



Examiner concern with the use of theory in PhD theses

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Literature pertinent to the topic

Topics and issues connected with the doctoral learner & examiner expectations

Theory anxiety

Broad scope/spectrum for role and use of theory

Scholarship and 'intellectual grasp' in the doctorate

Theory: 'alignment' 'articulation' with other research elements

General (global principles) and specifics of theory application and use that students should know

The connections between theory and success

Conceptual thresholds at doctoral level



Questions

To what extent is examiner comment on the literature a reflection of thesis quality, overall and by discipline?

In what areas of examiner reports are there direct references to theory and does this differ by discipline?

What is the nature of the comments, do particular patterns emerge, and if so do they differ by discipline?

Method

PRE THIS PAPER

Two very large studies of examiner reports 2121 and 742 reports. First stage coding some 30 codes across

1. what was referred to (assessable areas) such as a literature review, methodology etc
2. Type of evaluative comment eg summative and formative

We had coded further a large slice of formative comment and one area was Theory

FOR THIS PAPER

Developed 4 further codes for 'theory'

Applied and tested against substantial comment about theory in the second study for 4 fields of study

Core coding categories in the PhD Examination Study

Assessable areas

- Scope of thesis
- Significance & contribution of thesis
- Publications arising
- Existing publications
- Literature review**
 - Coverage/depth/recency
 - Inaccuracy(referencing)
 - Use/application/theory
- Method/design/execution**
- Subject matter & findings**
 - Analysis & reporting of findings
 - Topic related issues
- Communicative competence
 - Substantial
 - Editorial

Evaluative elements

- Summative**
 - Positive
 - Neutral
 - Negative
- Formative comment**
- Other Instruction
 - Commentary
 - Prescriptive
- Other Judgement
 - Positive
 - Negative

What we draw on from previous work with the data sets (Exam Study 1)

Emphasis on the coverage and use of literature

(Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat and Fairbairn, 2007)

- 71% of reports discussed coverage of literature and 29% use of literature
- 6% of report text was devoted to coverage of literature and 2% to use
- For both coverage and use, there was a greater proportion of positive compared to negative comment

Emphasis in Formative comment on coverage and use of literature

(Holbrook, Bourke Fairbairn and Lovat, 2012)

- 7% of formative comment was devoted to coverage of literature and 4% to use across all disciplines
- There was a significantly greater emphasis in Education than Science for both coverage of literature (11% and 5%) and use (8% and 3%)

To what extent is examiner comment on the literature a reflection of thesis quality, overall and by discipline?

(Bourke and Holbrook, 2013)

How did examiners rank indicators of quality? The 12 were very closely grouped (the mean scores for all quality indicators ranged between Moderate/High quality and High quality).

The highest quality was recorded for 'Presentation: correct expression', and the lowest for 'Contribution - advancement of knowledge' (p.412).

Three of the indicators related to literature (accuracy, coverage and use and application).

Accuracy was positioned the highest of the three, suggesting the litmus test in the examiners' minds regarding literature was trustworthiness, this, alongside the first 2 (correct expression and communicative competence),

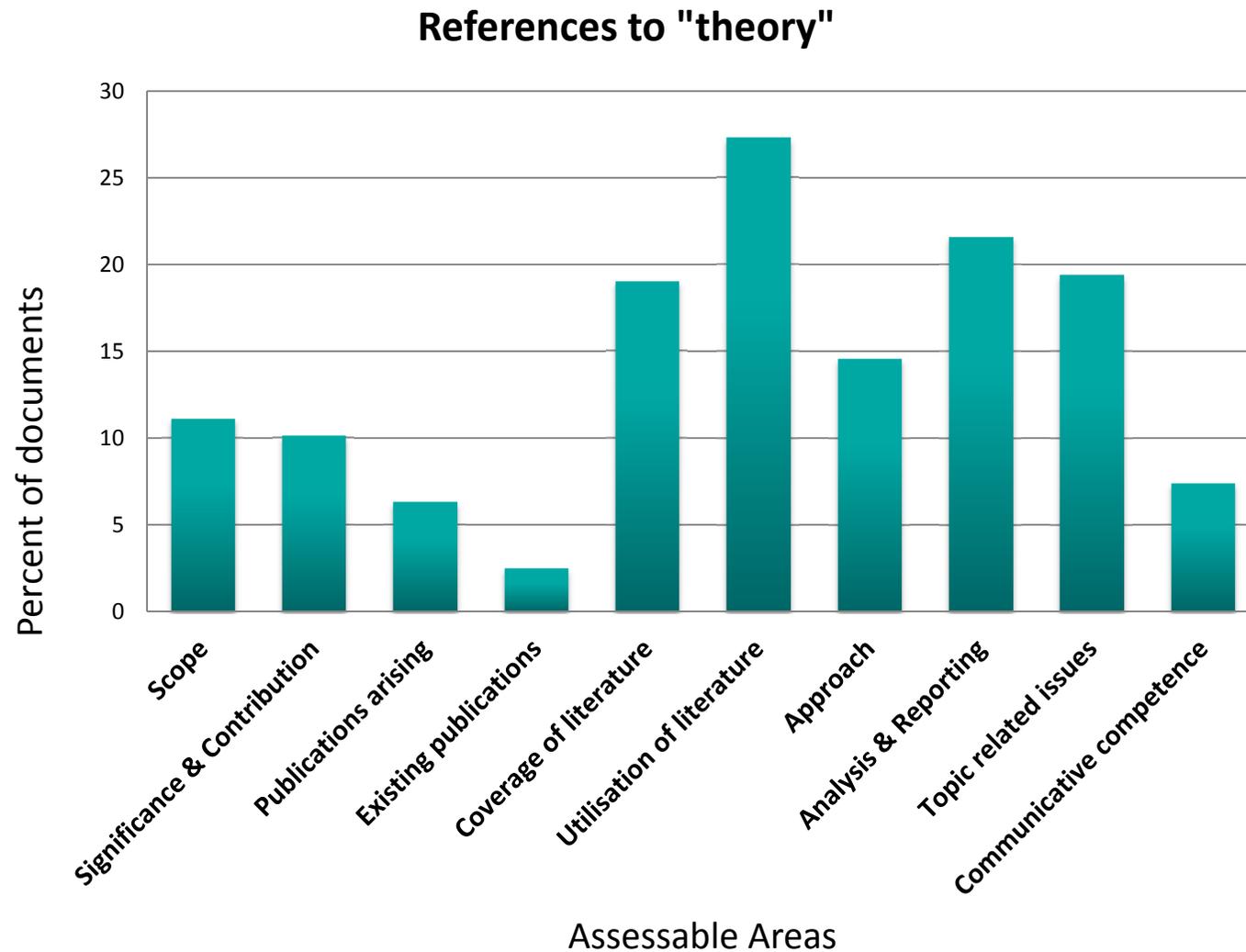
Methods & sub-set of data (n=742)

Broad field of study	Number	Percent
agriculture	8	1
architecture	6	1
arts, humanities and social sciences	168	23
business	48	7
Education	33	5
engineering	78	10
Health	190	26
law and legal studies	4	1
Science	197	27
veterinary science	10	1

Search for variations of 'theory'

+++ Searching document 220291...	
THEORetical study of one-inclusion graph and its related prediction	2
commitment to an interesting, but highly THEORetical area of research.	5
+++ Searching document 220292...	
Summary. This thesis uses graph THEORY to study the efficiency of	26
+++ Searching document 310123...	
hurried. This ethnographic exploration draws on post-structural THEORies	15
overview of the `problem' under investigation, the THEORetical and	23
+++ Searching document 310242...	
together with an in-depth THEORetical analysis of surface modified silica	3

In what areas of examiner reports are there direct references to theory and does this differ by discipline?





Intensity of use of the word theory or variants

157 reports (21% of all reports) where reference to theory occurred 3 or more times

This intensity was most prevalent in the assessable areas - literature review and analysis and reporting.

This intensity occurred most in Arts, Humanities and Social sciences (37%), followed by Business (18%), Science (16%), Health (13%) and Education (8%).

Summative positive and negative on Literature review

POSITIVE SUMMATIVE

Science

The candidate has demonstrated an up to date and thorough knowledge of the field and has taken published theoretical models and applied them to interpreting his experimental data (211222)

Education

The candidate's literature review provides an historically informed understanding of the pertinent debates in the field. (110791)

Humanities and Social Sciences

Along with the boldness and originality of the central argument, one of the great strengths of this thesis is the range and depth of X's familiarity with the relevant literature. In addition to his detailed knowledge of [particular author] X displays a firm grasp of scholarship on the various literary, cultural, and political discourses that are brought into play in his argument. ...X's appraisal of this material is invariably judicious, fair, and balanced. 210611

Health

The candidate provides a comprehensive, thoughtful, and well-synthesized review of the critical literature, and with it she builds a substantive evidence base for the study. She has done an excellent job of obtaining and reviewing the extensive international literature on the subject, which is in and of itself a challenging undertaking. 210052

NEGATIVE SUMMATIVE

Science

As a general comment to this review I would like to remark that the literature cited is sometimes somewhat at random, not systematic and missing a few important publications. 210732

Education

My recommendation is that the literature review framework is amended so that there is a sufficient theoretical framework to guide the review of empirical studies, and thus provide a grounded rationale for the thesis. (310333)

Humanities and Social Sciences

While there was some references to [references X and Y], the nature of embodied and temporal disruption, as well as the impact of progression of a condition was not explored in as much depth of understanding that the literature provides...A PhD in [discipline] should be at the cutting edge when it comes to methodological awareness; especially when such awareness would enable the thesis to avoid some real traps into which it currently falls 120811

Health

There was unnecessary repetition, a lack of primary referencing, and a paucity of critique. It is a requirement of doctoral studies that the candidate be able to judge the current literature from a knowledgeable and critical perspective. Whilst the candidate may be able to do this, it was not evident in the thesis.310771

4 categories of reference to 'theory'

ADEQUACY (INCORPORATING ACCURACY)

typically occurs in the review or where most reference to literature occurs

ALIGNMENT (WITH OTHER AREAS- ARTICULATION)

i.e. that sensible and appropriate connections are made

INFUSION – SEAMLESS INTEGRATION

Connecting, questioning, judging, being imaginative etc

SOMETHING NEW (CONTRIBUTION)

Arising specifically through employment of theory/literature



Infusion

She carefully articulated a range of theoretical positions, through which she reflected on the implications of her practice, and these theoretical offerings were well chosen, articulated and cross-referenced throughout...I enjoyed the enlightened `tacking' she managed as she moved back and forth between her chosen theorists/writers, her reading of their writing, her application of their ideas to her own reflective findings in her studio practice. She always made explicit the relationship between a new idea and something that had already been offered. This gave the thesis a tight weave and meant that I, as a reader, knew exactly where she was going and what the implications of her choices were in relation to the research period she had undertaken, the works she had produced, and the potential of her detailed reflection on her process for current and future [subject area] processes. (211112)

DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF MISALIGNMENT

SCIENCE	HEALTH	ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES	EDUCATION
<p>It is entirely unclear what hypothesis is being tested...the basic hypothesis of the thesis is the erythrocytes may have the capacity to protect cells from oxidative damage, yet many of the clinical questions asked have no obvious relationship to either inflammation or oxidation... this literature review was not used to clearly build the objectives and hypotheses of the thesis, (210201)</p> <p>(ARTICULATION)</p>	<p>Overall, the literature review is of a high standard: very easy to read and clearly indicates the candidate's grasp of the important role played by [x] Although, I would have preferred a greater depth of critical review and analysis that then highlighted the critical and unmet need that will be answered by the thesis; overall, the literature review was very good. Also, as the Introduction to each experimental chapter appeared to serve this role, i.e. to underscore the important question to be answered and establish the hypothesis to be addressed; my minor concerns about the Literature review were allayed. (210541)</p>	<p>The thesis also has some weaknesses. Most critically, the theoretical framework developed in the first chapter does not adequately scaffold the analysis that follows, nor is that framework directly connected to the methodological benefits of [x]. Further, some key components of the framework being used do not accurately reflect the theoretical concepts and/or constructs from which they are drawn. (510501)</p> <p>The result of this ad hoc approach to theory is that the thesis, in the end, has nothing to say about any theory. (111261)</p>	<p>The candidate has chosen gender as the governing theoretical framework.in contrast there is only marginal reference to social class even though much of the existing literature on gender emphasises the need to grasp the significance of the interaction between gender relations and relations based on social class. (111280)</p> <p>(WEIGHTING)</p>

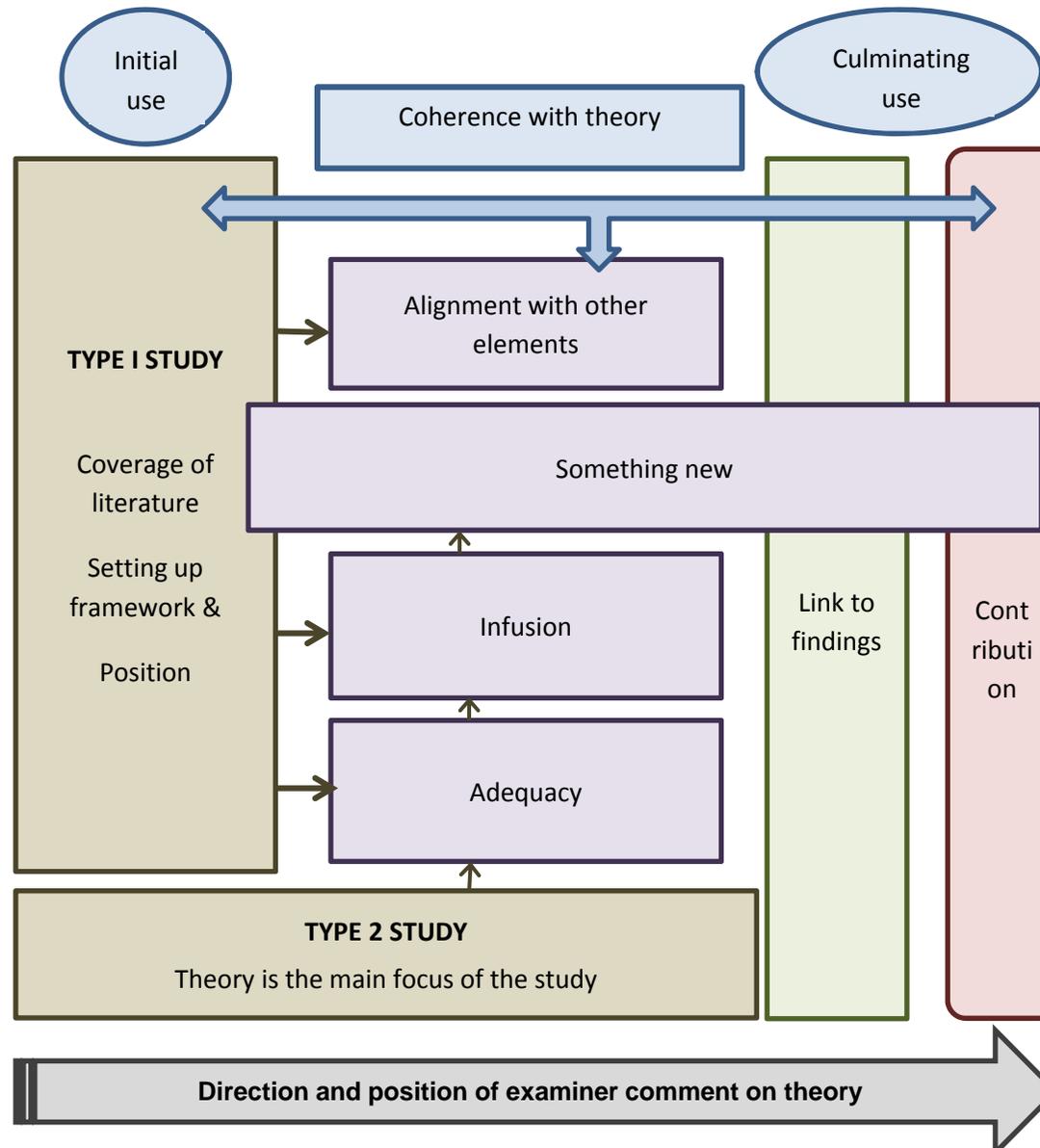


Fig: The focus of examiner comment regarding theory: where theory is, and is not, the main focus of the research



Conclusions

Examiners generally refer to theory directly somewhere in their report, and rarely more than once or twice

Where they refer to it more often this is typically in the arts humanities and social sciences

Examiners identify four clear areas where candidates are doing well/or poorly

Mostly theory is referred to in the context of the literature review and in relation to the global principles of positioning the work and discussing the findings and contribution



Coherence and theory

Often examiners and peer reviewers note that one of the things they hope to find is ‘coherence’ in a thesis this includes theoretic coherence.

This is not possible without a ‘maturity’ in the field and can explain why this is a hard to ‘approach’ threshold for novice researchers.

Not everyone crosses this threshold and it is possible to pass not having done so