

On Becoming a Theorist in Psychology

By Brandon Randolph-Seng

Theory construction is essential to any field of science. Within psychology, theory is at the center of the scientific method. Research is conducted on the basis of theory, and it is the results of that research that advance theory. As a theory develops, the understanding of the world that is produced can be applied to predicting and changing the natural world in which we live, hopefully for the better (Randolph-Seng, 2006). Therefore, solid, well thought-out theory is a necessary link in solid, well thought-out research. Because theory is so vital to the science of psychology, how does a student become a theorist? More importantly, given the number of established theories that currently exist in psychology, why should a student want to become a theorist?

What is a Theorist?

In order to answer the how and why of theorizing, one must first understand what a theorist in psychology is. Psychology has “a long past but only a short history” (Stagner, 1988, p. 1). The reason for this dichotomy is the relatively recent differentiation (compared with the other major sciences) of psychology from philosophy. Philosophers have many important theories about the human experience, but psychologists take those theories and examine them using the rigors of the scientific method. A theorist examines a systematic collection of evidence to create “intellectual structures” that make sense of diverse findings and, in turn, provide distinct predictions that can be examined empirically (e.g., the elaboration likelihood model; Cacioppo, 2004); therefore: Philosophy + Scientific Method = Theorizing in Psychology.

How Does One Become a Theorist?

One possible way to learn how to become a theorist may be through formal didactic education. After all, taking courses is the most common method of training graduate students and has been advocated as an important means of learning theory construction (e.g., Kruglanski, 2001). Nevertheless, courses in theory construction are rarely offered in psychology. Instead, opportunities to learn about theory construction will likely come in an informal manner; however, the informal opportunities to learn about theory construction can emerge in formal settings. Most graduate students attend a variety of different meetings — including lab and advisor meetings, professional conferences and seminars, and brown-bag and/or colloquium meetings. It is during the unstructured parts of these meetings (e.g., side comment during a discussion, off-hand remark at a lab meeting) that some of the best learning about theory construction can take place. Even in

classroom settings, important theoretical skills may be communicated informally through such comments and remarks. It is important to watch for these moments and to be prepared to take notes.

Outside of formal settings, there are many opportunities to learn about theory development and construction in psychology through identification of articles on the subject in general psychology journals, such as *Psychological Science*, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *American Psychologist*, *Psychological Review*, and *Psychological Bulletin*. Review journals within subfields may also be relevant (e.g., *Personality and Social Psychology Review*). Although these articles tend to be few and far between, once found they provide valuable insights to the theorist in training. Relevant books on theory construction can also be helpful, especially those books that cover the history and philosophy of science. Such literature illuminates the assumptions and preconceived notions of theory construction that even the seasoned theorist may fail to recognize (see Cacioppo, 2004). Another good starting point is to study the history of psychology — most universities offer a course.

Describing ways of learning how to become a theorist may come as a surprise to those who assume that theorists are the chosen few who are blessed with “inspiration, intuition, and imagination” (Kruglanski, 2001, p. 874). Of course, successful theorists have these characteristics, but such characteristics have usually come after first learning how to construct theories and after in-depth study in the area of their theorizing. To theorize about something, you need to know a lot about it. The more knowledgeable you become about area of psychology, the more likely you will be able to identify gaps in existing theory and be inspired by your informed intuition and imagination to construct/extend a theory to bridge them. In turn, these bridges must be strengthened by constructive criticism and the accumulation of evidence (Cacioppo, 2004; Fiske, 2004).

Why Become a Theorist?

As the discussion so far illustrates, becoming a theorist is not a mysterious process. It works in much the same way as becoming a researcher or teacher — through formal and informal learning experiences. Yet, learning to become a researcher or teacher in psychology is hard work, so why add theorist to the list? First, you will become more successful in the other aspects of academia. Just as the scientific method is synonymous with critical thinking, so is theorizing. The more you hone your critical thinking skills, the better you will do in your course work, your research, and even your teaching. More specifically, you will have greater insight into the intellectual development of your chosen subfield

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in psychology, be able to better identify important gaps in your current research area, devise appropriate research studies to fill those gaps, and more effectively communicate to others the importance of psychology for understanding the world and the people in it. Second (and just as important) you will simply gain greater insight into your everyday life. You will better recognize in your own lay theories and in others' pronouncements the benefit of relying on appropriate evidences.

Theorists in psychology no longer need be the favored few; theory construction can be taught and learned. To reword Kurt Lewin's famous quote, "There is nothing so practical as a good theorist." Becoming a theorist in psychology is not so much about being able to construct a grand idea, as it about being able to apply theory construction skills into the everyday world in which we work and play, an important training goal for any graduate student. ♦

References

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