Reconciling Definitions of Theory: A Critical Examination of Conceptual Variances

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Abstract- *Theory is the mainstay of intellectual pursuit and remains disputable within the various academic traditions. It is defined differently depending on disciplinary orientation, epistemological stance, and methodological commitment. This article draws a critical review of the divergent perspectives that Wacker, Galtung, Cornelissen et al., Weick, and Thomas have brought regarding what constitutes a theory. It pits positivist approaches to testability with formal definition and methodological rigor against interpretivist and constructivist views which emphasize creativity, dynamism, and practical relevance. Whereas Wacker and Galtung see theory as a structured empirical building, Cornelissen et al. along with Weick lean toward theorizing as an evolving imaginative process. Scholars of Thomas ilk, root for a pragmatic perspective favoring the usefulness of theory in explaining real life challenges. Notwithstanding the divergent epistemological variations in their outlook on what theory is, these scholars are in agreement on the critical role it plays in advancing the body of knowledge. An evaluation of various paradigms, brings to the fore the multifaceted nature of theory to be both systematic and fluid, abstract and applicable with its dynamic nature, which ensures its indispensable role in research and application.*

Index Terms- *Conceptual Frameworks, Epistemology, Interpretivism, Positivism, Pragmatism, Theory*

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of theory has long elicited diverse interpretations within the academic community, with no universally accepted definition or application. Its meaning and use are often shaped by the disciplinary lenses through which it is viewed. As Thomas (2017) asserts, scholars from various fields bring distinct assumptions and expectations to the concept of theory, making it a subject of enduring debate.

Despite disagreements, certain foundational elements recur: theories are often seen as frameworks that describe phenomena, define relationships among variables, and enable prediction or explanation. Galtung (1985) describe theory as a system of assumptions and logical inferences, underscoring its essence in guiding systematic inquiry.

This paper critically examines an array of scholarly positions on the nature of theory. Drawing on both positivist and interpretivist traditions, it explores key dimensions of theory: formal definition, methodological rigor, the process of theorizing, and practical utility. Through a comparative analysis of major contributions in the literature, this study aims to reconcile conceptual variances and articulate a multidimensional understanding of theory.

At its core, a theory can be understood as a set of interconnected propositions intended to explain or predict phenomena. It provides an intellectual framework upon which empirical research can be structured and interpreted (Kerlinger, 1986). Nachimias and Nachimias (1996) weighs in by expressing it as a framework for organizing knowledge and guiding empirical research. However, these definitions are straightforward, upon closer scrutiny through different lenses they give rise to complex analogies and constructs.

Crotty (1998) underscores a fundamental divergence in how theory is conceived across research paradigms. Within the positivist tradition, theory is typically valued for its clarity, precision, and empirical verifiability. Positivist scholars tend to evaluate theories based on their explanatory power,

internal coherence, and capacity to generate testable hypotheses fostering objectivity and generalizability. In contrast, constructivist and interpretivist perspectives embrace a more fluid and contextual understanding of theory. Rather than viewing theory as a fixed set of propositions, these scholars emphasize the interpretive processes through which theoretical insights emerge, shaped by interpretation, social interaction, and historical context. Theory, in this view, more of lived realities as opposed to universality of laws.

Theory serves many purposes. It can help explain causes, guide what should be done, or offer tools for understanding complex social issues. As Crotty (1998) notes, theory is not just a final product of research it is also a process that continues to grow through reflection and critical thinking.

II. CONTRASTING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Wacker (1998) express theory as a logically consistent set of relationships among defined constructs, emphasizing generalizability, testability, and coherence. His later work in Wacker (2004) elaborates on the importance of formal conceptual definitions, advocating for precision in the formulation of theoretical constructs and variables.

Wacker's perspective aligns with the positivist tradition, where scientific validity rests on empirical testing and methodological discipline. He contends that without clear definitions and systematic logic, theory risks becoming ambiguous and unscientific. For Wacker, theory must not only describe a domain but also serve as a verifiable framework that informs empirical research and prediction.

Galtung (1985) shares Wacker's empirical orientation but introduces important distinctions in the types of theory. He differentiates between explanatory theories which establish causal relationships and normative theories which offer prescriptive guidance. Central to his argument is the methodological process of theory construction, wherein assumptions are structured through logical inference and verification. Galtung's emphasis is premised on the structured development of theory as a tool for guiding

systematic research. His perspective reinforces the notion that methodological rigor is essential for theory to be meaningful, especially in the social sciences where conceptual clarity often competes with contextual complexity.

Departing from rigid definitions, Cornelissen et al. (2021) conceptualize theorizing as an evolving and imaginative activity. Their interpretive approach emphasizes abstraction, metaphor, and the continual reframing of constructs. Rather than viewing theory as a finished product, they present it as an iterative process shaped by scholarly discourse.

This view challenges the rigidity of traditional world view on theory and allows for greater responsiveness to social and organizational contexts. Cornelissen et al. (2021) argue that theory gains relevance not from rigid structure but from its adaptability and resonance with complex realities. Theorizing, in their view, is a reflective and creative practice.

Weick (1989) builds on this constructivist tradition by emphasizing the imaginative dimensions of theorizing. He likens theory development to "disciplined imagination," wherein scholars generate insights through analogy, abstraction, and reinterpretation. For Weick, the value of a theory lies not in its precision but in its ability to provoke unique understandings and open new avenues of inquiry.

His approach aligns with Cornelissen et al. (2021) in treating theorizing as an emergent process but differs in its emphasis on innovation. Weick (1998) challenges the assumption that structure and testability are the hallmarks of good theory. Instead, he promotes theoretical pluralism, advocating for creativity as a legitimate and necessary element of academic theorizing.

Thomas (2017) offers a pragmatic perspective on theory, underscoring its utility in addressing real-world issues. He argues that a theory's value should be judged by its practical application rather than its adherence to rigid methodological standards. This perspective aligns with the interpretive tradition but shifts focus from theoretical uniqueness to functional effectiveness.

While Thomas does not dismiss the value of structure or empirical support, he contends that theory should ultimately serve to inform practice and decision-making. His contribution bridges the gap between academic theorizing and applied research, reinforcing the idea that theory is meaningful only insofar as it addresses human concerns.

III. SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

The perspectives discussed reflect three major conceptual orientations: formal-empirical, interpretive-constructivist, and pragmatic-functional. While navigating the diverse landscapes of theory, it is imperative to consider how different traditions shape our understanding of knowledge. To the formal empirical theorists, structure, coherence and testability carry the day any time. A position advanced by scholars like Wacker (1998, 2004) and Galtung (1985). To this group, theory is not only a scientific tool but also a platform to structure knowledge and guide empirical research. On the other hand, is the view that theory is more dynamic and continuously evolving, a perspective advanced by interpretive-constructivists represented by scholars like Cornelissen et al. (2021) and Weick (1998).This perception corresponds directly with the facts, particularly in African settings, where meaning is derived from discussions, traditions, and social experiences. Therefore, the theoretical procedure from this viewpoint can be seen through an evolving process that researchers and their societies shape.

These orientations vary in several aspects but they meet at key dimensions: the indispensability of theory in framing and structuring scientific investigation and building the body of knowledge. It should be able to transcend the abstract into application while ensuring creativity alongside scientific rigor. Therefore, theory is a construct with multiple facets reflecting various intellectual viewpoints.

Researchers should not apply theory as a one-size-fits-all approach, pigeon-holing it into constricted views of tradition. They need to access the wealth of different perspectives offered by diverse schools of thought, mixing analytical rigor with creative thinking and an eye toward social relevance. Only then will our theories be able to address the real-world situations we are trying to understand and ultimately transform.

CONCLUSION

Debates that have never ceased over the very definition and role of theory attest to its basic importance in any intellectual inquiry. From positivist considerations of structure and testability to interpretive demands of creativity and contextual sensitivity, demonstrate that theory is a rich evolving concept. Reconciliation of diverse views is demanded by both theory building and practice.

These views don't contradict each other. They add up to give us a better picture of what theory is and what it should be. Accepting this diversity leads to finer, stronger, and more meaningful research. As the nature of study changes, so will the ways we understand and use theory making sure it stays important in an ever changing academic field.

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