

## Levels of Theory

| Level     | Focus   | How They Are Used  |
|-----------|---|--|
| Grand     | <p>These theories are concerned with the “broad sweep” of human society, with how human social structures and processes in general “work” or evolve. I think of them more as “theoretical stance” or “theoretical perspective” than “working theory.” They are highly conceptual in nature and usually do not develop from research, but rather from “leaps in understanding.” The (apparently false) story that Newton developed his sweeping contribution to our understanding of mass, gravity and momentum when an apple fell on his head from a tree is an example of one of these leaps.</p>                                      | <p>These grand theories are not very useful for the kind of research that you will want to do. However, most of us do draw on their ideas every day and their original key constructs (like race, class, social networks) remain the cornerstones of most social science, just as “selection” remains a key for biology and gravity for physics. Six or seven major “grand” theoretical perspectives have contributed enormously to social theory. Early social theorists developed most of these – Marx, Durkheim, DuBois – as they struggled to understand society. Other early “grand theorists” were Darwin and Newton in biology and physics.</p>   |
| Mid-Range | <p>These theories deal with specific <b>classes of</b> human behavior – like conflict, identity, or behavior change. For example, there are several mid-range theories that explain purposeful behavior and they are very useful in helping us develop interventions to change behavior. The theory of planned behavior is one. The health belief model is another. Mid-range theories do <b>NOT</b> deal with a specific <b>topic</b> (like drinking). There is <b>no</b> theory of drinking; there are several theories of risk-taking behavior or of personality disorders that could help us understand why people binge drink.</p> | <p>These are the theories that we use in the vast majority of social (or biological or physical) research. Most of them in the social sciences grew out of the grand theories. For example, Simmel introduced the concept of social networks. Later theorists took this idea and developed a whole set of theories called “exchange theory” that explored the role of social exchange as a fundamental component of human interaction. Individual researchers apply these theories to specific problems, topics or situations. For example, many health workers use exchange theory to understand health behaviors and fashion interventions to change that behavior. They focus on the role of social networks and social support in health behaviors.</p>  |
| Micro     | <p>These may not be “theories” in the usual sense of the term because they focus on understanding or explaining the processes or phenomena that occur under a specific set of conditions (in one place, with one group of people), or with anomalous findings.</p>  | <p>Micro-theories focus on explaining what happened at this place, with these people, at this time – not offering general explanations. Often, these theories arise because we see something that our existing theories simply cannot explain. We develop a micro-theory – sort of a disconnected piece of a theory in many cases – to describe what we have observed. Over time, research may show that our “piece of a theory” or micro-theory fits into other theories, or we “add pieces” and end up with a new theory. For example, I am very interested in the relatively new area of educational neuroscience, which deals with understanding how learning occurs at the brain (cellular) level. The original research that sparked the theories that form the core of educational neuroscience was with people who suffered brain injuries. Something was “wrong” with their brains. The original micro-theories deal only with explaining how brain injury resulted in behavioral disabilities.</p> |