



Australian
National
University

Big theories, little theories: What happens in doctoral education?

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A definition of theory (Schwandt, 2007)

- “A formal understanding common in the natural and social sciences is that theory is a unified, systematic causal *explanation* of a diverse range of social phenomena” (p. 297) (original emphasis)



Aim of research

- To shed some light on the issue reported in the literature that some doctoral candidates have difficulty with the concept and use of theory in their research

e.g. Hyatt & Williams (2011); Kiley, M. (2009); Kiley & Mullins (2005) Lovitts (2007); Mullins & Kiley (2002); Murtonen, Aiston, et al. (2006); Tight (2004); Tinkler & Jackson (2004).



Methodology

- Interviews digitally recorded, transcribed and clarified by the interviewee AU2
- Transcripts coded with three main themes:
 - Difficulties candidates had with theory AU3
 - Difficulties supervisors had in helping candidates understand theory
 - Strategies which supervisors reported as being successful in assisting candidates AU4

Slide 4

AU2 **Add full stop**
Karen Bell, 8/08/2013

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Karen Bell, 8/08/2013



Interviewees

- Twenty-one experienced supervisors from six Australian universities were ^{AU5} interviewed using a semi-^{AU6}structured protocol.
- Ten (eight male ^{AU7} and two female) from STEM areas
- Eleven (eight males ^{AU8} and three females) in the HASS areas

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AU5 Maybe
Supervisors from six universities were interview
Karen Bell, 8/08/2013

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Difficulties candidates experienced with theory AU9

- Making the transition from describing findings in practical terms to theorising AU10
- Appreciating the value of theory in broadening research value AU11
- Understanding differences between developing theory from findings or linking research to existing theories AU12

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AU9 Difficulties candidates experienced with theory?

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AU10 add ;

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Karen Bell, 8/08/2013



Difficulties for supervisors

- Getting candidates to:
 - Move on from reading and onto writing AU13
 - Understand the need to think conceptually AU14
 - See the relationships between theory and their own research topic AU15

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AU13 **add ;**
Karen Bell, 8/08/2013

AU14 **add ;**
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AU15 **add .**
Karen Bell, 8/08/2013

1 Margaret Kiley, 12/08/2013



Strategies for assisting candidates

- Writing: early and often, sometimes at the white board AU16
- Group discussion: as long as it is supportive and critical AU17
- Structured reading: examples of theory or materials leading to questions about theorising AU19
AU18
AU20

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AU16 **add ;**
Karen Bell, 8/08/2013

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AU19 **delete space**
Karen Bell, 8/08/2013

AU20 **maybe have it read**

examples of theory, or material that leads to questions about theorising.
Karen Bell, 8/08/2013



Discussion

- Traditional PhD experience places emphasis on theory^{AU21} or theorising
- However, the data suggests^{AU23} that for some the ability to link practice to theory, or to theorise their findings^{AU24} poses problems^{AU22}
- Interviewees suggest that the ability to theorise^{AU25} is what identifies the more talented and skilled research^{AU26} candidates

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- AU21** **add ;**
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Karen Bell, 8/08/2013



Conclusion and further questions

- Do all candidates have to theorise findings?
- What roles do the professional and practice doctorates have re building on and valuing a professional/practical approach to research?
- Are there candidates who, despite the best efforts of their supervisors, are unable to theorise their findings? AU27
- If so, how can we identify candidates on enrolment and guide them to appropriate programs?

AU27

don't understand with comment

Karen Bell, 8/08/2013



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