

Student Feature – Advice on Using Theory in Academic Work

Written by Michael Livesey

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MICHAEL LIVESEY, MAR 30 2021

‘Theory’ is what sets academic research apart from simple journalism, and yet variation in its meaning and uses continue to cause confusion. In particular, for undergraduate students new to the social sciences. Recent experience teaching first-year undergraduates in political science has given me a brief insight into the difficulties many students face making the transition from sixth form to higher education. Foremost amongst these difficulties is that of understanding ‘theory’, and its relation to ‘method’: both in students’ own work, and when they are evaluating the work of others. In this piece, I try to clear up some of the confusion around ‘theory’ and ‘method’ in social science. I present one view of what theory is, and what theory does. This piece is directed at first-year undergraduates, and those who teach them. It is designed to be as straightforward an introduction to ‘theory’ as possible. Inevitably, this means much of the nuance around the use of theory is overlooked – and left to wider reading for those inclined to do so.

There is a long-standing pedagogical tradition in the social sciences, which employs analogies and metaphors to help explain complicated ideas. I see no reason not to make use of this tradition when explaining the idea of theory. So, let’s simplify ‘theory’ by analogising it against a familiar example. Academics are interested, above all, in finding answers to *research questions*. The research question which I will use as an analogy in this essay is one many readers will have heard before. It is a question you will overhear in most British pubs on any given weekend: ‘who is the best footballer in the world?’. Like all research questions, it’s a difficult one to answer. And, like all research questions, it is the theoretical choices the responder makes that shape the type of answer they provide...

1. One answer to the question ‘who is the best footballer in the world?’ would be to think in terms of market value. In theory, the best footballer in the world should also be the most valuable: because, in theory, people will pay the most for what they think is the best. So, we can find out who is the most valuable as a means of approximating who is the best.
2. Another answer might be to find the footballer who is considered the best by their peers, in some kind of opinion poll. This answer assumes that footballers’ peers (other athletes, football writers, and fans) have the expert knowledge to judge rationally who is the ‘best’; and that this knowledge can be aggregated through a discernment process like the ‘Best FIFA Football Awards’.
3. A third answer would be to distinguish the best footballer in terms of gender – and to point out the structural barriers constraining parity between male and female athletes. This answer might look to celebrate footballers who have overcome barriers like the lack of gender parity: because they have had to work harder to be as good as they are.
4. One final answer might be to say that there is really no such thing as the ‘best’ footballer in the world. That is, to suggest that the very concept of the ‘best’ footballer is subjective, and dependent on individual perception. Liverpool fans might think van Dijk is the best footballer in the world; whereas Everton fans would opt for Richarlison.

All of these answers are instances of different theories:

1. The first answer ‘theorised’ the question ‘who is the best footballer?’ in terms of a ‘structuralist’ theory of

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material value.

2. The second answer operationalised our question in terms of a theory of rational choice, at the aggregate level.
3. The third answer made use of feminist theory to rethink the question, and challenge prior assumptions.
4. And the final answer was evidence of a 'constructivist' approach: emphasising definitional problems surrounding values like 'best'.

Each of these four routes to answering our question is defined by a set of theoretical assumptions. The type of *theory* we use to make sense of the question shapes the kind of answer we provide. When we see academics suggest answers to research questions, then, we have to think critically about the theoretical assumptions that got them there – and the validity of using those theoretical assumptions. Because if you don't think that the most valuable footballer = the best footballer, you are unlikely to agree with someone who does (no matter how compelling their findings).

Theory does a lot of work for social scientists, then. It helps define their pathway from A (research question), to B (research answer). But that's not the end of the story. Because even those sharing theoretical assumptions can still come up with different answers. How can this be so? Let's return to our analogy to find out. Let's say we've agreed to theorise our question in terms of material value (most valuable footballer = best footballer). This theoretical choice shapes *how* we answer the question: it limits our *methodological* options to those tools which measure material value. But that does not mean that we have no methodological choices to make... Because there's more than one way to measure material value – even if we theorise that value in a strictly financial sense.

For instance, we could measure players' value in terms of transfer value. (1) The best player would be the one who holds the record for the most expensive transfer in history. That would be *Neymar*, who moved from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain for €222 million in 2017. But surely this tool for understanding the best footballer isn't useful, because the data is four years old? (2) In order to understand who has the highest transfer value right now, it might be better to use the 'Transfermarkt' tool: which estimates player values based on a performance-related algorithm. This algorithm suggests *Kylian Mbappé* is currently the most valued/best footballer in the world. Any club seeking a transfer for Mbappé would have to pay €180 million – €52 million more than Neymar's present value. But then this is an anticipated value; it is purely hypothetical. (3) Surely the best measure of present value would be to work out the highest-paid footballer in the world, as this data is both current and non-hypothetical? That would be *Lionel Messi*, whose contract is worth €78 million per year (three times more than Mbappé's). But of course, footballers' earnings aren't purely based on their contracts; they also make money from sponsorship deals. (4) Including sponsorships and endorsements makes *Cristiano Ronaldo* the most valuable player in the world: with a combined income of €90 million per annum.

OK, things are getting complicated now! We selected a single theory to make sense of our question. On the basis of a theory of material value, we decided the best footballer in the world would also be the most valuable. This gave us a limited range of methodological options for answering our research question – all of which relate to financial value. But we still ended up with four possible answers, leaving us no better off than when we started. This headache is an important one. Because it shows that theory won't tell us exactly what to do with our research questions. Theory limits the range of answers we can give: all of our answers had to relate to material value. But we still have to make methodological choices; because there is usually more than one *method* for measuring the concepts associated with a theory (like the concept of 'value' in our structuralist theory). And these methodological choices will inevitably lead to debate between researchers, even when these researchers are operating on the basis of shared theoretical assumptions.

When 'doing' and 'reading' research, therefore, we have to pay attention to both theory *and* methodology. We have to choose methods that fit with our theoretical assumptions. But we also have to think carefully about the methodological choices we and others make, since these will also determine the type of research answers we generate.

Theory helps us get from *research questions* to *research answers*. It helps us make sense of research questions, by phrasing them in terms of a particular conceptual pathway. And, it guides us to certain methods which match that

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pathway (best = most valuable > look at data on financial value). But theories will not eliminate all diversity amongst research answers. And just because academics come from a similar theoretical tradition does not mean they agree when it comes to *how* they resolve research problems. When we read (and write) research we need to pay close attention to any theoretical and methodological choices guiding us from question to answer. And we need to be explicit about the theoretical/methodological choices we've made along the way – as well as their implications for the types of answer we produce.

About the author:

Michael Livesey is a PhD researcher at the University of Sheffield's Department of Politics and International Relations. His research explores the 'genealogy' of counter-terrorism practices in 1970s Britain. He has published in *E-International Relations*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, and the *European Journal of International Security*. He tweets @MALivesey.