Role of theory in dissertations

This piece discusses the role of theory in knowledge, traditional dissertations, and dissertations in practice. Conducting research has changed over the years, and so had some of its main ingredients. Therefore, it is only natural to raise questions about some of the established rules of research such as the presence of theory. There is often confusion of what theory does in a dissertation and how it informs the study. Also, what is theory and how it is different from conceptual theory? What is the conceptual framework and how does it differ from the conceptual theory? Let’s attempt to answer these questions.

*Note: Since I am writing this piece during COVID-19 time and I am constantly reading to my young daughter, there will be many quotes from Alice in Wonderland in this piece. I could not resist!*

1. What is theory?

*“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “ I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” (Carroll, 1865, p.60)*

Theory is a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world, and for the seasoned researcher, a way of predicting the future. But, what is it exactly and how it works? Well, the interpretation on what theory is may be different from one person to another, and that definition is likely to change over time. In a simple form, a theory is a set of defined expectations and rules on how the world works, and a theory is nested within a larger framework. I personally think that this larger framework is something that lives inside of us and is built gradually as we go through life. Everything that we read, everything we watch, everything we experience slowly constructs this set of principles of how we see life and it turns itself into a framework through which we view the world. As we develop as researchers, we read various theories, and some of those may ring true to us while others we dismiss. That selection process has to do with the larger framework and how we find the theory that aligns best with how we perceive and view the world. Once we have a theory, then we can detail how that fits with our dissertation.

*“How am I to get in?” asked Alice again in a louder tone.*

*“Are you to get in at all?” said the Footman.*

*“That’s the first question, you know.” (Carroll, 1865 p.80)*

So, what if you have a topic, but you have not found a theory yet? Where do you start? How do you find a theory? Even if you have not pronounced a theory, you still have this larger framework of how you view the world. You may have simply not found the theory that speaks to you. You need that “aha!” moment when you read a theory and you know that you inherently understand it completely. If this is the case, keep reading various theories until you find the one that seems to speak to you view of the world.

2. Theoretical framework

*“Well ! I ’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice ; “ but a grin without a cat!*

*It’ s the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!”(Carroll, 1865, p.94)*

If there is theory, there is a theoretical framework. Theories are grouped together into larger frameworks, we call theoretical framework. Often, we encounter similar theories that are all looking at the world through similar lenses but with a few different nuances to them. In broad terms they all belong to the same group. This group is the theoretical framework where various theories are nested in. A simple example would be *feminism.* There are many feminist theories out there from Marxist feminism, to matrix of domination, to hegemonic masculinity, and so many others. They all belong to the larger feminist framework even though they differ on details.

3. Conceptual framework

*“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.*

*“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “ at least—at least I mean what I say—that ’s the same thing, you know.”*

*“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “Why, you might just as well say that ‘ I see*

*what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘ I eat what I see’ !” p.97-98*

Conceptual framework, on the other hand, should not be confused with theoretical framework. We established that the theoretical framework is where different theories are grouped in together. The conceptual framework is a unique relationship that you are drawing out on your own constructs and variables of your study. The conceptual framework is utilizing your dissertation theory and predicting or drawing possible relationships between variables or constructs. In other words, the conceptual framework is your conceptual framework that works for your study and is unique on how you are employing the theory and other ingredients (constructs and variables) in your own work.

4. Traditional dissertations

*“and even if my head would go through,” thought poor Alice, “ it would be of very little use without my shoulders.” (Carroll, 1865, p.9)*

To put things in context, it is crucial to discuss the meaning of a traditional dissertation. A dissertation means an advancement of knowledge. It implies the discovery of something new and testing of the existing theories. In other words, we build new knowledge by constantly trying to falsify existing knowledge and testing existing theories (Popper, 1935). In other words, the sole purpose of conducting research was building new knowledge and in order to build new knowledge, we need to rely on existing knowledge. In some ways, that is the purpose of the literature review as well. We conduct the literature review in order to understand what is done on the topic before we came along with our ideas. That is as important as our own original work. The role of theory in a dissertation, therefore is closely tied to theory and theoretical framework where it belongs. Our own original study is simply an advancement or an attempt to falsify existing theories. Applied fields, however, such as social work have always argued for a different type of dissertation where there is a lot more emphasis in practice than in advancement of knowledge for the sake of knowledge.

5. Applied dissertations or dissertations in practice

*“Why,” said the Dodo, “ the best way to explain it is to do it.” (Carroll, 1865, p.33)*

The argument of the role of theory in applied dissertations is not a recent one. In fact, many researchers have brought up the idea that sometimes, practical problems are still an advancement of knowledge even though we may not have established a theory to guide us (Thyer, 2001, 2018). Others from the same field have argued that theory is in fact at the core of understanding a practical problem and one should not separate the two (Gomory, 2001). The discussion is open to interpretation, and even though it is true that a theory may not be a strict requirement for a dissertation in practice, one could always argue that the theory is still present, but simply not

Carroll, L. (1865). Alice in Wonderland, Macmillian Publishers.

Popper, K. (1935). *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, translation of *Logik der Forschung*, London: Hutchinson, 1959.

* How do we build knowledge

Theory and applied or practical dissertations (aka dissertations in practice)

* The argument about the role of theory in practical dissertations is not new (Thyer and Gomory).
* The fine line between requirement and robust studies