

Constructing Knowledge: Taking Scholarship in New Directions

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INTRODUCTION

Focus: current construction of scholarship

Key themes: theorizing and knowledge creation

Concern: need to

a) restructure & improve conduct of social science research;

b) recognize problems with major theories & consider new ways of doing research & theorizing.

Reason: imperative if our scholarship is to serve as a response to key problems in society.

CHANGING NATURE OF SCHOLARSHIP

- Must confront two major problems:
 - a) Our form of scholarship is not helping us solve real problems. May even exacerbate or create new problems. Seen in recent global financial crisis – forced economists to review their manner of scholarship. Quantitative vs qualitative methods in economics not always helpful.
 - b) new forms of theorizing crucial in order to get published, particularly in Western-based journals.
- Core problem: well-conceived research methods & high level of theorizing based on sound empirical evidence will enhance quality of scholarship – most difficult aspect of writing a thesis.
- Supervision: Nurturing of creative thinking will enhance quality of analysis that can be translated into solutions that solve serious social problems.

GLOBALIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

- Need to note increasing globalization of knowledge; how it is constructed & shapes scholarship.
- a) Easier to dialogue with academics across the world.
- b) Comparative studies increasingly the norm.
- c) Easy access to different viewpoints, while assessing outcomes in different contexts of a similar problem helps enhance quality of analysis, level of theorizing & nature of public policy response.
- Policy recommendations can have more depth, based on outcomes in other countries.
- What is most effectively globalized is knowledge distribution – dissemination of publications.

NEW KNOWLEDGE CREATION

- Structure of institutions is important in shaping scholarship, seen particularly in the sciences (neoliberal education systems).
- And, most dominant ideas coming from the West. Take social sciences theories – most effectively globalised.

Theorizing: For what purpose?

- Not always for the sake of scholarship.
- Can shape theories to help overcome injustices; or provide reasons to justify unacceptable acts by governments.
- Can contribute to new social problems, if they inform & shape promulgation of policies.

PROBLEMATIC THEORIES

Modernization Theory

- Political theory used to justify retaining an authoritarian system in the developing world, in this case Asia.
- Developed by Samuel Huntington, of Harvard: widely applied when US began supporting authoritarian regimes in Southeast & East Asia.
- Support for authoritarian regimes because of US fear communism was spreading rapidly throughout region.

PROBLEMATIC THEORIES: MODERNIZATION THEORY

- Developing countries need system where power is concentrated to ensure rapid economic growth.
- Strong state with little resistance from unions, opposition parties & NGOs can implement economic policies that facilitate rapid development.
- Economic progress would lead to rise of a new, economically independent middle class.
- New middle class who value democracy would compel them to act as vanguard to dismantle strong state. Democratic values they aspire to include free media, free expression, free assembly.

PROBLEMATIC THEORIES: MODERNIZATION THEORY

- Early 1980s, before democratization in industrialized Asia, question raised: Why was middle class not advocating liberalization of political system? Answer: their culture
- Asian political culture: emphasizes collective, not individual, freedom; favoured order over conflict.
- Between late 1980s & 1990s, democracy flourished in East & Southeast Asia; Concept of 'culture' to explain persistence of authoritarian rule was discredited.
- In Singapore, Malaysia & Indonesia, authoritarian leaders used concepts of 'Asian values' & 'Asian democracy' (Huntington, again). Argument: their cultural traditions favoured an authoritarian form of governance.
- 1997 currency crisis; then *reformasi*; discredits 'Asian values'.

PROBLEMATIC THEORIES

Horizontal inequalities (HI) theory

Deals with policy implementation & ethnic conflict

- Reason for persistence of racial strife in multi-ethnic societies – policies have been viewed from perspective that is:
 - a) **vertical**: addresses social inequities from a universal perspective. Vertically-based policies address plight of individuals in need, regardless of their ethnic background – (Class based)
 - b) **horizontal**: new counter argument – ethnic conflict & inter-ethnic social & economic differences can be better resolved by targeting ethnic groups that are in most need of help – (Race based)
- See Frances Stewart (Oxford University).

PROBLEMATIC THEORIES: HI THEORY

Major criticism of HI

- Group construction is dynamic. Group boundaries rarely static, as individual & societal perceptions & preferences shift over time.
- Horizontal structure of society does not take into account:
 - a) fluidity of individual identity & group membership;
 - b) does not allow for spaces where boundaries & identities overlap & transform.
- HI leans towards homogenous view of group members, neglecting:
 - a) multiple individual allegiances & identities;
 - b) high degree of heterogeneity within groups;
 - c) intra-ethnic changes;
 - d) class & sub-ethnic divisions.

THEORIZING RESPONSIBLY

- Primary concern in scholarly treatise: should be on **defining the problem.**
- Theories help frame our analysis; many are enlightening & enrich analysis . But, be aware of history of theories & what they advocate as resolutions of serious problems.
- Other problems with theories:
 - a) developed to deal with problems in societies in the West;
 - b) inapplicable in developing South;
 - c) creates a wrong impression of identity of communities societies in the South which can be detrimental. **Context matters.**

Urgent need for academics of the South to develop novel theoretical & methodological strategies that better reflect their lived realities.

KNOWLEDGE, CREATIVITY & INNOVATION

How to start process of researching and theorizing well:

- Pioneering work based on core problems in society.
- Given complexity of problems in multi-ethnic societies, need to consider **multi-disciplinary research** leading possibly to **inter-disciplinary theorizing**.
- Start by encouraging multi-disciplinary research, in comparative perspective, by facilitating collaboration between local & – selectively – foreign researchers to help develop novel theoretical & methodological strategies.
- Creates more vibrant research environment where debates & contestations occur over ideas, methods & mode of theorizing.
- Such research, capturing well the local context and nuances, will better inform public policy debates.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING NATURE OF SCHOLARSHIP

- Must ask ourselves two major questions:
 - a) can our form of scholarship help us solve real problems. Or, are we exacerbating or creating new problems with our dissertations.
Recent global financial crisis – forced economists & business schools to review their manner of scholarship.
 - b) new forms of theorizing may make it more difficult for us to get published, particularly in Western-based journals.
- But focus on well-conceived research methods and high level of theorizing based on sound empirical evidence to enhance quality of scholarship & contribution to society
- Nurturing of creative thinking will enhance quality of analysis that can be translated into solutions that solve serious social problems.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING NATURE OF SCHOLARSHIP

- As budding academics, need to nurture creative and critical manner of research that has a different way of understanding scholarship & development. Multi-disciplinary education leading also to inter-disciplinary theorizing will change nature of research.
- A more critical approach to use of theories & methods in research will help you generate new theoretical & empirical knowledge that will establish your scholarship.
- Innovative manner of scholarship – involves novel methods to solve problems that contribute to just outcomes. Consider new enabling frameworks that facilitate this type of scholarship.
- All this begins with your PhD, how you shape and develop your scholarship.

FINAL POINTS: ON WRITING WELL

- **Using Jargon:** don't use it blindly. Technical jargon necessary for specialized subjects. Can easily be understood by those familiar with subject matter, but general readers can't comprehend jargon. Keep good balance of technical & non-technical words when writing.
- **Language & Spelling:** know difference between US & UK spelling.
When in doubt, consult a good dictionary.
Determine if a word requires a hyphen, to capitalise the first letter of a word, etc. Makes a difference when examiner reads it.
- **Good writing:** Keep in mind the "ABC" of good writing:
 - A for accuracy, B for brevity and C for clarity.
- Ask yourself if reader will understand what you are saying.
Keep your sentences short.
Dispense with throw-away lines & stop padding.