Thinking with Theory

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Introduction

• What is theory?

• ‘a model’

• ‘rules of inference’

• ‘a coherent structure of interrelated concepts’ that help us to understand and explain social phenomena’
(discipline) Theory
My framework * "Container"
Architecture of ideas

Intersects with methodology
Structure to start building

Idea that can be tested/applied

Conceptual framework

Lens

Way of thinking about a particular subject

Belief systems
Use of Theory

Theory can and often does function to provide comforting and apparently stable identities for beleaguered academics in an increasingly slippery world.

Theory can serve to conjure up its own anterior norms and lay its dead hand upon the creativity of the mind. Too often in educational studies, theory becomes no more than a mantric reaffirmation of belief rather than a tool for thinking otherwise (Ball, 2006, *Education Policy and Social Class*, p. 64)
Fear of Theory

• Theory as “a scheme of ideas that attempts to both describe and explain a particular set of events, practices” or a phenomenon (Simon, Teaching against the grain, 1992, p. 80)

• “Provocative space of fear rather a hope-engendering space” (Simon, p. 81)
Theory and Power

• Integral connection between knowledge and power – experienced as “a form of symbolic violence” (Simon, p. 85)
• Theory as a regime of truth
• Sociological imagination and the rejection of grand theories and abstracted empiricism (C. Wright Mills)
I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing (Teaching to Transgress, 1994, p. 60)
Living in childhood without a sense of home, I found a place of sanctuary in “theorizing”, in making sense out what was happening. I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently. This lived experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, becomes a place where I worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away (Teaching to Transgress, p. 61)
Critical Social Theory

• Theory as a powerful tool:  
  [It] allows us to plan research that connects the ways in which social actors and conditions inside of school buildings, districts, and legislative offices are shaped and changed by what happens outside of classrooms, offices, and the official chambers (Theory and Educational Research, p. 3)

• Theoretically informed empiricism (Ayon, 2009, Theory and Educational Research, Routledge)
Chris’s Story as a Narrative Case

- Chris’s story: Narrative voice and theory in educational research
- Who is Chris?
- What was the study about and what was its purpose?
- What was the broader policy and narrative context?
Focus Questions

• As potential narrative researchers how will you represent Chris’s voice?

• What do you want readers to understand about Chris?

• What role will your own voice play in generating a narrative about Chris’s experience?

• What role might your use of particular theories or conceptual frameworks play in your interpretive practices?
“When it comes to interpreting narratives heard during interviews, narrative researchers begin with narrators’ voices and stories, thereby extending the narrator-listener relationship into the interpretive process … rather than locating distinct themes across interviews, narrative researchers listen first to the voices within each narrative” (p. 663).

Narrative researchers are concerned in their rendering of interview data to capture “complexity and multiplicity within narrators’ voices” … narrative researchers listen to the narrator’s voices – to the subject positions, interpretive practices, ambiguities, and complexities – within each narrator’s story (p. 663).

Thinking with Theory

- “Voices cannot survive without theorizing and cannot be left to stand on their own” (Weis & Fine)

- What sort of stories will be told about Chris?

- What details will be emphasized or foregrounded?

- How are power structures implicated at the personal level in this boy’s life?

- How might critical social theories be used as a tool for making sense of power relations at the individual and institutional level?
Different Theoretical Perspectives

• Critical Masculinities and Feminist Analytic perspectives (Connell, Hill-Collins, Butler)
• Social class (Bourdieu and Fraser)
• Critical race theories (Leonardo)
• Queer theories (Bill Pinar and Deborah Britzman)
• Phenomenology and questions of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty)
• Intersectional analytic frameworks (Anthias)
The Case of Epistemic Violence


• Employing different conceptual frameworks for representing transsexual subjects:
  1. Hermaphroditic
  2. Sex-gender misalignment
  3. Queer
  4. Material embodiment

• Purpose is to “explore how each might function in emancipating gender from heteronormativity” (p. 104)
Conclusion

• Intellectual labour of working with theory

• Recognition of simultaneously grasping both the limits and possibilities of interpretive frameworks

• Realization that we can only ever offer partial accounts – meaning or truth can never be fully determined
‘Working the Hyphen’

“Working the hyphen means creating occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and is not “happening between”, within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence”

“No need to hear your voice when I can talk better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me your pain. I want to know your story. And then tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now at the centre of my talk” (hooks, 1990, *Yearning, race, gender, and cultural politics*, pp. 151-2).