

Chapter 2

Theory and Theorising in Information Science Scholarship

Patrick Ngulube

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7676-3931>

University of South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Theory is one of the major pillars of research. Methodologies as another pillar assist in theory testing and construction. Theories help to explain reality, which is the subject of any research process. Theories and methodologies should be relevant to their context if they are going to contribute to the production of progressive and transformative knowledge. This chapter looks at the understanding of theoretical and conceptual frameworks as tools of conceptualising the research process. Some scholars confuse theoretical with conceptual frameworks. Sometimes they regard research frameworks such as paradigms as theoretical frameworks. Some scholars do not even explain how these research conceptual tools help them to design and execute their research. The implications of not using context specific theories in research, and its consequences to epistemic freedom, is presented. Researchers should focus on theorising instead of theory itself and develop theories that are interesting and relevant to the profession and discipline. That will also reduce dependency on borrowed theories.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Scientific ways of knowing mainly depend on a sound methodology and an elegant theory. In fact, “nothing can be studied empirically in the absence of theory and research methods” (Bergman, 2011, p. 99). Theory guides researchers to formulate research questions that inform a study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; King, Keohane & Verba, 1994; Ngulube, 2018; Ngulube, Mathipa & Gumbo, 2015). Theory also influences the concepts to be reviewed in the literature, research design and results of a study. A theoretical framework that is developed from a theory guides one’s study and is the central piece in the research puzzle (Ennis, 1999, p. 129). Research conducted without theories is poor and lacks a sound foundation. Such research has limited usefulness (Sarter, 2006). There is a lack of theoretical research in library and information science (LIS) (Kim & Jeong, 2006). Earlier on, Pettigrew and McKechnie

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(2001) bemoaned the limited application of theory and the failure of LIS research to address the practical problems of the profession.

The same observation was made by Ukwoma and Ngulube (2019). The two authors revealed that many theses and dissertations in LIS from Nigeria and South Africa were devoid of theory. Some of the studies even used concepts of theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework interchangeably (Ukwoma & Ngulube, 2019). This may partly be explained by a lack of awareness of the role of theory in the research process and the fact that many LIS researchers are concerned with LIS practice and applied practitioner-oriented research, rather than developing and applying theory. However, the use and understanding of theory can make LIS research interesting, relevant, insightful and rigorous.

Consequently, Kivunja (2018) advised educators of master's and doctoral students to spend more time on topics related to the application of theory in research. That will give future practitioners and professionals a sound basis for applying theory in their work and research irrespective of the discipline and context. Despite the recognition of the importance of theory in the research process, there is limited discussion in LIS of the application and use of theory, and how theoretical and conceptual frameworks differ. There are conflicting views on the utility of theory in LIS research. Misconceptions of theory and theoretical contribution in the LIS field are also rife (Ngulube, 2018; Ocholla & Le Roux, 2011).

Based on personal experience as a facilitator of master's and doctoral workshops, and examiner of dissertations and theses, this chapter provides signposts on the importance and use of theory in research and the development of a conceptual framework. At the end of reading this chapter, readers should be able to do the following:

- Understand what theory is;
- Articulate the role and significance of theory to research;
- Employ theory effectively in research;
- Appreciate that theories are social constructions and are disposable;
- Differentiate between a theoretical and conceptual framework; and
- Apply theory in qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research.

The rest of the chapter discusses the relationship of theory to research, the differences among metatheories, theories and models, the use of theory in research, the difference between the theoretical and conceptual framework, and the use of theory in various research traditions.

RELATIONSHIP OF THEORY TO RESEARCH

Theory is important in conducting research. Good theory advances knowledge, directs researchers to important questions, and provides knowledge and understanding about a research topic and the discipline (Sonnenwald, 2016; van de Ven, 1989). It is central to research (Thomas, 1997). Knowledge production is rooted “in theory whether we acknowledge it or not” (Compeau & Olivera, 2014, p. 347). However, there is still a need to ask: Do we really need theory? Is it really central to research? The answer is partly provided by Bichler et al., (2016) who posited that: “At its core, scientific knowledge is based on theories” (p. 292). Deming (1993) stressed, “Without theory, experience has no meaning, and without theory, one has no questions to ask. Hence, without theory, there is no learning” (p. 106). According to Jeong and Kim (2005), “Theory is the ultimate destination as well as the starting point of research” (p. 52). While

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