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

• Transcripts coded with three main themes:
  – Difficulties candidates had with theory
  – Difficulties supervisors had in helping candidates understand theory
  – Strategies which supervisors reported as being successful in assisting candidates
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Interviewees

• Twenty-one experienced supervisors from six Australian universities were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol.
• Ten (eight male and two female) from STEM areas
• Eleven (eight males and three females) in the HASS areas
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Supervisors from six universities were interviewed.
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Difficulties candidates experienced with theory

• Making the transition from describing findings in practical terms to theorising

• Appreciating the value of theory in broadening research value

• Understanding differences between developing theory from findings or linking research to existing theories
Difficulties candidates experienced with theory?
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Difficulties for supervisors

• Getting candidates to:
  – Move on from reading and onto writing
  – Understand the need to think conceptually
  – See the relationships between theory and their own research topic
Strategies for assisting candidates

- **Writing**: early and often, sometimes at the white board
- **Group discussion**: as long as it is supportive and critical
- **Structured reading**: examples of theory or materials leading to questions about theorising
examples of theory, or material that leads to questions about theorising.
Discussion

• Traditional PhD experience places emphasis on theory or theorising
• However, the data suggests that for some the ability to link practice to theory, or to theorise their findings poses problems
• Interviewees suggest that the ability to theorise is what identifies the more talented and skilled research candidates
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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?
• If so, how can we identify candidates on enrolment and guide them to appropriate programs?
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References


