Soc 468&468S FALL 2012

GENERALITIES about theory, science, social science, interpretive-scientific and traditional-critical theories

1. Theory as **a perceptual and cognitive map**: contains **taken-for-granted assumptions and basic propositions about reality**; need not be formally stated or discursively available; results in 'reality' being 'available' to us. While theory/ies is/are, in principle, not the 'cause' of appearances and reality, without it/them we can have no contact with the 'world'.

2. Theory is, by definition, **general and abstract**. It consists of propositions about phenomena. A single proposition about a single (instance of a) phenomenon is not a theory. **A theory is a cluster or system of propositions about (kinds of) phenomena**. It imposes some order to perception by selecting what is to be attended to and how, and provides categories (i.e. concepts) for classifying/typifying items in the world. The 'phenomena' about which theories furnish systems of propositions need not be empirically "objectively" existing phenomena, i.e. material entities and events which exist independently of ANY observer or theorizer.

3. Formal theory and theorizing differ from informal theory and theorizing in that they are more explicit, disciplined and intended to be logically consistent. Informal theorizing is guided by the pragmatic principle of everyday life. The 'pragmatic principle' of formal theorizing differs from that which guides informal theorizing. Clear, formal, logically consistent theory is NOT required for perception and action.

4. **'Scientific'** theory seeks to predict, explain (and thereby enable us to control) ultimately empirical (i.e. in principle and ultimately, amenable to sense-perceptions, raw or aided by technology) phenomena. It is capable logically to derive hypotheses about or explaining phenomena that **CAN** be empirically falsified (i.e. are not true by definition, and do not follow merely logically) Scientific theories must be **BOTH** logically sound/consistent **AND** empirically verifiable (or falsifiable). Thus, a logical syllogism must be derivable from basic assumptions and premises, and the propositions thus derived (known as hypotheses or theorems) must be disprovable, falsifiable empirically.

5. The assumptions of a scientific theory need not be 'true' empirically. They are not, within the parameters of the theory, subject to empirical verification. They are provisionally accepted as true, and evaluation of a scientific theory depends **not** on the truth, or beauty, or moral acceptability of its assumption **but** on the 'usefulness' and empirical support (absence of empirical disconfirmation) of its derived propositions/hypotheses.

6. Science assumes that the subject matter, call it the 'universe', is non-random. It is bound or produced by basic ('eternal', not time- and place-bound, trans-contextual) structures and processes, such that concrete and time-bound phenomena are accounted for, or caused by, the operation of those basic structures and processes. Science assumes that the 'universe' is **knowable** by humans, i.e. that human beings can know what those basic structures and processes are. For science, this knowledge can be attained through the use of reason and methodical, disciplined observation/research; **not** through 'revelation', prayer, ritual, introspection, emotional or physical stimulation, etc. For (natural) science, the structures and processes that account for, that 'govern', the universe, are assumed to be independent of **any** observer. The 'universe' exists as such; it is not the mental creation of any one individual knower. The goal of science is to 'discover' the basic, eternal, not context-bound, not time-bound, structures and processes, the 'laws' of form and process, of an independently existing 'reality'.

7. For science, as traditionally understood, the 'universe' is not to be morally or esthetically evaluated (when 'doing' science). The goal of science is to develop knowledge about the universe that allows us to predict, explain and possibly control empirical phenomena. The 'laws' of the universe are assumed to be unchangeable. Our knowledge of them may change but that does **not** change the laws themselves. "Controlling' the universe, one of the goals of science as a knowledge system, does **not** entail changing the laws of the universe.

8. Thus, objectivity and 'detachment' vis-à-vis the universe itself and with regard to the possible uses of the knowledge of it produced through science are subsidiary values for science. They are valuable because they are claimed to be useful and/or indispensable for producing the kind of knowledge of the universe that science seeks and promises.

9. Can theories in the social sciences be 'scientific'? Is there such a thing as a 'social universe' that is part of the overall universe and thus can be assumed to have the same basic characteristics as discussed above?

10. 'Scientific' vs. 'interpretive' perspectives on the nature of the subject-matter of the social&cultural sciences, be that subject-matter 'man', 'spirit', 'society', individual or collective 'representations', etc. The more the subject-matter of the social&cultural sciences is seen (either ontologically or simply assumed for the purposes of analysis) as **'thing-like'**, as existing (like the physical, material universe) independently of human will, interpretation, cognition, etc., the more social/cultural sciences become indistinguishable from the natural sciences in their approach to their subject matter: **The same goals, the same methods, the same type of knowledge, the same 'control without being able to alter the basic laws' attitude**.

11. The more the subject-matter of the social&cultural sciences is seen as inextricably dependent on, and produced by, human will, interpretation, language etc., the more it is seen as a **symbolic**, rather than a material, **reality**, the more the social&cultural 'sciences' have to be qualitatively different from the natural sciences. **Interpretation, empathic understanding, 'translation', emphasis on the specific, particular, 'individual' become paramount**, rather than the quest for the discovery of either non-existent or trivial generic and eternal laws.

12. What aspects/dimensions of human beings and their societies are amenable to scientific analysis and knowledge? Are societies or social phenomena 'cultural or symbolic entities', thus not existing independently of their producers? Can they be explained, predicted and controlled? I.e. are they subject to basic structures and processes which operate in all contexts and across time? Can they be observed and described the same way that material, physically existing, phenomena can be? Do they 'exist' independently of ANY human cognition (as the material, empirical, natural universe is assumed to exist for 'science')? If not, then 'imitating' natural science in sociology and other social sciences is inappropriate. The very goal of developing secure knowledge about the social universe(s) created by human beings necessitates that our goals and methods ought to be appropriate to the subject-matter in question. The subject-matter in question for social scientists does not consist of directly observable and measurable 'events' or 'phenomena' in the sense in which it is (generally) claimed to be by natural science with regard to the natural universe, that which exists independently of ANY human involvement, will, choice, symbolic construction, meaning-weaving, emotion, rational or nonrational understanding, etc.

12. Are the objects of social science, the 'social universe', subject to eternal laws? Are they not (at least in part) the product of human (collective) praxis? If so, why should we take towards **THEM** the same detached, 'value-free' attitude as we do towards the natural world? Must we content ourselves with developing knowledge **ABOUT** society and people, as opposed to **FOR** them? Must the goal of our knowledge-seeking about the social world be to predict, and explain and control the social world while assuming that **ITS** basic 'laws' or 'law-like principles' are unchangeable and eternal?

13. Which aspects of the social universe are subject to eternal and universal, unchangeable 'laws' and which are not? Are beliefs and assumptions about the social universe part and parcel of what may be changeable? If beliefs and assumptions about the social world and its operation <u>are constituent parts of the social world, and are involved in its production and reproduction</u>, then challenging them, '***deconstructing***' them, showing them to be human products, not inherent in how the world is, <u>may</u> result in the transformation of the social world, including its basic structures and processes.

14. If the social world is (wholly or in part) the 'product' of human beings themselves, if it wouldn't exist without them and their physical and mental/symbolic actions, it **does** make sense to relate to it in a moral, esthetic or evaluative sense (i.e. ***critically***), to develop normative ideas as to what/how it "ought to be" (the so-called "***utopian vision***"), to seek to tie knowledge sought about it (or parts of it) with practical action (on the part of the scholar but also, and more importantly, the people themselves) guided by such knowledge that aims at, and is capable of, transforming it (not merely predicting, explaining, and controlling it, i.e. the ***instrumental or goal-rational pursuit of knowledge***) in the direction of normative ideals (i.e. ***value-rational pursuit of knowledge*** tied to transformative, emancipatory, revolutionary etc. ***praxis***).

15. The questions that arise if one accepts the foregoing are: are the two activities (describing, predicting and explaining the social world vs. developing a set of normative ideals as to how the social world, including its constituent parts or members, ought to be) to be pursued independently? Ought (descriptive, predictive and explanatory) knowledge developed about social worlds, past and present, not enter into one's constructions of normative ideals about the social world? Ought normative ideals about the social world not enter into or affect the pursuit of knowledge of how social worlds operate?

16. Value-judgments about the natural world do not make sense outside of a religious outlook on the physical/natural world. On the other hand, they certainly do make sense for those parts or aspects of the social and cultural world that are the products of human individual and collective choices (albeit not unconstrained by the natural/physical world and the effects of past human individual and collective choices).