Section 12
Constructing a Social Science Argument:
Recognising and Using Theory

Introduction
This section looks at recognising and using theory in your work. Reading books articles, and writing essays and seminar presentations all require being able to recognise theory and use it to construct an argument. Firstly, this section will cover what theory is, why it is important, and where it is used. It will then look at some examples of theory and how you can use it and apply it in your work.

By the end of this section you should understand what a theory is, be able to recognise it in your reading, and use theories to construct arguments in your work.

What is theory?

- “Theory is an essential part of the social sciences” (Smith 1998:12)

- Theory is “often….an answer to a why? question”

- “For example, Why does the sun shine?; why are some people poor and others rich?; why are so many people unemployed in western capitalist societies?” (Gilbert 1993: 21)

So, although the word ‘theory’ can seem scary and mystifying, it actually means ‘an explanation’ for something, for why something happens. So, if you observe a sociological phenomenon such as some people being poor and others rich, there are probably several explanations offered by sociologists as to why this is the case. These explanations are theories. There are many different theories to explain all kinds of phenomena in our society, and all have corresponding reasons why they are supported by various sociologists, such as evidence from observation and empirical study.
There is, however, an important distinction between definitions of phenomenon and theories for phenomenon. Definitions are descriptions and theories explanations.

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In addition to being answers to why questions, to explaining evidence from research, theories can also “provide predictions” (Gilbert 1993:21) and consequently, be the beginning of more research into that question.

For example, if there is a theory that interest rates and unemployment are connected then “if the interest rate is falling and the theory is correct, it would be possible to predict that the unemployment rate will also fall” (Gilbert 1993:21).

Formulating theories requires us to ask “Theoretical Questions”. These are: “Questions posed by the sociologist when seeking to explain a particular range of observed events. The asking of theoretical questions is crucial to allowing us to generalise about the nature of social life.” (Giddens, 1989)

Although it is useful to think of a theory as an explanation for something, a ‘theory’ does have important differences from what is known as “common sense beliefs” (Giddens 1989) which are defined by Giddens as “Widely shared beliefs about the social or natural worlds held by lay members of society” (Giddens 1989:736). These beliefs may have no evidence to back them up, but are still used as explanations for things that happen in the ‘social or natural worlds’.

**Theoretical Approaches**
These are different from ‘theory’. Examples of theoretical approaches include Marxism and functionalism. Giddens describes theoretical approaches as “broad overall orientations to the subject-matter of sociology” [or another discipline] and theory in contrast is “more narrowly focused, and represent attempts to explain particular sets of conditions or types of occurrence” (Giddens 1989:711)
Theoretical Dilemmas

Because theories are formulated from observing social phenomena, behaviour and discourse, they are the result of people interpreting these things. This is why there is no one definitive way of explaining why something is the way it is or happens the way it does. This is where you get what are called ‘theoretical dilemmas’—arguments about which theory or theoretical approach is the right one for explaining something.

"Theoretical Dilemma: A basic theoretical problem that forms the focus of long-standing debates in sociology." (Giddens, 1989)

Some theoretical approaches do agree on some aspects of social life that they examine. For example, Marxism and functionalism both look at society as a whole such as “How do societies hold together?” (Giddens 1989: 702). However, they disagree about the answer to this question. In functionalism, all aspects of society are working together for the good of the society as a whole. This means that there has to be a consensus among groups living in society. In Marxism, there is a conflict in interests of the different groups in society, and power is concentrated in the hands of those owning the means of production.

So, in your reading, you need to be able to recognise the theories, the ‘explanations’ that writers put forward for events, behaviour, etc. You then need to be able to apply these theories in your work. However, before we go on to consider the application of theory, we need to look at where theory is used and why it is so important in the social sciences.
Where is theory used?
Theory is used in journal articles, books, policy reports and newspaper articles. In fact anywhere the author is attempting to explain statistics or research evidence they are employing theories. As a student, you will need to use and assess explanations of evidence and social phenomena (theories) in your work, and assess these in order to construct a social science argument.

Examples of theoretical approaches

Feminism: looks at inequalities between women and men and what to do to change these

Functionalism: society functions by consensus

Marxism: “All societies contain basic contradictions” (Haralambos and Holborn 2000)....and these are characterised by one group exploiting another. In capitalism specifically this is exploitation of the working class by the ruling class

Examples of theories

Stanworth (1983): Theory about girls and classroom interaction: explanation of why girls were disadvantaged in further education

Durkheim: Theories about why people commit suicide, why these numbers tend to be greater or fewer in certain communities

Braverman: Theories of labour: explanations of work, and the ‘degradation of work’
Why is it important?

“The only thing which makes fact-gathering useful and manageable is the *theory* shaping the research.” (Northedge, 1990)

Researchers have theories (explanations) and they can use these for broadly two purposes: to inform a research study, and give a new study direction, or to make the data from that study more manageable.

As explained earlier, an explanation may be used to *hypothesise* or predict what may happen in a situation. A study is then designed to test this, and then the explanation (theory) may be modified in line with what was found in the study.

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**Induction and Deduction – 2 ways in which theories can develop:**

- *Induction:* an example of an event or behaviour is observed and, then more of these examples are observed. The observer then “constructs a general theory to cover all cases”

- *Deduction:* The theory is then used to “explain particular observations”

“Thus, induction is the technique for generating theories and deduction is the technique for applying them” (Gilbert 1993:23)

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So, any statistics or evidence that you see are only useful when backed up with explanation. For example: “nearly 1 in 5 counselling sessions held in Relate Centres in England on 28/9/00 mentioned domestic violence as an issue in the marriage” (Stanko 2000)

This tells us something about the counselling sessions on that particular day, but very little about *why* this is the case, which is where theory can help. Different theories will represent different explanations of why it is that 1 in 5 counselling sessions that day brought up domestic violence as an issue.
When using theory to construct a social science argument you need to weigh up various theories and decide which ones you support as part of making your argument in an essay or presentation. When two theories are competing for your attention, they may have a number of empirical studies, interview quotes and statistics to back up their point.

**Suggested exercise:**

Read examples of research in course textbooks, or in suggested chapters on your reading lists. What explanations [theories] are offered for the results found? Are conflicting theories discussed? Which explanations do you find most convincing and why?