

Theories in mass communication



Submitted] Social Science and Theory Although dictionaries such as American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2007 ed.) and Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (2005 ed.) have different ways of expressing the meaning of the word, it can be deduced that the word 'theory' pertains to a set of statements or principles devised to explain a group of facts or phenomena, especially one that has been repeatedly tested or is widely accepted and can be used to make predictions about natural phenomena. The use of theories in the Social Sciences is very important in understanding social structures and phenomena because it provides a framework which the social scientist can use to understand or to explain such social occurrences. Social theories provide a rational, local and objective basis for discussion of concepts related to society and can uncover deep-seated relationships that are not readily apparent. It provides different and revealing perspectives on issues and represents the desire for knowledge through 'aposteriori' methods of discovery rather than 'apriori' methods of tradition.

There are different schools of thought on how social phenomena should be discussed and interpreted. Post-positivist theories are those that reject the view of the world in a purely scientific manner. This is because human knowledge is not founded on unchallengeable, rock solid-foundations and is in fact fallible. While experimental methodology can be used to investigate social phenomena, it is often impossible or unethical to use the kind of carefully controlled laboratory studies characteristic of physics or chemistry for social phenomena. Conceptually, it is often noted that unlike the subjects of natural science, people are reflexive. That is, they may alter their behavior based on the presence or findings of the researcher. This implies that there is no single, unifying all-encompassing truth emphasizing the need for

multiple measures and observations. It is possible to arrive at a consensus by a process called triangulation or the consideration of other observations from other social scientists. (Bohman 1991, p. 15-17)

While post-positivist theories deal with the descriptions of 'what is', normative theories deal with evaluations of 'what should be'. Much of the social-science tradition has been structured by the exclusion of normative analysis, which is often viewed as dependent upon subjective values and therefore more properly the subject of politics or individual preference. Normative theory is more concerned with the investigation of what should be lacking in our society (Steuber and Kogler 2000, p. 222-224). Another theory that has become very popular is the so-called Critical Theory. According to Horkheimer (1982), a "critical" theory may be distinguished from a "traditional" theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation, "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (p. 244). Critical theory combines the need of multi-perspective understanding of social phenomena and the normative approach of evaluating what should be present to improve social conditions. Social scientist must not only come to know of what is happening and what should be happening. They should also be aware of how the understanding that we have can be used to 'emancipate' men from various hold of social phenomena.

While it is true that gaining information on our society is important, I firmly believe that it would be useless without making use of it to improve the current and future condition of our society. This belief of mine makes me prefer critical theory as the best choice between the three. We should understand the world not purely for the sake of knowledge but also for the

sake of improving ourselves and society as a whole.

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