Chapter 2:

Social theory and methodology in education research: From conceptualisation to operationalisation

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Introduction

Social theory has provided a vital resource for intellectual debate, delivering an impressive panoply of theoretical approaches that have helped broaden the conceptual horizons of education researchers. This commitment to theory has undoubtedly provided scholars with a sharp set of tools via which to interrogate forms of professional and institutional practices. Without such tools, it is difficult to see how the field could offer a critical alternative to the instrumental demands of the educational improvement and what works agendas.

Education researchers are drawn to the transformative potential of social theory, as it offers tools to develop a counter-discourse to prevailing orthodoxies - this function is much prized and understandably so in a field

that is inevitably politicised and wide-open to ideological manipulation. Social theories provide a suitable platform for developing this counter discourse as they share an unquestionable political orientation, while also providing a rich resource of material and concepts drawn from a diverse interdisciplinary base. Social theory comprises of a range of analytical frameworks used to explain social phenomena, borrowing ideas from sociology, philosophy, history, literature, geography, cultural and gender studies, among others.

The discursive element of social theory is especially significant to the education field, as social theory itself is a form of language, a 'language that is able to illuminate, sometimes amplify, the understanding of the world we aim to explore' (Costa et al. 2018, 2). The seemingly endless linguistic resources provided by social theory have greatly enriched the field and have left no corner of education research untouched. That said, it is wise to take stock of this application of theory in education research, and to reflect on key challenges that need to be examined alongside the undoubted achievements of theory-driven applied research. We use this chapter to argue that three issues in particular need special consideration: 1) how to promote hybridised theory and conceptual interdisciplinarity in education research as a counterpoint to monological approaches to theory application; 2) how to encourage forms of critical reflexivity to counteract 'off-the-shelf'

approaches to theory use; and 3) how to elevate the status of theory 'application' as a vital conduit in bridging concepts and research methods.

We argue that these issues need special consideration as the field would ultimately benefit in the shape of greater conceptual originality and methodological rigour. Most importantly, taking fuller advantage of the intellectual 'wide-lens' provided by social theory offers a much-needed vantage point from which to further enhance the quality of theory-driven education research. Before these issues are explored in more depth, it is important to situate theory-driven applied research in its historical context, specifically in relation to the role and status of positivism in education and social science research more generally. This contextualisation helps to illustrate the significance of the issues addressed in this paper from an epistemological and ontological standpoint.

Positivism and research in the social sciences

As a force in social scientific research, positivism developed alongside the birth of capitalism and the industrial revolution, and as a philosophy and method draws heavily on the work of August Comte, the founder of sociology, as well as other 19th century philosophers such as David Hume. While there are numerous offshoots of the theory, key tenets can be identified.

These include the position that all factual knowledge is gained from
experience, and that the analysis of these facts is dependent on the science of
logic and mathematics. Evidence gained from observation and experience has
an exclusive monopoly on this factual knowledge. The task of the social
sciences is to research these social facts and then to develop from these facts
a set of general laws of human behaviour and action, in a similar fashion to
the methods of the natural sciences. This approach was deemed by Comte and
others to be the only viable and logical way to escape the bias and prejudice
of metaphysical and theological conceptions of knowledge, a set of affairs
they viewed as outdated and incompatible with the modern emphasis on
social and technological progress.

These aspects of positivism are well known and often detailed in textbooks
on research methods. But alongside this and for the purpose of this chapter,
the position of theory in positivism is worthy of special note. For positivists,
theory is a secondary offshoot of the predictive effects of scientific method
and is useful to the extent that it allows the researcher to move across data
sets. Theories themselves play second fiddle to observable and verifiable facts
and the data sets that accrue from them. This reflects the ontological
assumption of positivism – that the world exists independently of people's
perceptions and as a result could be investigated as an objective reality with
the right methodological tools. The 'truth' of social behaviour was attainable,

not through abstraction and theory, but by rigorous analysis of data gleaned through sensory experience.

Objectivity, disinterest and detachedness became guiding principles of scientific research, and as the father of modern sociology, Comte went on to have a considerable influence on what was considered appropriate and worthy (social) scientific research in the field. But positivism as a guiding force in fields such as sociology has not gone unchallenged over the decades and in particular has had to deal with its 'epistemological others' (Steinmetz 2005). These others have come thick and fast over the past 150 years, including approaches such as Marxism and psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, postcolonial and gender studies.

A key flaw highlighted by these epistemological others is the conception of sensory experience that is so central to the positivist tradition. Scholars such as Thomas Kuhn (1996) have highlighted the inherent bias that underpins this sensory experience: researchers will inevitably bring with them certain understandings of the world that frame their social observations - observation and interpretation being intertwined. As a result, the prized objectivity of the detached and disinterested observer becomes open to question – the methods of data collection do not exist independently of the values the researcher brings to the research design. So for example in the design of a questionnaire

or a focus group, the kinds of questions that are asked of respondents will themselves be framed by particular ontological and epistemological beliefs.

This is arguably the key debating point when it comes to positivism and its epistemological others - the place of values in humanities and social science research. The notion of a value free science has often been held up as the gold standard of academic research, a vaulted position from which to make grand claims about the purity of research outcomes as well as the political sphere that seeks out research evidence supposedly free from ideological bias. Hence the generous funding for randomly controlled trials (RCTs) in schools in countries such as the UK and US, an approach to research design that positions itself as untainted by values.

But such a view rests on distinctly uneasy foundations, one of which being the problematic assumption that a field such as education is amenable to research analysis using the same tools and approach as that deployed in chemistry or biology. This is a serious error of judgement on the part of researchers, given that education is a decidedly social enterprise and a highly politicised one at that. While it is laudable that researchers aim to depoliticise a field and often view positivist approaches such as RCTs as a way to achieve this, politics and values are part of education's DNA and the denial of this is a form of what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic violence'. This is evident in the design of RCTs, a design that testifies to the fact that this approach is as biased

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as any other and produce 'knowledge based on what is deemed to count as knowledge' (Gale 2018, 211).

Social theory and the positivism debate

This paradigmatic stance inevitably means that positivism and the field of social theory are uneasy bed fellows, to put it mildly. In fact, there is often strong animosity between the two – anti-positivism is an identifiable thread that links numerous social theorists, such as the ones detailed in this book, as well as others such as Theodor Adorno, Donna Haraway, Judith Butler and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. For these authors, there is a political component to theory and theorising that is decidedly at odds with positivism. And for positivism and positivists, the space made available for theory and theorising is minimal – this sidelining of theory speaks to a politics of method and methodology that is an important aspect of this book. Steinmetz (2005, 29) talks of the 'uncanny persistence' of positivism even though it has been besieged by criticism at least since the great positivist debate of the 1960s (see Murphy 2021, chapter 8). Part of this remarkable resilience is down to the prevalence of methodological fetishism, with methods and method training being 'a central site for the reinforcement of positivist hegemony in the social sciences' (Steinmetz 2005, 45).

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This vaulted position of positivism is evident in the details of academic life. It is often the case that for example, when 'researchers attempt to justify their methodology, they often appear to fail to explore the relationships between theory and method as science' (Bartlett 1991, 20). This methodological fetishism can be damaging for the quality of research outcomes, especially the assumption that methods are sufficient in themselves at uncovering meaning. As McCarthy puts it (2001, 231):

> If the method itself forms the objects of perception, defines the logic of analysis, legitimates particular social problems, and justifies the logic of science, then the theories which penetrate beneath the phenomenal appearances into the depth structures of society and call these structures into question are not valid forms of scientific knowledge.

For education researchers, this hegemonic hold on the field can have real world consequences for the quality of research outcomes as the fetish for method overshadows paradigmatic concerns on research design. As Iversson and Skoldberg (2000) (cited in Kumar Gir (2006, 232) put it, 'It is not methods but ontology and epistemology which are the determinants of good social science'.

The status of 'good' social science is what really matters, especially to the aims of this book, as it embodies questions of research design, academic

rigour, originality and significance – all powerful signifiers of quality research. The persistent denial of politics, of theory and values, highlight the shortcomings of positivism as a methodological approach to education research in the 21st century, a historical context is which the politicisation of education and education research is stark and unrelenting. Burawoy (2005, 515) is correct to suggest that positivism is of little value in this rapidly changing world, one in which education institutions are subject to often highly unpredictable forces. These forces do not lend themselves to the scientific detached analysis of positivism, and instead result in the erosion of the 'conditions of the positivist illusion' (Burawoy 2005, 516). Education academics who stick steadfastly to positivist science are placed in a difficult position, as social transformations such a marketisation impinge more and more on their own research environment. University researchers 'can no longer regard ourselves as outside history, projecting a universal knowledge from a non-existent archimedian place. … we have been living in a fool's paradise' (Burawoy 2005, 516).

This fool's paradise is compounded by positivism's conflation of method and meaning, a situation that denies researchers access to the really-useful knowledge of social theory: the
language required to formulate critical questions 'is not available' (McCarthy 2001, 231). Social theory offers such a critical language - hence why it is so valuable but also why it is such a threat to positivist social science.

That said, just because social theory offers this critical alternative does not mean that the field as well as its research applications are immune from critical scrutiny themselves – indeed, critical scrutiny is very much in keeping with social theory's own rationale. An opposition to positivism, while laudable in itself, provides an insufficient basis on which to build a strong case for theory-driven methodologies. This field of interpretive education research needs to develop some common understandings of what this form of research consists of, both its benefits and drawbacks – while positivism casts a long shadow, this should not be used as a reason to avoid a closer investigation of the field, ands to suggest ways forward in order to enhance the quality and rigour od this form of education research. Ensuring that one's own methodological 'house' is in order is a more sustainable way to reclaim phrases such as research 'quality', and 'research rigour' from the hegemonic power of positivist approaches.

What follows is a contribution to this critical scrutiny in the context of education research, starting with a brief elaboration of theory as critical literacy.

Social theory as a form of critical literacy in education research

Language itself is central to the field of social theory as a professional practice. Social theory would struggle to express itself and develop without

the explanatory power that language affords the user. Language not only allows for the communication of theory, it creates and shapes its conceptual architecture – see as examples the concepts of the shared third (Benjamin 2017), the broken middle (Rose 1992), the hollowed-out state (Rhodes 2017). These are excellent examples of how language creates intellectual space for ideas to take shape. They also illustrate how language in the basic form of nouns and adjectives is surprisingly efficient at clarity and conciseness, even if at first sight it may be hard to grasp. Yet, perseverance in acquiring the theoretical language can often result in 'light bulb' moments that give researchers intellectual direction(s) through the newly acquired linguistic standpoint. The language of theory can help thread together the researcher's ontological, epistemological and methodologically approach to help guide their critical enquiry.

In this way, theory offers a form of *critical literacy* for researchers to work with as a core aspect of 'doing' research. As a critical research literacy, theory can equip researchers with research lenses that give research phenomena a perspective from which to 'capture' reality as well as vocabulary for researchers to express their understanding of it. This is an essential step in research practice, one that individuals new to research or those less experienced in theory application can often struggle with when formulating their research and/or operationalising the different elements that compose the research project. When researchers are already well versed with the

knowledge of theory, then the concern shifts to the 'capturing' of reality. The question here then is not one of theoretical framing of what to capture, but a methodological concern of how to do the 'capturing' of reality (Costa et al. 2019). Here, in providing an answer, theory moves from intellectualisation of ideas to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of research through method.

Nevertheless, while its influence in education research has grown and its visibility all too evident, social theory faces a number of obstacles when it comes to realising its transformative potential in the education research field. In the remainder of this chapter we focus on three key issues in particular that need special consideration: 1) the place of hybridised theory and conceptual interdisciplinarity in education research; 2) the importance of critical reflexivity when dealing with social theory and education; 3) the question of theory application in education research design.

1: Hybridised theory and conceptual interdisciplinarity

Social theory is a response to historical events, and historical forms of injustice. The raison d'etre of social theory is to provide explanations for social transformations and their effects and also to account for the lack of change when it comes to issues of equity, freedom and solidarity. It therefore has little interest in identifying some kind of archimedean point via which

society can be judged - this is a thankless task and a waste of intellectual energy. But that said the lack of such an archimedean point has posed difficulties for social theory and has asked questions of its capacity to deliver an effective form of social critique. It is better off without it however as changing historical circumstances cannot accommodate absolute certainties and fixed positions. This is why social theory should be approached as also subject to transformation in that theory should never be regarded as an off the shelf, one size fits all conceptual tool. Rather, it should be considered and used in light of the context that it is needed, hence the term 'theory application'. Theory application implies 'putting something to relevant use', in this case, placing theory at the service of the research phenomenon in need of exploration, understanding and explanation. This applies also to the numerous conceptual apparatuses that have been painstakingly constructed by scholars to help them explain society and its consequences. These theories and the theorists themselves are also products of historical circumstances and are not immune to change. On the contrary, they should be seen as historically contingent and not viewed as unalterable or outside critique. No social theory can or should be considered in such a manner. In this regard, Hope notes that Foucault and Deleuze made a similar argument (1980, 208), reasoning that social theory 'should not be approached as something to genuflect before but rather as a tool kit that is used selectively depending on the analytical task at hand' (Hope, this volume, page xxx).

The historical nature of theory is also of relevance to social theorists themselves. Social theorists often feel the need to defend a particular position against threats posed from other theories, and their anxiety is understandable given that so much depends on the assumed legitimacy of their conceptual work, both from a political and professional perspective. But this is unnecessary. It is also illogical as their own theories are generally built on an already existing set of ideas and concepts, without which it would be impossible to generate new concepts. Take Habermas for example: his work is a shining example of what we call hybridisation, his work weaving together a dazzling combination of thinkers and ideas to construct his own analysis of modern pathologies (Murphy 2017).

The same can be said for Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak and numerous others. The most effective theorists engage in this kind of conceptual interdisciplinarity, as a way to move debates forward and to untangle some previously knotty conceptual issues (Murphy 2017, 13-14). Fields such as the social sciences and humanities require hybrid work; take for example Stuart Hall's theory of culture (1997) which expertly drew together ideas from Foucault, Fanon, Derrida and Said, using this fusion of ideas to respond to changing forms of diasporic identity, themselves rapidly evolving into hybrid forms of cultural signification. It is improper therefore to think that these latest versions of hybrid theory are themselves immune to change and represent the last definite word on whatever topic they examine.

It is more likely that they will stay with us for a long time but any efforts to preserve their purity are destined to fail or at best lead us down some suspect avenues. If nothing else, users of theory need to allow for the theory – often through certain key concepts - to infiltrate the contexts being researched and explore if and how far the theory can stretch as well as how it can be extended.

If the acquisition of theory can be compared to the process of language learning then, just like language acquisition, theory is the product of multiple influences. Most social theories seek inspiration in a multitude of sources. For example, Bourdieu's concept of habitus draws on ideas from Aristotle, Chomsky and Piaget while Axel Honneth's typology of recognition combines Hegel's early work on recognition and Mead's interactionist principles of individual action, as well as the ideas of Jessica Benjamin. Many other theories currently used in social and education research originate from a variety of ideas that are put together to form a new one – this we call the process of *hybridisation*. In other words, theory is built on the hybridisation of ideas. In the art of theory making and theory application however this aspect can be overlooked as researchers seem too easily to adopt a research identity that pays homage to the 'Master' as Freirians, Foucauldians, Derridians, Habermasians or Bourdieuians, to name but a few forms of self-theoretical identification. By focusing on this issue it is not our intention to discourage deep study of these authors' work, but rather to question if such monological approaches to the theorisation of research is sufficient in the face

of highly complex and rapidly shifting forms of educational practice, identity and governance. Instead we should seek to make it commonplace to bring different theories together to complement our research. The need for such an approach is often identified when a given theory no longer stretches linguistically or empirically to decode the phenomenon at hand. This indicates that the further intellectualisation of research – conceptually and/or methodologically – requires inspiration from elsewhere.

A hybridised approach assists with both theory development and research design. Theory needs to 'test' and reconstruct itself based on changing forms of social practice. This is a key element of theorising, and this itself tends to strengthen the case for hybridisation in social theorising rather than weaken it. We suggest that education should be viewed through the intellectual wide-lens of social theory. On this point, Swedberg has done the field of social theory a great service by drawing our attention to the art of doing social theory (Swedberg 2014). According to Swedberg, to be successful at social theorising, you need to have 'the capacity to look at reality from a social perspective' (2014, 169). He also adds that knowing some social theory and having the ability to engage with it effectively, to 'handle it well' is also important, a sentiment wholeheartedly shared by the authors. What Swedberg means by 'handle it well' is central to this debate:

> You may, for example, need to take a concept from one theory and combine it with a

> concept from another theory. You may want to eliminate some part of a theory and
>
> replace it with a new idea of your own, and so on (Swedberg 2014, 169).

This capacity to hybridize, he argues, means that researchers can develop the capacity to draw on a range of sources for inspiration. This is where knowledge of social theory comes in, knowledge that is not just about the accumulation of ideas, concepts and theoretical approaches; rather it is about having a depth of understanding as to what the 'social' means.

The capacity to be able to handle social theory well also requires a large dose of imagination on the part of the theorist. Talk of imagination and social theory sends us back to the work of C. Wright Mills and his classic text *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills 1959). His description of what this imagination entails and how to achieve it had a strong hybridising element. Mills argues that the sense of imagination 'is the combination of ideas that no one expected were combinable - say, a mess of ideas from German Philosophy and British economics' (1959, 211). The mechanisms Mills identifies as stimulators of this imagination also speak to hybridity as crucial to effective theorising, which include scrambling and mixing up notes, searching out comparable cases, and seeking out the opposite of your own research subject (ibid, 212).

Swedberg builds on the work of Mills by providing some further avenues for exploring the creative social theory mind, which include free association and reverie. These are valuable ways of unearthing inspiration and budding theorists would be wise to consider them more fully. They should also accept that the basic building blocks of theorising are *other theories*. Building up this body of knowledge about specific themes/topics and the ways in which different theories have been constructed to help account for these is a crucial element to the development of social scientists, including education researchers.

Publications such as these produce new ways of thinking about specific topics that help to move academic debates forward, as well as helping to reorient our thinking about educational issues in changing historical times. Most importantly, hybridized research that adopts a reflexive attitude to theory application, works to the benefit of education practice, rather than purely serving particular theoretical silos. Theory is put to work to illuminate how practices, such as those related to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, have particular effects (such as inequality), while also providing ideas about how best such effects can be tackled from a policy and practitioner perspective.

Education is not the only discipline to rely on theory from a range of other disciplines, organisation studies for example has a long history of 'borrowing'

concepts from fields such as sociology and psychology (Oswick et al. 2011. 318). There are lessons that can be learnt from the experience of other fields, one of them being that conceptual borrowing can 'damage' the host field. Conceptual borrowing 'can overwhelm the more creative insights offered by the foreign theory, diminishing it to a rather "impotent" form of theory building' (Oswisk et al. 2011, 328). It is also the case that theory can mean very different things to different social scientists (Kroneberg 2019, 31), making comparisons across fields an even more challenging task. It is in this sense that not only epistemic and ontological vigilance remains central to research, but also reflexivity becomes a critical tool to researchers' research practice.

2: Social theory and critical reflexivity

The previous section highlighted the limits to monological approaches when it comes to theory building. There are also limits from a research design perspective. Evident in the education research literature is a tendency to not just depend on one key theorist, but also to act as if these specific theoretical toolkits solve all their problems – magically (and particularly true for Bourdieu and Foucault), concepts such as habitus, capital, field, subjectivation, discourse, panopticism, bio-power, heterotopia, and so on, can be taken down from the shelf and transposed onto seemingly simple and

historically unwavering educational practices. This approach to theory application, which Allan calls 'lensification' (see Allan chapter , page xx), can result in an uncritical acceptance of the virtues of specific social theories and their relevance to the education field.

This lensification approach is evident when it comes to the work of Bourdieu whose core concepts of habitus, field and capital are often used as a recipe to explain specific forms of education and social inequality. Such an approach is sometimes evident in different academic journals and is often accompanied by an uncritical approach to the use of these concepts. In the case of Foucault, Allan argues that this lensification sees researchers enticed by the 'apparent simplicity' of a Foucauldian lens, with such lens often 'serving as little more than a gloss' in educational research (Allan this volume, chapter, page xx). What such careless use of theory usually leads to is the loss of the critical meaning that such concepts carry as part of the research process, thus reducing the significance and deep meaning that theoretical concepts encapsulate. It can also potentially lead to an impoverished view of the relation between theory and practice, one that tends to subjugate educational practice under the uber-explanatory power of habitus, discourse, rhizome, performativity, and so on.

Bourdieu himself warned against such a tendency, hence his insistence on a critical reflexivity in the research process (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Talk of reflexivity has become commonplace in the research world, and alongside a focus on positionality offers a welcome guard against the excessive influence of personal bias and ideological position. But this tends to be geared towards issues of method and is much less prevalent in considerations of theory and its utility. Reflexivity should therefore not be confused with personal reflection of research practice. It is deeper than that in that as an intellectual tool, reflexivity aims to turn the research mirror on the researcher as a continuous form of intellectual accountability towards the entire research process – from its inception to conclusion - and not just the methodological construction of a research project.

Post-graduate students have been steadily immersed in issues of methodological rigour and/or trustworthiness, alongside an embedded obligation to consider the limits of their research design. This concern over limits does not always extend to theoretical issues, and Bour (2017, 51) helpfully reminds us that a requirement of theory-driven research is to explicate 'one's perspectivity', precisely because 'social theory plays both a major role in focusing the research question and in linking theory with the data' (Baur 2017, 51). At the very least, explicating this theoretical perspective can help the field avoid the worst consequences of 'methodological fetishism' (Berger 2002) – i.e., the 'sprinkling' approach to theoretical analysis (Pierre 2017, 1081), or even more troubling, the failure 'to identify a conceptual framework at all' (Brosnan 2013, 5).

The adoption of a specific theorist or concept is not necessarily always a concern in the work of early career researchers or any researcher for that matter. Such as approach can provide greater depth and understanding of the value of particular concepts. It is appropriate to apply certain theoretical ideas but to do so calls for a critical eye - care needs to be taken when engaging with concepts in relative isolation. That said even when care is taken, a monological approach to theory application is not necessarily the best training for a career in academia and neither does it help move the education field forward in any significant way.

The use of such approaches is questionable at the very least in the context of producing quality research outputs. While the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK does not have the final say on the topic of education research quality, the criteria used in the REF – originality, significance and rigour - are a useful way to consider what constitutes 'quality' research in education. Although the use of 'theory' is emphasised in '4 star' papers, this must be measured against these criteria, and it is arguably the case that monological approaches to theory can fall short in this regard. Any effective research assessment exercise needs to consider the extent to which the education research field benefits from continuous non-reflective application of one theorist or one concept/set of concepts to educational

topics. It is difficult to characterise such work as original or laden with real significance.

The level of conceptual rigour is also open to debate: the degree of critical reflection on the utility of certain concepts or theories can be minimal, or evasive of its real significance and contribution to the field. Research rigour does not start or end with concerns over the design of research instruments but rather extends to the entire research process. In critical research, theory should be the marker and driver of rigour, with the caveat that rigour should be a guard against conceptual oversimplification. This has become common place when using the work of popular theorists, as is the case of Bourdieu's whose concept of capital is sometimes applied in research accounts as a vague catch-all term for forms of educational exchange, rendering its theoretical application meaningless. The same applies to the concept of habitus, whose etymological nature inevitably demands that researchers somehow engage with its complexity. Nonetheless, in attempts to simplify the concept, researchers can adopt a more than desired generic understanding of habitus as 'dispositions', without properly conceptualising these dispositions.

This is not useful as research outcomes can become unclear and vague, thus losing part of its essence and purpose in deriving originality. These examples illustrate the unreflexive side of the research(er) in trying to justify the applicability of theoretical concepts that demand an appreciation for the

context of the research. After all, habitus as a theoretical tool was not conceived so it could be reduced to an elusive understanding of 'dispositions', but rather to be operationalised with a clear purpose and meaning in mind, one that is related to its context of application (see Costa et al. 2019), and whose meaning therefore changes from situation to situation, dependent on the research questions that motivate its application. Theoretic concepts are thus best understood as capsule definitions (Wacquant 2014, 4) developed to be transferable to different, yet specific contexts; contexts that are untangled into a complex system of interrelations (Champagne and Duval 2018, 137), This is where reflexivity is most needed because this theory transferability from one context to another does not negate the fact that the meaning of concepts is not context dependent. Application of social theory requires an appreciation – as well as an awareness - for the relational nature of theoretical concepts.

Additionally, even when theories are duly applied to a research project, its applicability should not be approached as the be-all and end-all of theory-method approaches. Although at some point researchers will need to draw the line on the theories and concepts they will enlist for a given research project, the practice of reflexivity should not stop there. Reflexivity as part of the theory-method dialectic is not only concerned with theory application appropriateness, but also its extendibility to the research phenomenon as it is unveiled through the research process. For example, although neither

Foucault nor Bourdieu have lived to explore the phenomenon that digital technologies have created, the legacy of their concepts have been extended to studies of digital practices, with reasonable success. Studies on datafication of education have drawn considerably on Foucault's concepts of subjectification and the panopticon, whereas studies on digital scholarship (Costa 2014, 2015) and digital education practices (Beckmann, et al. 2018) have taken inspiration on Bourdieu's conceptual triad of capitals, field and habitus. Nonetheless, it is always important to wonder if these research instruments extend the boundaries of the research sufficiently.

Such questions can be posed at the operationalisation stage of the research as well as at the analysis stage, thus making the case for an additional opportunity for theory hybridization. Clues to this need often arise from the lack of vocabulary to explain, expand and/or do justice to the reality that the researcher aims to account for through their research. When the theoretical language at our disposal, as enlisted by our selected theoretical apparatus, no longer suffices to depict the problematics under focus, then it is important to seek theoretical help elsewhere. This can take at least different forms, by either seeking inspiration in other theories, developing our own concepts, and more often than not by doing both.

Ultimately, key to theory-method reflexivity is an awareness that all stages of the research process are intimately related as an intellectual project of

meaning-making for which theory application becomes not only the conduit but also the glue that keeps it together. In this sense, critical reflexivity in education research can help overcome researchers' dogmatic views of what theory can offer to education research (Costa and Murphy 2016), which is more than adding an intellectual gloss to research findings. A critically reflexive approach enlists the power of social theory to unmask issues of power and injustice, while also keeping the researcher in check when it comes to issues of conceptual and methodological rigour. To be critically reflexive is then to remain vigilant of theory application across the entire research process.

3: The status of theory 'application' in bridging concept and method

The application of social theory to the exploration of education phenomena has never been more crucial than today given the highly politicised contexts of institutional and professional practice in the 21st century. That said, the notion of theory 'application' does not sit easily with everyone; for example Judith Butler (in Gane 2004, 74) expressed concern that the notion of applied theory overlooks the idea that theory is already a social practice. This is an important issue, but it does not negate the strong desire among researchers especially to 'fit' theory to method, and rightly so. 'Application' is at least a form of linguistic shorthand to engage with the 'problematic relationship between theories and data' as Habermas put it (Habermas 1988[1967], 100).

It is useful to bring Habermas into the discussion at this point. His presence in education research is less obvious than in the work of other theorists which will have something to do with his lack of focus on educational matters over the years (Murphy 2010), but the same cannot be said when it comes to questions of theory and methodology on which subject he wrote about at some length in the 1960s. Investigation of this work indicates a shared concern over application, or what he calls 'operationalisation' (1988, 100). He called to account the 'arbitrariness of operationalisations' which he saw as undermining the credibility of social research, especially that which was grounded in interpretive approaches (1988, 100). He argued that the arbitrary nature of application could be limited

> if we could make conscious the process whereby measurement procedures are adapted, after the fact, to a prescientifically grounded correspondence between sociological concepts and communicative experiences (Habermas 1988 [1967], 100).

In part Habermas here was responding to earlier claims made by Cicourel (1964), that the social sciences were plagued by a 'lack of methodological sophistication' (Cicourel 1964, 21), which resulted in a disconnect between theory and method, in the lack of 'a precise or warranted correspondence between existing measurements systems and our theoretical and substantive concepts', a link Cicourel damningly states is only established by fiat.

It is evident therefore that concern with overcoming the dichotomy of theory/method is not a new one. But its significance when it comes to the craft and quality of research design remains. As we have argued in this chapter, theory should be elevated in research design because of its intrinsic relationship with research methods. How theoretical concepts are or can be applied to research practice is a question that new researchers often ask themselves. This is normally considered the 'black box' of research practice (Costa et al. 2019, 20), which consists of a set of challenges faced in research when 'bridging the gap' between theory and method. How researchers prepare for field work in light of the theoretical concepts that underpin their research (Costa and Murphy 2015; Murphy and Costa 2016), is rarely discussed explicitly in research publications. Accounts of how theoretical concepts can be brought to life in research settings are a valuable component of research design rationale, one that merits discussion and a place in teaching of research practice. Considering the theory-method relation allows for research practices to be positioned within a theory-praxis nexus while at the same time guiding research away from the temptation of perceiving the role of theory as an arbitrary, add-on to the discussion of research findings.

Social theorists themselves have supported stronger conceptualisation of research practice through the theoretical conceptualisation of research methods, with Bourdieu leading the way on such discussions (see, for example, Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron 1991; Bourdieu and

Wacquant 1992). This approach aims to position theory and method as inseparable elements of research practice, of *methodology*. The theory/method dynamic points to a practice of addressing research methods beyond their role as tools for data collection and applying theory across the entire research process. This implies that disconnecting the conceptualisation of the research study from the methods of data collection is best avoided. Instead, a theory-method approach suggests that theory becomes central to the entire research process by making theory application central to the development of research instruments, not only with regards to the type of instrument, but also what shapes the contents of the research tool. An example of theory applied to method can be accessed through Nowicka's (2015) work on migrants' adaptation to a new environment. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu, Nowicka starts by conceptualising her inquiry through the concept of habitus that requires access to a suitable set of dispositions related to the phenomenon at hand. To unearth a deep understanding of 'adequate' dispositions to her study, she then seeks out ideas from intercultural studies and parallel fields to establish which dispositions are useful to employ in her study. This synergy between Bourdieu's theory and knowledge from Nowicka's applied field of research is then transferred to different research instruments to capture different dimensions of a specific set of dispositions that were operationalised to meet the purpose of her study. In other words, Nowicka's study is a good example of how theory can be applied to research design, i.e., to practice.

This type of theory application however should not be confused with ways of reproducing or re-testing theory, but rather as a form of theory 'stretching' in that the contribution of theory is only acknowledged when it enhances current knowledge through original and critical perspectives. Nowicka's work achieves this aspect by hybridising Bourdieu's concept of habitus with understanding of intercultural practices/learning. In essence, what theory as method does is to give researchers a *clearer* direction of their research and how it can be deployed empirically. This is an aspect that should be of central interest to researchers in that methodological choices are deeply rooted in theoretical discussions.

In short, theory application would benefit from being celebrated more visibly as an essential gateway into critical research. Theoretical language carries a given cultural perspective - it would be naïve to think theory is impermeable to change or progress, or that additional theoretical lenses should not be explored in tandem. Theory that remains relevant across time - just like language - is not only adjustable, but also dynamic enough to incorporate vocabulary (new concepts) necessary to express fresh reflections of social phenomena. That is the fundamental role of hybridisation in theoretical work, to welcome the influence of other areas of knowledge. Theory should not imprison researchers, but rather liberate them to conduct research in a suitably informed way whilst providing tools to explore pertinent phenomena and

push the boundaries of theoretical work through the entanglement of different theories.

To make it clear, to adopt a theory as method approach to education research, i.e., how theory is used not just to help problematise and conceptualise the problem at hand, but also how it is then translated into the development of research instruments fit to 'capture' such reality (Costa et al. 2019), is to take a value-laden position pertaining to the research phenomenon at hand. However, this is not to be confused with adopting a biased stance to the research, to answer to positivist claims, but rather to establish from the onset that when it comes to critical education research value- and epistemologically neutral approaches are deemed illusory and unreflexive of their own ideological presumptions and values. As Bourdieu , Chamboredon and Passeron (1991) further remind us, claims of methodological objectivity serve only to hide a lack of epistemological, ontological and axiological concern when conducting education research:

> The endless debate about "ethical neutrality" often serves as a substitute for a genuinely epistemological discussion of the 'methodological neutrality' of techniques, and, as such, it provides further support for the positivist illusion. By a *displacement* effect, interest in ethical presuppositions and ultimate values or ends diverts attention from critical examination of the theory of sociological knowledge that is engaged in the most elementary acts of practice (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron 1991, 41).

To illustrate this issue in concrete ways, we will use the example of research on gender in education and the confusion between concepts of gender and sex

in some subfields of education research, despite an established body of academic literature that asserts the different meanings attributed to the two terms (see Butler 1996), namely that gender is conceptualised as a social construct and sex as a biological attribute. Garvey et al. (2019) have identified 'methodological troubles' in research in this area that place both theoretical and analytical work at peril through the use of gender and sex as binary variables. This shows a disregard for a wider representation of gender identities that could have been achieved through a careful operationalisation of gender as a concept that conceals in itself a range of complex meanings. This represents a failure 'to subject ordinary language (…) to a methodological critique [and] entails the risk of mistaking objects pre-constructed in and by ordinary language for data' (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron 1991, 21). It is in this regard that Rassmussen and colleagues (2020) reminds us of the intrinsic relationship between conceptualisation and operationalisation of research as a critical form of theory application.. In other words, research benefits methodologically from theoretical clarity as it moves through the different stages of the research process (see also Glasser and Smith 2016). Theory application then becomes an iterative process.

In sketching out a process of theory application one needs to be flexible and remain open to alternatives that more adequately explain the phenomenon. Having said that, a blueprint can be outlined as a guide for the essential elements of theory application using the principle of *theory as method*.

Figure 2.1: A methodology for theory driven applied research

_____ PLACE FIGURE 2.1 HERE _____

The figure above provides a simple and straightforward approach to conducting theory-driven education research and illustrates for us how theory can help shape methodological practice. The role of theory thus is three-fold in that theory can influence methodology via three stages in the research process:

- Stage 1 theoretical conceptualisation – theory operates as a research lens that informs and helps problematise a given research phenomenon. At this stage, theory serves the purpose of contextualisation, helping to devise research problems from a critical standpoint.

- Stage 2 theoretical operationalisation: The researcher's work on conceptualisation in stage 1 provides the foundation for stage 2, which is focused on the application of theory to the research design, including the development of research instruments that are framed by conceptualisation.

- Stage 3 theoretical interpretation: this stage sees the research data examined via the lens of the original concepts framing the methodological approach. Here, social theory is used to make sense

of the data and to translate the findings into new understandings and conceptual knowledge.

As illustrated in the figure, all three stages are influenced by a strong commitment to reflexivity as a way to hold the researcher to account in all stages of the methodology. Alongside this, the methodology benefits from the dynamic influence of theory hybridization, which can assist the continuous process of intellectual work, rather than to narrow the understanding of the research phenomenon to a given school of thought or theorist.

Conclusion

This paper argues that education researchers should consider more fully the ways in which social theory is utilised in contemporary forms of education research. At the centre of this consideration should be a concern to develop a form of critical research literacy that positions theory as at least the significant other of method in our efforts to advance methodological innovation. The quality of education research, especially in terms of intellectual advancement, would benefit greatly from the further harnessing of social theory and its transformative potential. Our position as detailed in this chapter is that strong forms of theory application require close attention to both the ways in which theory is conceptualised *and* operationalised. But at its best theory application also demands of the researcher the capacity to engage in theory hybridisation

as well as to critically reflect on the way they have incorporated theory into their research. These different elements constitute a powerful critical literacy when it comes to research design, one that moves us away from siloised devotion to specific theorists/schools of thought as well as the current pervasive disconnect between theory and method.

If anything, this proposal fits well the legitimate desire for rigour and trustworthiness to be at the heart of theory-driven education research. An important dimension of any methodology is the energy devoted to being *methodical*, not just in questions of instrument design and data collection but also in the application of theory. The second edition of this book provides an opportunity to take stock of the methodical nature of existing education research and how this can be extended. It is an opportune time to establish theory as a core component of educational research methodology.

Enhancing the position of theory can also contribute to education research, expanding its domain of influence, even outside the field of education itself. Moving away from a devotion to particular theorists and adopting a more critical stance towards theory more generally can help pave the way for education theories that can be useful to other sectors; in this regard one can point to the concepts of Bourdieu, whose work on capital for example (itself a result of conceptual hybridisation) has become a major influence in other academic disciplines.

In the spirit of critical reflexivity, let us add two notes of caution to our proposal. The first is that a greater appreciation and acknowledgement of social theory in research methodology should make efforts to avoid what Habermas has referred to as 'conceptual fetishism' (Habermas 1988[1967], 188). Replacing one form of fetish with another would be an unwelcome and unproductive endeavour and would detract from the ambition to further integrate theory and method. The critical literacy described above is designed to make theory and method communicate more effectively with one another, not to enable theory to adopt a privileged and detached position outside the research process.

Dallmayr offers a useful caveat in this regard when he argues for a conditional and contingent form of theorising that accepts the equal weight afforded to practice. He presents the notion of a conditional, non-systematic mode of theorizing; theorizing, for Dallmayr, 'does not pretend to systematic epistemic knowledge, but only to an ongoing clarification of its own limitations or conditions of possibility' (Dallmayr 1984, 6). This modest approach to theory is a more logical and reasonable one, which removes theory from its sometimes-vaunted pedestal and allows the user to adopt a more nuanced but also effective attitude to theory. Kumar Gir (2006, 232) puts it succinctly - that theory can be approached as 'our companion rather

than as a master, as a moving light house which gives possible direction in the sea of complex reality, rather than as a fixed star.'

The second note of caution relates to what Savage and Burrows (2007) call the 'coming crisis of empirical sociology' and the role of social theory in it. While their seeming association of social theory with teleology is debatable, they make a useful point that social theory will not 'solve' whatever crisis empirical research may or may not be experiencing. Theory is not designed to be a substitute for research data (of whatever kind) and cannot be expected to fill in the gaps of empirical work. As suggested in this chapter, effective research requires theory to engage with forms of practice and to assist us in our efforts to comprehend changing educational dynamics. Making a case for application as a key element in research in its own right will only strengthen this dynamic, not weaken it.

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