

THEORY IS A VERY PRACTICAL MATTER

Creating a theory, or being a theorist, is often described in contemptuous or derogatory terms. This is the case when you hear comments like “well, it’s only a theory” or “we are looking for something practical or applied”. Some people feel that a theory is always vague, abstract, speculative—really no more than a hunch or a guess and quite the opposite of a fact.

It is true that a theory without evidence or knowledge foundation is speculative. It is equally true, however, that a mass of research data can be meaningless unless it is organized into some sort of explanatory framework or context.

A theory provides the framework for simplifying and describing empirical data in a meaningful and profound way. A theory is a kind of map that represents the data in their relationship with one another. It attempts to bring data into some kind of order, to fit them into an overall structure in which each piece is an integral part. There are two voices of alert: 1) The map is never the same as the territory, so there is always space for surprises! 2) Sometimes the presentation of data reports are looking desperately for a theory or an explanation!

The thing is that theories are not restricted to science; we all use personal theories in our everyday interactions with others, specially within the work scenario. We may believe that “all people working within an organization are basically decent and productive” or that “people are basically for themselves”.

These suppositions are fragile theories. They are frameworks within which we place the data of our commonplace observations of other people. We usually form these theories on the basis of data derived from our perception of the behavior of those around us. The fact that personal theories are derived from observations is similar to formal theories in organizational sciences.

However, this is the only point of similarity. Personal theories have major weakness compared to the more fully scientific variety. In the first place, we usually derive our personal theories on the basis of a limited number and type of people or incidents. In contrast organizational scientists develop theory by systematically observing many people and many patterns than are generally found among the individual's circle of friends, and limited numbers of observations. **THE ORGANIZATIONAL THEORIST DRAWS ON MUCH BROADER RANGE OF DATA AND STUDIES TO SUPPORT HIS/HER THEORY.**

Another weakness of personal theories is the tendency to persist in our belief in the face of contradictory evidence. Once, it has been developed a theory about groups, people or units in general, or one person in particular, there is the tendency of seeing only those behaviors that confirm the personal theory and fail to see those that refute it.

Ideally, organizational theorists are not blinded by their theories. They should be able to observe reality as it is and not as they need it to be. Thus as my dearest professor Aaron Wildavsky instructed me, that an organizational scientist dares to "speak truth to power", avoiding stigma, stereotype or prejudice. Organizational theorists should be able to reject their own frameworks if sufficient new evidence against them is found. An interesting question to the history of organizational science is, what theories have been overcome on the basis of new and fresh knowledge?

Formal theories are tested repeatedly against reality, often by scientists other than the one who proposed and applied the theory. Personal theories are not so tested, either by the person that advances them or by another independent party.

While personal theories are used in the everyday interactions and relationships with other people, they differ in several ways from formal, researched and profoundly studied theories.

When working with organizations and engaging in formal interventions it is a matter of using systematically developed and formulated, comprehensive and complete approaches in accounting for the complex behaviors of people, groups, teams and units functioning in the organizational world. They have to be supported by actualized research and empirical knowledge.

Yes, one should not get the impression, that theories or conjectures about organizational reality are the sole approach to understanding issues of individual and organizational nature. The point is that organizational theorists should focus on theories, those studied and most important actualized frameworks that depend on profound knowledge for their validity and for their change and transformation relevance.

Theories start with creative ideas! A parenthesis here is that various kinds of ideas can be classified by their relationship to the authentication process. There are ideas systematically prepared for authentication (formal theories); ideas not derived from any systematic process (visions); ideas which could not survive any reasonable authentication process (illusions or fantasies); ideas which exempt themselves from any authentication process (myths); ideas known to have failed or certain to fail such processes (falsehoods) both mistakes and lies. The continuum of human thinking, at one end is pure science and at the other end is pure myth...

Organizations have to paid attention to the theories they use; examine the techniques of inquiry and the methods by which supporting data were gathered. It is necessary to establish the kind of data on which the theories in-used are based.

Existing theories in-used have to generate new research inquires that further investigate certain of its aspects, as well as new perspectives of assessment and intervention.

Only if this is performed with excellence and intelligence can an organizational theory be “reshaped”, “modified”, “re-framed”, “re-wired”, and as we prefer, elaborated or discarded on the basis of the new generated research.

Like Kurt Lewin instructed: There is nothing more practical than a good theory!