



Theoriophobia, theoriophilia, theoriomania

Rachel H. Ellaway¹

Accepted: 1 February 2021

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. part of Springer Nature 2021

All brontosaurus are thin at one end, much, much thicker in the middle, and then thin again at the far end. (Chapman et al. 1989)

This Monty Python perspective on theory is illuminative on a number of levels, not least the pomposity of the researcher and the bemusement of her audience. Perhaps the most important point, at least in this context, is that this theory is patently true and yet risibly pointless. The example provides a starting point for this editorial.

The full name of this Journal is *Advances in Health Sciences Education: Theory and Practice*, which rather unambiguously positions theory as a key concern of the Journal. In this issue, the first in volume 26, we launch a new column dedicated to articles that consider the role, position, and articulation of theory in health professions education in all its many expressions and contexts. The first article in this column (Varpio and Ellaway 2021) considers theory as being in a dyadic and cyclical relationship with empiricism; theory guides action, action informs theory. I encourage you to read this article and reflect on its applications and implications for your own scholarly endeavours. Having said that, I am sure that there will be those reading this who will be relieved to know that I will not be presenting yet another manifesto on theory in this editorial. Some of you may be tired of theoretical discussions, others may simply be more interested in other matters. However, it is exactly because there are some who find theory troubling that I focus on scholarly dispositions to theory in this editorial.

I will start by outlining some orientations to theory that scholars in our field may have seen or experienced themselves. I therefore ask readers to consider to what extent they see themselves, their colleagues, or others they know in the following, which I have hypothesized from the entirely non-existent Diagnostic Manual of Theoretical Disorders. I should say too that theoriophobia is not my creation (see Sandercock 2004), but theoriophilia does seem to be an original term; my apologies if it is not.

Theoriophobia is marked by a fear, rejection or disengagement with theory. This may involve a deep antipathy to theory in general or to specific theories, it might focus on certain aspects of theory such as creating, adapting, or critiquing theory, and it may be an antipathy in regard to theory in one's own work or in the work of others. Common theiophobic indicators include: 'theory doesn't apply to my work (or this work)'; 'theory doesn't help me in my/this work'; 'theory is too complicated or obscure to be of any practical use to me'; 'theory is too complicated or obscure to be of any practical use to my readers';

✉ Rachel H. Ellaway
rachel.ellaway@ucalgary.ca

¹ Department of Community Health Sciences and Office of Health and Medical Education Scholarship, Cumming School of Medicine, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

'there are too many theories so using theory seems arbitrary and contrived'; and 'theories are not something I am familiar with or feel competent using'. Individual teoriaphobia can arise in theory-engaged cultures as well as in cultures that devalue or downplay theory. It is a slow onset chronic condition that can go unnoticed until diagnosed through routine screening such as peer review. False positives are possible, for example, a disinclination to engage with theory that does not exist, is not relevant, or is not useful is not a phobic reaction. A particularly extreme form of teoriaphobia is 'theory paranoia' (quite different to conspiracy theorists) the tendency to see all theory as ideologically suspect.

Theoriophilia is marked by an unusual love of theory, perhaps a little too intensely to maintain objectivity and rationality. As with teoriaphobia, this philic form may focus either on theory in general or on specific theories, and it may reflect specific applications of theory. The most common teoriaphiliac indicator is a tendency to overemphasize or overfocus on theoretical matters to the detriment of other parts of a study. Other signs can include the need to impose a strict adherence to theory in others (theory policing), or the need to grow one's own theories despite the existence of serviceable alternatives (theory replicators). Theoriophilia can develop within a theory-obsessed culture or spontaneously in individuals who become entranced by the beauty and power of particular theoretical positions. False positives are possible, for example, orienting a body of scholarly work around exploring or developing substantive theory is not a philic reaction.

Other unusual roles and positions related to theory can include: theory curators (a compelling need to care for theory, particularly old and fragile theories or strange and exotic ones); theory anarchists (a compelling need to disregard or even tear up the rules of theory); and theory retrofitters (justifying a study or its findings by making arbitrary connections between their work and a range of disconnected theories). These may or may not be problematic according to context, the levels and forms of activity involved, and the goals of the scholars involved.

Although I have painted these philic and phobic reactions as problematic, they need not be. My inclusion of false positives in my fictional clinical vignettes is an important element therefore, not least because how much or in what ways theory does or might play a part in scholarship is bound by context. It is not surprising (or at least it should not be surprising) that scholars, particularly in a largely applied field such as HPE, have differing perspectives and ideologies related to theory. As an indication of this, AHSE is, it might be argued by teoriaphobes, a somewhat teoriaphiliac journal. Theoriaphiliacs on the other hand may still decry the absence of theory in some of the work we publish. The aim of this Journal is not to define or impose a single right way of engaging with theory in scholarly writing, but rather to ensure that contributors and readers consider its place and utility in the differing kinds of work we engage with.

According to Glassick et al. (1997) theory does not in and of itself need to be present for something to be scholarly, only that such work should involve clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, and reflective critique. Theory can play a role in any and all of these six dimensions of scholarship, but it does not have to do so. Indeed, theory can ground scholarship, it can guide scholarship, it can be tested by scholarship, and it can be generated by scholarship, but only when it is useful, and it logically makes sense to do so.

In the often rather messy real world of the health professions education sciences, the dispositions I have described are perhaps less black and white or extreme, but they can nevertheless be problematic in a journal such as this where theory is a key part of our scope. As an editor I see many papers that we reject because they fail to consider theory when it is clearly suggested or required by the methodological position taken. I see papers where

theory is generated apparently without checking to see whether these theories have already been articulated. I see papers that suggest they will engage with or build theory and then do not do so. I see papers that use theory in scattershot and stochastic ways without any logical sense of how they advance the knowledge claims the work is making. I also see papers that robustly engage with theory in ways that strengthen their work and make significant contributions to the field. I will leave it to you to reflect on which of these approaches to using theory are more likely to be published.

The more astute among you (particularly if you read the paper or the online version of the journal rather than selected papers identified through, say, Pubmed) may have noticed our new cover design. The diagonal split design reflects the duality of ‘theory and practice’ in our title. I may well return to practice and the dyadic relationship between theory and practice in a future editorial. For now, I would simply ask that all those seeking to have their work published in *Advances* (as well as those reading the work we do publish) think carefully about how the papers they create or read could and should engage with theory, and how they actually do engage with theory. In particular, is the authors’ position on theory explicit, defensible, and proportionate to the paradigm being used, the questions or hypotheses being explored, and the knowledge claims being made? If not, then what are the implications for their findings and arguments?

Finally, and turning to more practical matters, I am pleased to welcome the new associate editors joining the AHSE editorial board this year (see inside front cover for the full list) and I thank those who have stepped down over the past year for their hard work and dedication. The last 12 months were particularly challenging for us as a Journal as well as individually, in part because of the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 emergency, but also because we received twice as many submissions as we had seen the previous year. Thank you to everyone, editors, authors, reviewers, and administrators who did and who continue to do the critical work in making this Journal a home for some of the very best scholarly work in our field.

Rachel Ellaway, January 2021

References

- Chapman, G., Cleese, J., Gilliam, T., Idle, E., Jones, T., & Palin, M. (1989). *The complete Monty Python’s flying circus: All the words* (Vol. 2, pp. 118–120). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Glassick, C. E., Huber, M. R., & Maeroff, G. I. (1997). *Scholarship assessed: Evaluation of the professoriate*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sandercock, L. (2004). Editorial. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 5(2), 141–144.
- Varpio, L., & Ellaway, R. H. (2021). Shaping our worldviews: A conversation about and of theory. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-021-10033-2>.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.