dooley investigates



# Theorising mixes intuition with constraint

- Is a leap of imagination
- Abstracts from the 'data'
- You need to know how you think and the judgments you make

# Which means theorising is also dialogue with the literature

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- Metaphor of switching back and forth in Wright Mills (1959) and in Umberto Eco (2015)
- A switch between focal (the goal) and subsidiary (the particulars) awareness; works at a tacit level (Polanyi, 1958)



# So when it works

- It is a revelation - it all falls into place
- Captures a central idea
- Is personal but constrained by data
- And very difficult to access

# Rachel Carson

Recently some of my thinking on all this has begun to fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle ... a great light is breaking in my mind

'I have a comforting feeling that what I shall now be able to achieve is a synthesis of widely scattered facts, that have not heretofore been considered in relation to each other. It is now possible to build up...a really damning case against the use of these chemicals as they are now inflicted upon us.'  
(Carson 1962)



# So theorising: how to do it?

- Think but also be intuitive
- Notice problems
- Mentally rehearse consequences
- Expand frames of reference
- Draw on knowledge of field (but be profane about it)
- Key metaphor 'shuttling back and forth'
- Compare perspectives

# Swedberg helpful too, up to a point

- Observe and choose something interesting
- Name and formulate the central concept (eg leadership, help, tolerance, learning)
- Build at the central concept (dimensions, definition, domain, characteristics,)
- Complete the tentative theory and provide an explanation (re-work it, broaden it, discuss consequences, causes)

# You and theorising?

How do you go about theorising?

How have your views changed over the year?

How will you discuss theorising in your work?

# Go to

Blog post at

- <https://wordpress.com/post/mickhammond.blog/818>

Slippery Fish site

- Pass word: Slipperyfish all lower case
- <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/current/socialtheory>