

# **RESEARCH DESIGNS AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR DOING HERMENEUTICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND THEORETICAL DISSERTATIONS AND THESES**

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# Introduction

- In my study of philosophy, theory, and human inquiry in the arts, humanities, and sciences, I have become aware of certain templates, if one is permitted to use this word, that have been useful in carrying out theoretical research.
- I have taken the liberty to associate hermeneutics, philosophy, and theory because I have found in my inquiry of these domains there is much in common in regard to what appears to occur in dissertation and thesis research, as well as the research traditions associated with each term.
- Use of the phrase theoretical research in this presentation is to be generalized to all three terms.

# Introduction

- Often one has little help but to study those who have completed such a dissertation or thesis to learn and imagine what the inquirer went through to arrive at the final table of contents in the document.
- I wondered whether there could be a template, or what I would call a research design, for a theoretical dissertation or thesis.



# Research Design

## theoretical

- A theoretical research design would be an organization of constituent elements that gives to inquiry a pattern that can be used again and again.
- It is conceived to be a template because it has proven productive to (a) explicate the treatise and thesis, (b) advance theory of the subject domain, (c) spurn the inquirer to articulate what can become known, and/or (d) provide a skeleton that facilitates communication to others what one has formulated, explicated, and come to understand.



# Research Design

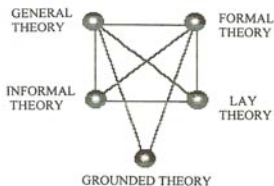
experimental, empirical

- In empirically oriented approaches to research, research design is the organization of constituent elements that gives it a pattern, a template that can be used again and again.
- It consists of the unique spatial configuration of conditions, participants, time allocations, and resources needed, for example, to conduct the experiment.

# What Is Theory?

- What do I mean by theory? (I am using the word very liberally.)
- There is the scientific usage of theory in regard to theory testing and theory building.
- Theory can bind together a set of ideas and concepts that have explanatory value, bringing meaning to our comprehension of a knowledge domain. (Ex: Bandura's social learning theory based on modeling behavior)
- In contrast, there is use of the term to mean an over-arching framework that contains a body of interrelated concepts; the theory is a rubric and lens but not necessarily an explanation. (Ex: Bertalanffy's General Theory of Systems)

# Kinds of Theory\*



**GENERAL THEORY:** A general conceptual framework that organizes a large body of concepts and principles and that pertains to a wide variety of phenomena.

**INFORMAL THEORY:** A network of concepts and principles that supposedly accounts for a circumscribed subject area, integrated by a set of hypotheses and/or assertions based on an established body of disciplined inquiry.

**LAY THEORY:** Speculation and opinion on a subject based on incidental associations among daily events.

**FORMAL THEORY:** A cogent set of logically interrelated propositions, axioms, and laws, each aspect of which has been derived by logical application, such as deductive and/or inductive logic, and tested through hypothesis formulation and empirically based disciplined inquiry.

**GROUNDED THEORY:** A category scheme generated by the constant comparative research method, or such equivalent, pertaining to a specific human experience based phenomenon and revealing a network of hierarchical relations among the categories.

\*from A. Collen, 2003, *Systemic Change Through Praxis and Inquiry. Praxiology: The International Annual of Practical Philosophy and Methodology* (Vol. 11), p. 219. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

# Theory



- Please keep in mind the possible meanings and uses of the term theory to maximize potential application of the templates.
- It is critical that the term be clearly defined for purposes of inquiry, so that readers will not misunderstand what you mean by theory, and further, use of a research design to expedite theoretical research.



# Introduction

- For many, the topic area is an enigma!
- Imagine asking a hermeneutic, “Do you have a template to facilitate your journey of explication through the hermeneutic circle?”
- Or asking a theoretician, “Is there a pattern to the manner in which you lay out your theory and argue for your theory as more plausible than its rivals?”
- Finally, asking a philosopher, “How do you develop and fit soundly altogether the flow of your thinking to convince someone that what you have to say is the truth?”
- I can only imagine these heady beings thinking you are either misguided or crazy.

# The Search for Templates

- Despite risks of strange looks and accusations of lunacy, I have insistently searched for such designs potentially productive for theoretical inquiry. And I am pleased to report that yes, my quest has been answered to some level of satisfaction.
- Repeatedly asking the question “What do philosophers do to do their inquiries?” and peaking my curiosity whether such templates exist has helped me to make the seemingly invisible more visible, the implicit more explicit.
- I believe I have found some such guidance that hopefully can be useful to those conducting theoretical research.

# Introduction

- The purpose of this presentation is briefly to look at eight templates (research designs).
- Consider your learning objective to become sufficiently familiar with them to pinpoint the more productive one for your theoretical inquiry should that be your propensity.
- In the slides to follow, I rough out for your consideration these designs: Comparative, Deductive, Inductive, Abductive, Syncretic, Dialectic, Hermeneutic, and Systemic.



# Comparative

- Compare and contrast two known theories that presumably account for the same phenomena. Let us call them Theory A and B.
- What are the similarities between A and B?
- What are the differences between A and B?





# Comparative

- Comparisons are to be accomplished through exposition of descriptive definitions, contrasting features, common characteristics, published empirical tests of each theory, published arguments for and against A and B, and illustrations of A and B.



# Comparative

Culmination of inquiry is the argument for a position on whether one theory is more valid, explanatory, useful, parsimonious than the other. Perhaps, each has merit that should be studied further. Perhaps, some blend is possible, or critical test that will finally refute one in favor of the other.



# Comparative

- Theory A c/c Theory B  $\Rightarrow$  X, where X is an explicated set of comparisons.



# Comparative

- The origin of this template stems from Greek, Roman, and Scholastic philosophies.





# Deductive

- Describe the theory, its key constructs, and what the theory is supposed to explain. What can be deduced?
- If the theory holds validity, one should be able to deduce what should be and should happen if the theory accounts for why a phenomenon is the way it is.



# Deductive

- In what particular realm does the theory apply, that is, what are its boundaries and delimitations?



# Deductive

- One need not do the actual empirical work to test the theory, though one could complement the research with illustrative “thought experiments” that illustrate the presumed validity of the theory to stimulate further research by those who would conduct the “real experiments” to test the theory.





# Deductive

- Theory X  $\Rightarrow$  Hypotheses 1, 2, 3 . . . n, where any number of deductions called hypotheses can be posed that presumably can test the validity of the theory.





# Deductive



- The origin of this template stems from Greek philosophy.

# Deductive



- We think immediately of the philosophical contributions of Socrates (469-399 BCE), Plato (427-347 BCE), and Aristotle (384-322 BCE).

# Inductive

- From accumulation of cases relevant to the existence of a phenomenon, what theory can be constructed to explain it? From the set of cases, what theory can be induced?





# Inductive



- One makes an inference from one case to the next as to whether such a test (an hypothesis) of the theory by case lends validity to the proposed theory. As the cases mount that support and refute the theory, one is led to either revise or confirm various aspects constituting the description of the theory.
- The cases applied to the theory need not be actually collected, but each may be a research publication pertinent to the phenomenon and theory.



# Inductive

- The challenge in using this template is to introduce the problem, describe the territory within which the cases occur, take readers through cases building theoretical argument in favor and disfavor of rival theories until finally repeated inductions (verifications of the hypothesis) lead to the favored theory.
- Schematized, the Inductive template is as follows: Cases 1 + 2 - 3 + 4 - 5. . . + n => Theory X, the theory induced from cumulated cases.



# Inductive

- The origin of this template stems from the philosophical contributions of Frances Bacon (1561-1626).



# Abductive

- From a central construct, a starting place in the theoretical territory, connect the construct to another, then to another, and yet another, until a set of associated and interrelated key theoretical constructs become known. From this set, what theory of their origin and association can be abduced?



# Abductive

- This template takes the inquirer, and eventually readers once written, on a journey about the pond of theory, metaphorically speaking, jumping from lily pad to pad.
- Through a sequence of linked landings (constructs, cases) that manifest pragmatic plausibility, cases (hypotheses) that can be linked back to the theory and argued to be cases explained by the theory, the possibility of theory building emerges.





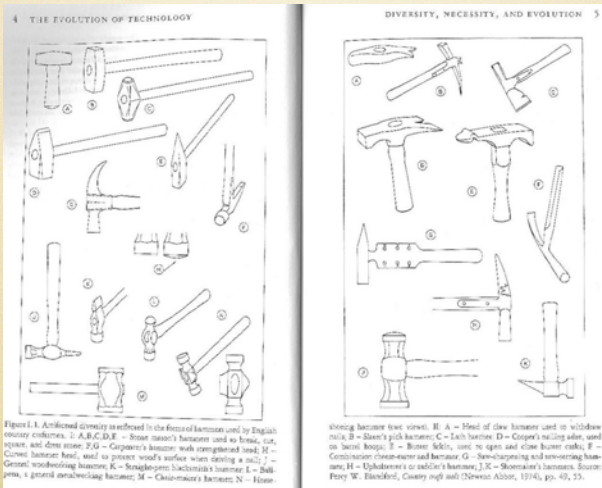
# Abductive

- Once all key constructs (cases, hypotheses) are known and thoroughly explicated, the challenge is to integrated them, like building a nest, into an internally consistent explanation.



# Abductive

- Schematized, this template is: Case 1  $\diamond$  2  $\diamond$  3  $\diamond$  ... n  $\Rightarrow$  Theory X



# Abductive

- The origin of this template stems from the philosophical contributions of Charles Peirce.



Charles-Santiago-Sanders  
Peirce  
1839 - 1914

# Syncretic

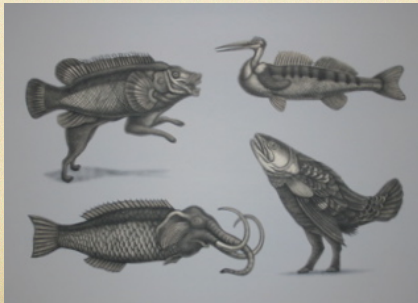
- This approach to theoretical research involves an eclectic selection of key ideas (constructs) from the theories that presumably explain a subject domain of interest.
- The explication is a presentation and discussion of these key constructs that de facto becomes a theory derived, based upon, and forged (in the same sense that steel is produced) from the various theories of the knowledge domain under study.





# Syncretic

- The result is recognized as a theoretical advance over the older theories from which it came.
- It is accompanied by an argument as to why the newer rendition (theory) should be taken more seriously than the theories whose elements made it possible.



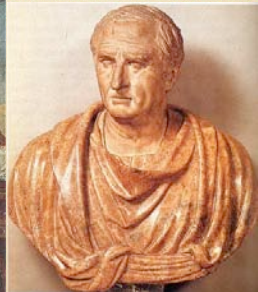
# Syncretic

- Schematized, it is: Elements 1 and 2 of Theory A + Elements 3 and 4 of Theory B + Element 5 of Theory C >>> Theory X



# Syncretic

- The origin of this template stems from the philosophical contributions of the Roman philosophers, whose syncretic approach in the last century BCE entailed selected ideas from rival schools of Greek philosophy synthesized into distinctively Roman philosophies. Most enduring were the philosophical works of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE).



# Dialectic

- This design is useful to examine an idea in relation to its opposite. It may be easily set up for inquiry by recognizing the tension that inherently coexists in any dichotomy comprised of a pair of opposites.





# Dialectic



- First, the idea (theory, proposition) is posed, termed the thesis.
- Second, its opposite, (contra-idea or negation) is posed, termed the antithesis.
- Instead of a comparative or syncretic approach described previously, the inquirer argues for a unique synthesis of what might at first appear to be an either/or presentation.

# Dialectic

- The task one pursues carrying out this design is to articulate clearly both sides or theories to arrive at a blend or hybrid theory.
- Argue for Theory A. Then argue for its opposite, or opposing theory, Theory B. Finally, find a means to bring both together into a unique synthesis that can supplant both prior theories-- often no easy task.

# Dialectic



- Thesis + Antithesis => Synthesis

# Dialectic

- The source for this template stems from the philosophical contributions of Georg Hegel (1770-1830), who famously rendered this approach to explication by following a course of argumentation that is substantively this design.





# Hermeneutic

- The term hermeneutics has been generally understood to mean approaches to inquiry that rely exclusively on the interpretation of text.
- It all began with the challenges of understanding scripture and sacred texts, especially when translated from one language into another, for example from Aramaic to Greek, and Greek to Latin.



# Hermeneutic

- Biblical hermeneutics seems the source from which so many streams have emerged, and then streams from those streams, such that today the idea of text has become very broad indeed.



# Hermeneutic

- What is text? The construct is being applied to not only recently discovered religious documents at one extreme, to interview transcripts in the middle, to real time video at the other extreme.
- The definition has expanded from ink scratches on a dusty document to the flow of events through time (a kind of text), all of which are subject to hermeneutic analysis.
- Hermeneutically oriented inquirers have this gamut of potentiality, and it is critical the inquirer define cautiously what is meant by hermeneutics in a dissertation or thesis.



# Hermeneutic

- Central to this design is the construct known as the hermeneutic circle, likely its distinguishing characteristic relative to the other designs.





# Hermeneutic

- Hermeneutic circle is inseparably tied to layered interpretations, most easily understood as writing in the margins what you think the text means, an exegesis. Then someone else comes along and does it too, but based on the original text and your interpretation, hence a second layer over the text.
- This process continues over decades, even centuries of use, yielding a rich body of meanings.
- Cumulative exegesis is characteristic of this kind of theoretical research.

# Hermeneutic

- The essential idea of the circle is that the inquirer first enters inquiry somewhat naive.
- As he or she proceeds to study the various sources that reveal and clear a place to know the phenomenon of inquiry, this naivete gives way to a shallow though substantive understanding of the phenomenon.
- At some point in one's study, one begins to explicate this journey and what is becoming known by means of it.

# Hermeneutic

- Having concluded once through the circle one realizes not only that one knows more than before, but that there is much, much more to know.
- As is typical to inquiry, more questions appear than answers.
- Hence one enters the circle once more, you might say, the second go around.
- This iterative feature of hermeneutical inquiry is repeated until in depth understanding has been reached.

# Hermeneutic

- Some prefer the metaphor of spiral rather than circle to describe hermeneutical inquiry as a process.



- The process can entail several iterations, several years, all of which lead to a magnum opus on the subject of inquiry.



# Hermeneutic

- $\Omega_1 \ggg \Omega_2 \ggg \Omega_3 \ggg \dots \Omega_n \Rightarrow \text{Theory X}$



# Systemic



- The perspectivism of systems theory serves to provide yet another theoretical template.
- One can often approach a knowledge domain from various points of view.

# Systemic

- This design becomes easily apparent when one realizes that various fields of study and disciplines bring a special viewpoint to a research focus.
- For example, a theory of trauma due to war can be viewed from the social, economic, psychological, and physical points of view.
- One need not be confined to one point of view in theoretical research that allows interdisciplinary studies.
- Systemics emphasizes that the confluence of the chosen perspectives allow integrated study to arrive at a more comprehensive, multi-dimensional explanation of what is studied.

# Systemic

- Executing this design in a theoretical inquiry would involve the rationale for selecting the chosen perspectives, the study of the subject domain from each perspective, followed by their integration to arrive at the holistic explanation (theory).





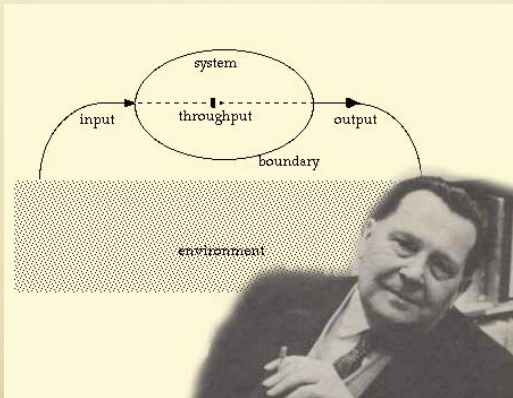
# Systemic

- Perspectives  $1 + 2 + 3 \dots + n \Rightarrow$  the Whole, where the Whole can be defined in terms of the theory, explication, or integration of the subject domain.



# Systemic

- The source for the Systemic design comes from philosophical contributions of Ludwig von Bertalanffy to the General Theory of Systems.



# What research design?



# Conclusion

- Like theory, design is an idea. It is a construct that brings organization to human inquiry, hence the phrase research design.
- Designs are found in almost everything we do. Note the vital roles they play for the architect, cabinet maker, clothier, potter, shoemaker, and weaver.





# Conclusion

- Human beings discover and employ patterns, i.e. designs that enable them to do what they do.
- The design is the pattern or template, and it is up to the inquirer to provide the substance, that is, the skin, bones, flesh, and body that makes the inquiry what it is.



# Conclusion

- Let us summarize by means of the schematics. The eight research designs covered, having potential application for theoretical research are:

Comparative: Theory A c/c Theory B  $\Rightarrow$  X Comparisons

Deductive: Theory X  $\Rightarrow$  Hypotheses 1, 2, 3 . . . n

Inductive: Cases 1 + 2 - 3 + 4 - 5 . . . + n  $\Rightarrow$  Theory X

Abductive: Case 1  $\langle \rangle$  Case 2  $\langle \rangle$  Case 3  $\langle \rangle$  . . . Case n  $\Rightarrow$  Theory X

Syncretic: Elements 1 and 2 of Theory A + Elements 3 and 4 of Theory B  
+ Element 5 of Theory C  $\gggg$  Theory X

Dialectic: Thesis + Antithesis  $\Rightarrow$  Synthesis

Hermeneutic:  $\Omega 1 \gggg \Omega 2 \gggg \Omega 3 \gggg \dots \Omega n \Rightarrow$  Theory X

Systemic: Perspectives 1 + 2 + 3 . . . + n  $\Rightarrow$  the Whole

# Conclusion

- The template helps to bring structure and direction to inquiry, but it should not straight-jacket the process that in any way retards or derails inquiry. Clearly, each design is delimiting of its path, and knowing which template best fits what one seeks to know can be tricky.
- Thus, at the very least, my desire is that a study of these eight designs stimulates possibilities for guiding theoretical inquiry, enhances its feasibility, and facilitates its process productively.
- Moreover, consultation with your dissertation and thesis committee close at hand is always advised.

The End





# Additional Research Designs?

- Analytical Philosophy (analog to scientific analysis)
- Critical Theory (Frankfurt School of Philosophy)



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