

Higher Education Close Up 5: Think Pieces

This is one of four 'think pieces' offered by the Keynote Speakers at the HECU5 conference, which is to be held at Lancaster University 20-22nd July 2010. The theme of the conference is Questioning Theory-Method Relations in Higher Education Research and these pieces are intended to act as the starting point for a conversation about research into higher education, which conference participants can continue by submitting a proposal to present a paper or a symposium at the conference. Further details can be found on the conference website: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/events/hecu5/index.htm>

Wicked Issues in Situating Theory in Close Up Research

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This think piece is divided into three sections:

1. The argument that theory is important in empirical research
2. That much theory use is poor in educational research
3. And that we need to make careful, informed, decisions in choosing appropriate theory in relation to the particular nature of the close up research to be undertaken.

First some conceptual ground-clearing:

Concepts

'Wickedity'

The term 'wicked' in the sense being used here was coined in 1973 (Rittel and Webber) and refers to issues or problems that have the following characteristics: each example of the problem is unique – there are no algorithms to follow to solutions; they are ill-understood; there are many causal levels and so have the characteristics of complexity (Blackman et al, 2006). Both *problems* and *issues* can have the characteristics of 'wickedity' (a term coined by Bore and Wright, 2009 to avoid the associations of 'wickedness'). In educational research a wicked *problem* is one that is not only ill-defined but one where different parties have different, but quite clear, ideas about what the problem actually is (Briggs, 2007). Tameness, by contrast, means that problems and issues are clearly defined and relatively easily solved by technical-rational algorithms or even by single solutions.

The 'wickedness' in my title refers to the various issues about the application of theory in close up research, for which there are no simple solutions or algorithms to help the researcher, instead they require careful reflection on their own terms.

Of course another reading of the title, using modern idiom, suggests that such issues are interesting and to be enjoyed, and I wouldn't want to bracket out that reading.

'Theory'

Theory has the following characteristics:

- it uses a set of interconnected concepts to classify the components of a system and how they are related
- this is used to develop a set of systematically and logically related propositions that depict some aspect of the operation of the world
- it claims to provide an explanation for a range of phenomena by illuminating causal connections
- in the hypothetico-deductive model at least, good theory should provide predictions (reducing uncertainty about the outcome of a specific set of conditions) and should be corrigible – it should be possible to disconfirm or jeopardize it through observations of the world
- and locates social processes in wider structures
- and guides research interventions

Theory is often thought of in terms of big, clear, explicit statements: for example the general theory of relativity, or Marxist theory. But of course we operate on the basis of theory in our everyday lives: it is impossible to escape the gravitational pull of theory. To think otherwise is simply naïve inductivism.

The same is true in research. Despite the etymology of the term, data are not 'given' but are 'contrived' with the inevitable help of concepts and theory (Merton, 1949). Most difficult of all to escape (because normalisation lends them invisibility) are what Gouldner (1970, 31-33) calls domain assumptions, which might include, for example:

dispositions to believe that [women and] men are rational or irrational; that society is precarious or fundamentally stable; that social problems will correct themselves without planned intervention...[Domain assumptions] are an aspect of the larger culture that is most intimately related to the postulations of theory....they are often resistant to 'evidence'....to understand the character of [a thesis] we have to understand the background assumptions with which it operates.

Dominant discourses can also influence ways of seeing, and these can also be invisible to those using them - it takes 'work' to counter them (Trowler, 2001).

To talk in this way is not to automatically adopt a relativist ontology or a dismissive attitude towards the need to establish robustness of research:

The influences, however deep, of theories upon [people's] perceptions or understanding is one thing; the claim that there are no theory-independent objects of perception and understanding is another.

Similarly, the influence of theories upon what [people] may count as valid or consistent is one thing; the claim that validity and consistency are theory-dependent is another. (Lukes, 1973, p 236)

So, theory is everywhere. But it is often tacit, untested. As Ball (1995, 265-6) argues:

...the absence of [explicit] theory leaves the researcher prey to the unexamined, unreflexive preoccupations and dangerously naïve ontological and epistemological *a priori*s...

Now to move on to the substance of my argument.

The importance of theory in educational research

There is an argument that the use of theory in empirical research is like mist on spectacles: it obscures more than it illuminates (Shaw and Crompton, 2003). However I would entirely disagree, if only for the reason that it is always better to have explicit theory to edge out the sort of tacit theory that inevitably exists anyway.

Using explicit theory in empirical research, at its best, does the following things:

- illuminates 'reality' – simplifying and identifying what's important, suggesting how things relate to each other, highlighting causality, providing explanations. Patton says that “causal inferences flash as lightning bolts in stormy controversies” (1997, p 216). He is right. Better that these inferences are carefully considered and structured with some established degree of robustness.
- develops hypotheses which can then guide questions, methodology and methods. (ie very much prior to the stage of using theory to illuminate data, or data to test theory)
- makes explicit sets of propositions and so renders them amenable to critique
- takes research beyond being simply descriptions - 'abstracted empiricism' – and avoids a 'market research' approach which is rooted in one context only and describes correlations but offers no explanations
- theory therefore allows even single case study research to 'generalise to theory' (Yin, 2008), to engage in theory-building and the move from substantive to formal theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) - theory about the particular to larger scale theory. Martyn Hammersley deals with this in his keynote speech, and like me he argues for greater reflectiveness by researchers.
- good explicit theory can counter dominant discourses, foster criticality (Ball, 1995, 265-6):

Theory is a vehicle for 'thinking otherwise', it is a platform for 'outrageous hypotheses' and for 'unleashing criticism'. Theory is destructive, disruptive and violent. It offers a language for challenge, and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others. It provides a language of rigour and irony rather than contingency. The purpose of such theory is

to de-familiarise present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary, and to open up spaces for the invention of new forms of experience

This may be going to far, but at the very least as Deming says:

Without theory, experience has no meaning....one has no questions to ask. Hence, without theory, there is no learning. (1993, p 105)

The need for better thinking about theory in educational research

Tight's work (2004) has shown that much work in higher education research is theory-poor: in the majority of cases any theoretical perspective is only implicit, and broader engagement with theory is absent. Tooley and Darby, (1998, p 67) criticise non-cumulation in educational research, and this is certainly true of HE research too – there are a lot of individual studies unconnected with each other. The use of appropriate theory would go some way to countering this. They also criticise the tendency of educational researches to defer to a small number of theorists (Bourdieu is mentioned) for no good reason other than the fact that others do likewise and these theorists are considered 'eminent'. There is, they argue, 'adulation of great thinkers, (pp 56-62). Ball (1995) refers to this as the 'mantric' use of theory, and Dale (1992) 'theory by numbers'. Eminence-based practice in research is certainly a problem, and it includes the use of sometimes poor theory and ill-defined concepts (like 'habitus', or 'culture') as well as the substantiation of argument simply by reference to the (theoretical) work of such people.

Abell and Reyniers, (2000) make a similar argument to mine. They use the example of Castells (2000) to argue that "social theory has failed intellectually" (p739) but has the trappings of success. They argue for example that his writing conceals the obvious behind florid idiom (a point made more generally many years ago by Andreski in *Social Sciences as Sorcery*) and that ill-defined concepts are made to fit the argument (in another field, the concept of 'community of practice' falls into this category, I would argue). Not only Castells is culpable. It is certainly time for a wakeup call, and not only in the area of close up research in higher education.

Choosing appropriate theory for close up research

Like Martyn Hammersley, I am arguing for greater reflectivity among researchers, in my case about their use of theory. I offer in brief some guiding principles for choosing good theory, or developing theory:

1. Be clear about the purposes of theory. Sibeon (2007) distinguishes between 'sensitizing' theory and frameworks as well as substantive theory. Sensitizing theory gives new perspectives on habitual practices: better ways of conceptualising the world.
2. Be critical of theory: "In our fieldwork we do not look for confirmations but for theory's refutations. We need first the courage of our convictions, then the courage to challenge our convictions, and finally the imagination to sustain our courage with theoretical reconstruction." (Burawoy, 1998, p 20)

3. Try to span the levels of analysis. There is generally a lack of integration between mezo and micro levels of analysis. The public policy literature for example operates on the levels of whole organizations, professions and middle range theory, while close up research like ours operates at the micro level. Practitioners consistently highlight the level of interpersonal relations when discussing coordination and collaboration. They give pride of place to the micro. But the danger is that they miss structural conditioning of behaviour, and the close up researcher is in danger of being drawn into this. What is needed is both theoretical explanation of collaborative behaviour at this level and a way of spanning the mezo and micro levels of explanation. The spanning of levels of analysis is a fundamental challenge to social science.
4. Use data to test/ refine/ develop theory, and use theory to interrogate data, to organize/ explain/ order it, but be clear about which you are doing, when. "Good social science uses facts to inspire theory and/or to check the empirical validity of a theory" say Abell and Reyniers (2000, p 749). And good social science is clear about what it's doing.
5. And as Paul Ashwin argues (2009, p 131-132), ensure that the theoretical perspective you adopt is appropriate in two ways: there is internal consistency between the different positions you adopt, conceptually, theoretically and methodologically; and that the theoretical approach is fit for the purpose you are using it for.

Of course personal preferences, affinities, disciplinary trends will also creep in. The key thing is to interrogate any decision made, and to be ready to make and remake the decisions again:

Only by re-solving the problem repeatedly, in each context, might we begin to gain, and re-gain repeatedly, an understanding of wicked problems in the social domain and an avoidance of the stresses and misery occasioned by inappropriately providing tame solutions to wicked problems. (Bore and Wright, 2009, p 254)

'Stress and misery' may be overstating the effects in higher education research. Nonetheless there are serious deleterious consequences to applying tame solutions to wicked issues even there. It is important to carefully consider how and why we are using theory, why we make the choices we do. It's important too not to have one's professional identity become bound by a particular theory so that to undermine it becomes a threat to ourselves.

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