



Understanding social problems through a theory-research nexus approach

Francis O Barasa

Department of Sociology, Psychology & Anthropology, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

Abstract

In the last four centuries, from the days of Classical Sociological thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim and immediately after the Middle Ages, the importance of Sociological theories has been growing steadily. Both classical and contemporary theories have provided a theoretical orientation that has made it possible to understand society and its social problems through social the theory- research nexus. Social science research enables us to understand the intricate web of society and the problems that surround it. Although a number of scholars do not use theory in carrying out research, the theory-research nexus is important if we have to understand abstract social problems especially in a changing and dynamic society. Research generates new knowledge and information and through its findings, it extends and widens our understanding of social issues by gaining new insights into social phenomena. However, the understanding of social phenomena can be substantially enhanced through proper application of relevant theories. The objective of this paper was to assess the relationship between theory and research and the use of theory-research nexus in the understanding of social problems. Using secondary data, this paper provided an in-depth analysis of the importance of social theories in guiding social research. It concludes that theory, is important in social science research work given its wide application. The study recommends the use of that theory in social science research. The study is relevant to young scholars who have interest in understanding social problems by carrying out research.

Keywords: Social theory, Framework, Research, Concepts, Relationships, Phenomenon

Introduction

Throughout the history of scholarship and research, a number of theories have been developed for use. In social sciences, scholars have developed theories that have formed the basis for understanding social dynamics including social problems. Society is complex and the social relationships therein form an intricate web that requires scientific research to understand. Theories in disciplines such as anthropology, education, economics, psychology, criminology and most recently sociology are all positioned to enable the understanding of the complex social world (Creswell, 2009). Theories may be classified as macro or micro. Macro theories are broader in scope and encompass an extended range of laws while micro theories have a narrow frame of reference and focus on a limited range of phenomena (Abraham, 1981). For instance, in sociological discourse, there are a number of theoretical orientations that examine the complex nature of interpersonal relationships to understand society the social dynamics of society. They include; functional, conflict, exchange, interpretive and structuralist. They underlie specific perspectives in the field of sociology and are most widely spread and influential in terms of use and application (Tuner, 1987). According to Haralambos (2008), functionalism perspective is prominent in the work of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), two of the founding fathers of the discipline. Functionalism developed by Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and refined by Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) is concerned with the organic analogy of society as a set of interconnected parts which, together form a whole. The basic unit of analysis in functionalism is society and its parts are better understood primarily in terms of their relationship

to the whole (Haralambos, 2008). For instance, if one institution in society such as the family dysfunctions, then other institutions such as law enforcement agencies will be constrained because of the rising level of lawlessness. Other disciplines such as psychology, criminology and anthropology have specific theories that explain society at different levels of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, our way of looking at the world depends on the theoretical perspective one is using. Researchers approach their study with certain assumptions, they emphasize particular research methods with particular questions they want answered. This then means that their research is based on the ways of looking at things that theories advance. Theories lay these out in an explicit and systematic way (Wallace & Wolf, 2005). Depending therefore on the area of study, a researcher may employ one of the theoretical orientations or a combination of theories from a number of social science disciplines for his study.

A theory has a specific role in social science research. It is used by a researcher to explain how people feel about a social problem and how it affects them. It is essential for effect social change processes. Proponents of the importance of theorizing such as Comte believe that society and its social problems can only be understood through theorizing (Ritzer, 1996). Theory provides a deeper understanding of what is going on in society. With this understanding, programmes of action can then be meaningful if they are rooted in a full analysis of current circumstances that have brought them about (Maynard, 1989). Today society is faced with many social problems that include alcoholism, child abuse and neglect, drug addiction, human trafficking and exploitation, gender

violence, terrorism, white collar crime and cyber crime. To deal with these social problems, there is need to theorize. This will then provide a framework for a scientific research. At times theories may have been used, but they are incomplete because they do not address potentially valuable variables or categories of interest to the researcher. A researcher may therefore develop a grounded theory to provide a general framework for understanding the problem at hand and how it affects people (Creswell, 2013). Whichever way a researcher wants to look at a social problem, a theory is necessary.

Objective of the study

- 1) To assess the relationship between theory and research

Discussion

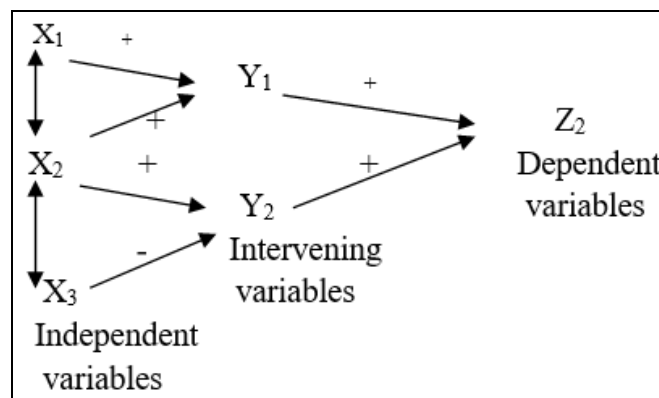
What is a theory?

A theory has been defined by Ward (1974) as a system of concepts, definitions and propositions which shows a relationship between two or more selected aspects of a phenomena from which testable hypotheses can be derived. Creswell (2009) on the other hand defines it as an interrelated set of constructs or variables formed into propositions or hypotheses that specify the relationship among variables in terms of magnitude or direction. These definitions are compatible with Kerlinger's (1979) which states that a theory is a set of interrelated constructs,

definitions and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables with the purpose of explaining some natural phenomena.

Although Kerlinger's definition is used more frequently, other scholars such as Haralambos & Holborn (2008), state that a theory is a set of ideas that explain how aspects of a society function. It comprises propositions that are couched in terms of defined concepts which must be consistent with each other and from which existing generalizations can be deductively derived. These propositions must be fruitful as to show the way for further generalizations so as to increase the scope of knowledge (Timasheff & Theodorson, 1976). In a study that employs a theory, a set of concepts, propositions, definitions and hypotheses are necessary because they constitute essential ingredients of a particular theory being used. Lastly, it can be stated that a theory is a way of making sense out of a disturbing situation or a social problem and a therefore a device for guiding the study in discovering more powerful generalizations and plausible explanations about social phenomena (Kaplan, 1964).

Theories are stated in several ways: First, they are stated in form of interconnected hypotheses. For example, the higher one's rank, the greater one's conformity. Secondly they are stated it as a series of ifs and lastly they may be presented as a visual model which enables the translation of variables into a visual picture (Creswell, 2009).



Source: Creswell (2009, p54).

Fig 1: Three independent variables influence a single dependent variable mediated by two intervening variables

A theory as a visual model has been used in research. For instance, Blalock (1991), advocates for the use of casual models in order to visualize the interconnections of the variables as shown in Figure 1.1. Turner (1995) states that in sociology, models are constructed to emphasize the casual connections among properties in the universe, and they are designed to show how changes in the values of one set of variables are related to changes in the values of other variables. For example, the level of education and income. He points out that casual models are drawn to provide a more detailed interpretation of an empirical generalization. In some cases casual models are presented as a way of portraying complex sets of the connections among the variables. For example, Macionis 2004, presents a theoretical analysis of politics by using both pluralist model (closely associated with structural-functional theory which sees power as dispersed among many competing interest groups) and power-elite model (based on social-conflict theory which argues that the upper class holds most of

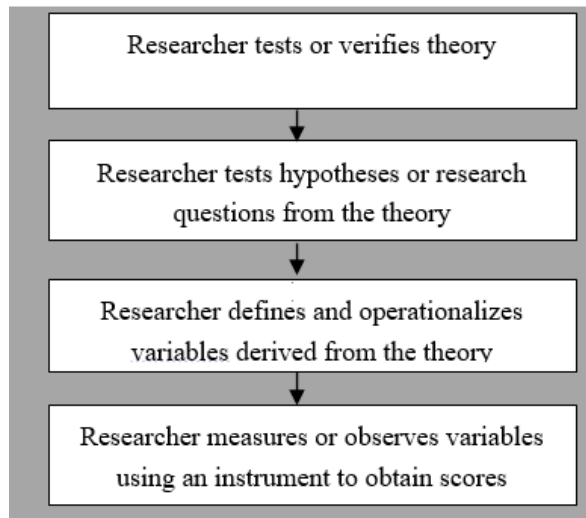
society's wealth, prestige and power) to help understand the intricate nature of power relations in society.

Theories operate at different levels: Micro-level theory seeks to explain behaviour at the level of the individual or family environment (e.g. frustration, aggression hypothesis etc). Meso-level theory seeks to explain the interactions of micro-level organisations (e.g. social institutions, communities etc). If we use religion as an example of a social institution, we can visualize how religion is socially constructed through various rituals such as prayer or Easter to construct religion as sacred. Macro-level theory seeks to explain behaviour at the level of large groups of people (e.g. ethnicity, class, gender etc). Most of the Psychologists use micro-level theory in their research because they study individuals and how those individuals interact with their environment. However, micro-theories are not confined to psychology alone. They are also used by sociologists. Phenomenological sociologists, for example examine phenomenon from a micro-level or at the individual level. A case in point is where an individual outlines the meaning he

imparts to situations in everyday life. He focuses on the individual's own definition of the situation in which he is in (Wallace, 2006). Using ethnography, researchers may study the way a group shares its culture and how such culture makes sense to the entire group (Creswell, 2013).

A researcher opting to use quantitative approach may use a theory deductively by placing it at the beginning of the proposal. This can be done with the objective of testing or verifying a theory rather than developing it. According to

Creswell (2009), in such a case a theory is advanced, data collected to test it and reflects on its confirmation or disconfirmation by the results. The theory becomes a framework for the entire study, an organizing model for research questions or hypotheses and for data collection procedure as shown in Figure 1.2 below. The recommended way to go is for the researcher to introduce the theory early in the study, most appropriately in the literature review section.

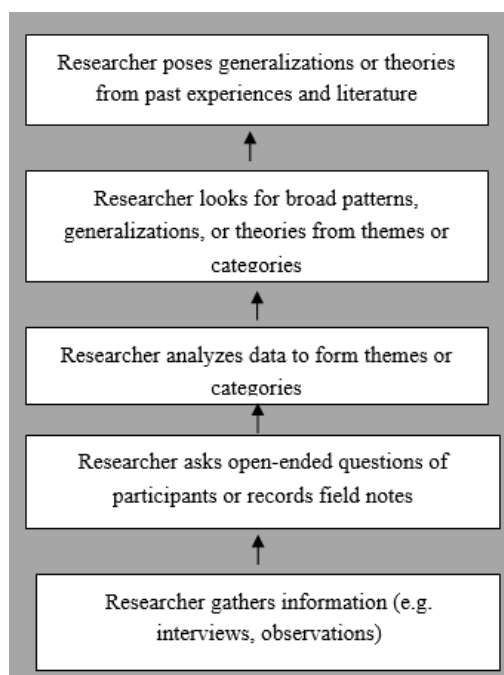


Source: Creswell (2009)

Fig 2: The Deductive approach typically used in Quantitative research

In a qualitative study a theory may be used in various ways. First, it may be used as a broad explanation for behaviour and attitudes which then requires variables, constructs and hypotheses (Creswell, 2009). For example, ethnographers employ cultural themes or "aspects of culture" (Wolcott, 1999, p. 113) to study in qualitative projects, such as social control, language, stability and change, or social organizations, such as kinship or families. Although

researchers may not refer to them as theories, they provide broad explanations that anthropologists use to study the culture-sharing behaviour and attitudes of people (Creswell, 2009). Second, a researcher in qualitative studies, may use theory inductively. Inductive approach is the process of building from data to broad themes and to a generalized model or theory (Creswell, 2009). This logic is captured in Figure 1.3 below:



Source: Creswell, 2009, p. 63).

Fig 3: The inductive Logic of Research in a Qualitative study

In recent years some sociologists, for example, have questioned the rationale for such a rigid division between quantitative and qualitative approaches by advocating a combining the two approaches (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). This approach calls for use of more than one theory

The Role of Theory in Social Science Research

Social Research involves the collection, exploration and reporting of information about people and societies (Yates, 2004). Mugenda (1990) adds that research is a process of arriving at effective solutions to problems through systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. There are many types of research but the overarching divisions in social research are qualitative and quantitative research. In qualitative research the aim is to help the investigators to interpret and understand the actor's reasons for social action and the way they construct their lives and the meanings they attach to it including understanding the social context (Sarantakos, 1993). On the other hand, quantitative research is geared towards documenting subject attributes expressed in quantity, extent or strength as well as guaranteeing among other things, objectivity, accuracy and reliability. The purpose is to measure variables and produce figures which will allow judgements as to the status of the variables in question and allow further processing and comparison and therefore permit replicability (Sarantakos, 1993). A theory might then appear in a research to help in explaining or predicting how variables are interrelated Labovitz and Hagedorn (1971).

Theory plays (John, 2004) (Macionis J John, 2004) different but complimentary roles in social science research. It has the ability to guide research and narrow down the range of facts to be studied (Abraham, 1981). If the right theory is applied to a specific phenomenon it is capable of providing the direction to social investigation. It also has the capacity to help in isolating the variables to be measured in a study while at the same time overlooking others (Abraham, 1981). Furthermore, theory has the unique function of narrowing down the broad area of study to enable a researcher pick a small area of concentration. For instance, many types of conflicts in society occur because of different reasons. For instance, a researcher may want to establish why and how such conflicts occur, how they affect both the individuals and the organizations and what consequences they pose to the entire organization. A researcher may choose to use Dahrendorf's conflict theory of society to narrow down and understand the frequent conflicts occurring in organizations. Dahrendorf's theory of conflict arose out of a critical evaluation of the work of Karl Marx (Dahrendorf, 1959). According to him, conflicts are no longer based upon the existence of the two classes identified by Marx, nor are they based upon economic divisions but they are concerned with authority (Haralambos, 2008). He argues that social institutions systematically generate groups with conflicting interests that predisposes them to inherent tendency to conflict (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). He further states that the distribution of power is the crucial determinant of social structures in which conflict is inherent. In his view, the essence of power is the control of sanctions which enables those who possess power to give orders and obtain what they want from those without power (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Besides power, conflict of interest is evident in all spheres of development.

Dahrendorf argues that the power different groups as well as possess is used coercively to the disgust of those being coerced. As a consequence of this overt act, social conflict will take place systematically among groups that enjoy authority over those who do not possess any authority (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Conflict is therefore evident at the family, group, institutional and societal levels. By focussing on power among competing interest groups, a social science researcher may also carry out a study of how power is distributed and how it gives rise to social conflict. It is also possible to study and understand the relationship between external conflict and a group's identity, consciousness and strength by using theory as a framework (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). This conflict position has also been explained by Lewis Coser who argues that conflicts that are internal and those that are external to a group can define a group, establish its identity, maintain its stability and increase its cohesion (Wallace & Wolf, 2006).

Ethnic identification in Africa is very strong (Kimenyi, 1997) and as Collier (2001) argues, tribe and kin groups are the most powerful levels of social identity. The loyalty to an ethnic group rather than to the state is a bane of many African states resulting in internally displaced persons as a result of conflict (Rowntree, 2003). This tribal identification is an important way of solving collective action problems (Kimenyi, 1998). This identification and cohesion was at play during the ethnic violence in Kenya in 1991 where organized bands of arsonists targeted certain farms populated by different ethnic communities including Luo, Luhya and Kikuyu and Kisii (Collier, 2005). Therefore, external conflict strengthens a group's identity and cohesiveness. The study of conflict is therefore possible when using theory as a framework.

Furthermore, a theory helps in predicting facts. Based on intuitive knowledge, historical analysis and observation on social uniformities, a theoretical system provides a secure ground for prediction. Usually expressed in tendency-statements such theoretical system postulates and increases the fruitfulness of research by providing leads for further inquiry (Abrahams, 1981). The laws of a given theory help to make predictions and to control events. For example, because of well developed theories in meteorology, accurate predictions about rainfall patterns in different geographical areas can be made (Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999). These laws can only be derived from doing research on the social world or doing empirical research. Social Psychologists can make predictions about behaviour patterns of a given client. This is made possible by use of drive theories of aggression in a study. The frustration-aggression hypothesis which stems from the drive theory of aggression states that frustration is one of the factors that can potentially lead to aggression (Baron & Byrne, 2003).

It has been observed through scientific study that frustration sometimes produces aggression because of a basic link between negative effect (unpleasant feelings) and aggression. In fact, frustration can serve as a powerful determinant of aggression under certain conditions especially when it is viewed as illegitimate or unjustified (Folger & Baron, 1996). Weber's methodology on the study of phenomenon was through the use of causality which means the probability that an event will be accompanied by another event (Ritzer, 2008). He states that the best way for a sociologist to understand a phenomenon is by making probabilistic statements about the relationship between

social phenomena; that is, if x occurs, then it is probable that y will occur. He posits that the goal is to estimate the *degree* to which a certain effect is "favoured" by certain conditions. On the basis of these probabilistic statements it is possible for a researcher to predict and interpret the outcome of a relationship between social phenomena. The Weberian thinking and interest in the question of causality is the linking of Protestant ethic to another system of ideas i.e. the Spirit of capitalism that eventually made modern rational capitalism expand and come to dominate the world. (Ritzer, 2008).

In reaffirming the importance of theory, both functionalists and conflict theorists provide significant approaches to the understanding of social change. When appropriately used to suitable situations, we can predict change in various institutions. It is also possible to predict stability in those institutions within a larger social structure. For instance, Parsons (1902-1979), a leading proponent of structural-functional theory, viewed society as being in a state of equilibrium. By "equilibrium" he meant that society tends toward a state of stability or balance (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). According to his equilibrium model, as changes occur in one part of society, adjustments must be made in other parts. If not, the society's equilibrium will be threatened (Schaefer, 2005). Using this model and reflecting on evolutionary approach of societies, Parsons maintains that the four processes of social change are inevitable. As society evolves, these processes are necessary for the maintenance of stability or equilibrium. The first process is the differentiation which refers to the complexity of social organizations. Parsons believed that differentiation is key to evolution of social systems. Differentiation within social systems would then bring about specialization, innovation and technological development. This would enable society to evolve. The second process of evolutionary change is adaptive up-grading in which social institutions become more specialized in their purposes. For instance, in the medical field we would have physicians specialising in different areas. The third process is inclusion of groups that were previously excluded because of their gender, race, ethnicity and social background and the fourth process that brings in value generalization (Schaefer, 2005).

In contemporary countries such as Kenya, we are witnessing the inclusion of women, the physically challenged, the opening up of democratic space, strengthening of judiciary, a new constitution and a relatively free press. Groups that had been previously excluded from active participation are now making significant contributions to critical areas of development. The inclusion of educated women into the occupational world on an equal basis with men has led to adaptive upgrading because it has released more trained capacity into the system (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). The dominant theme in this model is balance and stability. Society may change but it remains stable through new forms of integration (Schaefer, 2005). Of importance in this integration is the increasing role of people with disabilities, the young people and women. Therefore, by using theory, it is possible to predict change or stability within social institutions. Collins (1986, 1995) a conflict theorist has argued, as far back as 1980, that the Soviet expansionism had resulted in an over-extension of resources, including disproportionate spending on military forces and that such an overextension would strain the regime's stability. He predicted that these incidences would precipitate the

collapse of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union indeed collapsed on the 25th of December, 1991 (Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, 2009).

Theory also provides general orientations and suggests potential problems and fruitful hypotheses (Abraham, 1981). Rational choice theory for example, provides a general orientation that enables a researcher to understand the general direction of action taken by an individual. The theory depicts human beings as rational decision makers particularly in situations of scarcity in the world (Wallace & Wolf 2006). In evaluating the impact of managed healthcare on medical aid focusing on mothers and their children, medical sociologists or researchers in Sociology of Health care use models. An example is the predisposing, reinforcing and enabling causes, in educational diagnosis and evaluation (PRECEDE). This model is applied to a population of Medicaid-eligible mothers to help organize and clarify the research questions and to identify the types of variables the researcher need to consider for the exercises (Muller, 1999). The model is important because it allows assessment at the aggregate level while also providing theoretical concepts. It considers a variety of variables to be used.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, it is certain that the use of theory in research is important. It provides basic concepts for use while directing the researcher towards important research questions. The use of theory in social science research enables us to see the world from a scientific perspective, understand it, explain it and come up with findings that will inform future policy makers. It also, enables a researcher to make sense of the research data while increasing his knowledge of the of the social issues at hand and the broader significance of the data collected. Therefore, theory is important in research because it enables the researcher to work within a specific framework that gives a world view that is predictable.

Recommendations

This paper recommends the use of theory in carrying out social science research. All students of social science research are encouraged to use theory in doing research. Departments charged with the responsibility of policy formulation are also encouraged to employ theory in their early stages while undertaking simple baseline surveys.

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