

Learning Guide to Role of Theory in Scientific Research (Reed)

I commonly hear students say that they are not interested in theory because they want to work in the “real world” or they are more interested in “practical work.” To me, this makes no sense. No one needs a good understanding of theory more than the professional practitioner. Any effort to address a social problem, issue or need must be informed by theory. Otherwise, to be quite honest, the practitioner is just guessing about what will work. Guesses have a very low chance of being right. Even if there were only four known ways to address a problem, anyone who just guesses has a 75% probability of being wrong. In the “real world,” there are many more than four possible approaches to addressing any complex social problem, issue or need. Your chances of guessing right dwindle to almost nothing. Worse, bad guesses by practitioners really hurt real people. It is not the practitioner who suffers the consequences of bad guesses, but rather the people that s/he meant to “help.” Take the “bad guess” at solving the housing needs of poor people in the 1960s. We spent millions of public dollars building giant apartment complexes for poor people in major cities. These turned into ghettos filled with poor families living in a state of siege, surrounded by violence, crime and drugs. Investments in maintenance were never made and the physical conditions became horrible – 15 story “walk-ups” because the elevators were never repaired, no lights in the stairwells and hallways, garbage piled in hallways. We finally tore them down, but not until long after many people suffered the consequences of this bad guess. Many social theories clearly explain why this approach was a poor one. In fact, social scientists argued against building these complexes – based on theory. I hope that this course convinces you that you shouldn’t guess at solutions to complex social problems, issues and needs and, therefore, that you really do need to learn to understand and use theory. Theory is not just for “academics” or “dreamers.” It is a critical tool that any professional needs.

1. Reed (pp. 88-97) discusses several ways that theory and “theorizing” can improve practice. State your professional goals – what you want to achieve as a professional – briefly. Two or three sentences are sufficient. Which two or three of these benefits of theory and theorizing seem most important to you for achieving your professional goals? Why?

2. Reed provides an excellent summary of several major theoretical frameworks and gives some examples of how each can be used to inform practice. Table 4.1 on p. 89 gives a nice summary of some theoretical approaches and their potential application. Select a need, problem or issue of interest to you and explore how at least three of these approaches would help guide practice to address the need, problem or issue. Compare and contrast how the three different perspectives would influence how a practitioner would approach understanding and addressing a problem, issue or need of interest to you.

3. In this course, we will define theory as a logically consistent explanation of the relationships between two or more constructs, supported by a body of empirical evidence (also see pp. 30-32 of Garard). How is this definition similar to Reeds definition at the beginning of p. 85?