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The paper begins by examining the variety of meanings that can be given to the word 'theory', the different attitudes that may be taken towards theories of these various types, and some of the problems associated with them. The second half of the paper focuses on one of these types, explanatory theory, and the question of what is required if case study research is to be effective in producing sound theories of this sort. A range of important distinctions is outlined, and questions are raised about the possibility of, and need for, such theories.
(Key words: theory, case study, explanation, causation)

The importance of theory is widely accepted in higher education research, and in educational and social scientific enquiry more generally; though there have also been commentators who have questioned its nature and/or value (see, for example, Winch 1958; Thomas 1997 and 2007; Oakley 2000:310; Carr 2006; and Hutchinson et al 2008:ch3 and *passim*). Moreover, even among those for whom theory is the major social scientific goal, there have been recurrent complaints about a failure properly to develop theory, and about the speculative character of the theory that is produced and used (see, for instance, Glaser and Strauss 1967; Willer and Willer 1973; Hammersley 1985 and 1987; Rule 1997; Abell and Reyniers 2000; Tight 2004; Ashwin 2009:134 and 2011).

Underlying much of this discussion, not always recognized, is the problem that the word 'theory' has a range of very different meanings.[1] Given this, I will begin by outlining seven senses in which the term is commonly used, and in the course of this will mention some of the conflicting attitudes that have been taken towards each type of theory, and discuss a few of the associated problems. In the second half of the paper I will focus on just one sort of theory, explanatory theory, looking specifically at what producing it requires, whether case study research is capable of doing this, and whether it is a feasible or worthwhile product.

The meanings of 'theory'

The various senses that are given to 'theory' in current discourse pick out quite different intellectual phenomena with diverse functions. It is important to distinguish among them, otherwise discussion is likely to be frustratingly unproductive. The meanings are as follows:

1. *Theory in relation to practice*. Here the word 'theory' refers to ideas about how an activity of a particular type *ought to be* carried out, why, what its value is, and so on. On this interpretation, theory is normative in

[1] For an earlier attempt to identify some of these, see Hammersley 1995. There are some characterizations that are surprisingly indeterminate: for instance, Miller (2007:6) writes: 'What we call theory is a series of ongoing debates about meaning, texts, knowledge, and subjectivity that extend from the Platonic dialogues, through Aristotle to Cicero, Seneca, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, and so on to the present'.

character. Examples of this kind of theory would include some versions of educational theory (Hirst 1983) and of political theory (Vincent 2007).

Normative theory can take many forms, from personal philosophies that are little more than a set of value principles and practical maxims through to whole worldviews, such as Plato's political philosophy or Rousseau's educational views. Such theory may be seen as having the capacity to transform practice, either by providing a coherent underlying set of principles for understanding the world and guiding action within it, or through subverting conventional wisdom, and perhaps thereby the current socio-political regime, so as to make way for something different (See Ball 1995).[2] Alternatively, theory may be seen as offering more modest guidance, which needs to be moderated in light of experience and information about the situation in which action is taking place. Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, theory of this kind may be dismissed as an irrelevance, because it assumes idealized conditions that never hold: 'It's OK in theory, but it'll never work in practice'. Relatedly, a contrast is sometimes drawn between espoused theories and theories-in-action (Argyris and Schön 1974).

2. *Theory versus fact*. Sometimes it is said that a particular statement is 'only a theory', implying that it is not well-established knowledge but hypothetical interpretations. Here, theories are factual rather than normative but at the same time speculative in character: their validity is uncertain, or they may even be viewed as idealizations.

   There are a number of debates around this meaning of 'theory'. One concerns how much and what sort of evidence is required before theories become facts. This can be particularly problematic in some contexts, for example in Popper's fallibilist philosophy of science where theories can only be disproved and never be shown to be true (Popper 1963). Another issue is about the ontological status of the entities to which theories refer. Are these, and the relations amongst them that the theory proposes, meant to represent how the world is, or are they simply useful fictions that may allow us to account for and predict what will happen in the world (see Gillies 1993)? More fundamentally, it is sometimes questioned whether there is, in fact, any knowledge that is *not* fictional in this sense; and, if there is, about exactly how its empirical validity can be established, what criteria should be employed for assessing candidate claims, and so on. So, for example, some qualitative researchers question whether there can be any social facts, on the grounds that this implies an independent reality – for them, in effect, all accounts of the world are theoretical fictions. Other methodologists insist that the task of research is to produce theories that capture what is really going on, even if they recognize the valuable role of idealizations.

3. *Theory as abstraction as against concrete particulars.* Here 'theory' is

[2] There are other, even less determinate, characterizations that fall into this category.

taken to refer either to all concepts or categories, by contrast with individual phenomena themselves and our experience of them, *or* to relatively abstract categories as against more concrete ones. So, the distinctive feature of theory here is that it operates at a level of abstraction that is higher than immediate experience or commonsense knowledge, and perhaps even than low-level empirical generalizations.[3] In other words, it employs categories that gather together many phenomena that are usually treated as quite different in character, and treats as different what are often regarded as similar.

In one version, what is involved here is an insistence on a distinction between an observation language, designed perhaps to capture sense-data relating to particular phenomena experienced at particular moments in time, and a theoretical language that is intended, at the very least, to identify stable features of types of objects and the relations amongst them. In more realist versions, theory is concerned with identifying the essential characteristics of types of phenomena, or the causal mechanisms that generate them. Some views see science as producing ever more abstract conceptualizations of the world, these designed to grasp the fundamental laws that operate behind appearances. This notion is central to some positivist and realist views of science, and also, for instance, to Marx's science of society. In more mundane ways, many qualitative researchers distinguish between formal and substantive concepts, as well as between those that are introduced by the analyst and those that are employed by the people they are studying (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lofland 1971). They also often argue that a central task of social science is the development of typologies that identify general patterns in human social life (see McKinney 1966). Given that it is difficult to see how phenomena could ever be cognitively grasped *in themselves*, without recourse to categories of *some* kind, the key issue must be *degree* or *type* of abstraction. Yet the value of abstract theory has often been questioned. The sociological theory of Parsons, for example, was widely criticized for excessive abstraction (Mills 1959; Merton 1968), and much the same charge has been directed at more recent theories, such as those of Bernstein, Giddens, and others (see, for example, Cherkaoui 1977:561; and Sharrock 2010:106-9).

4. *Theory as concerned with the macro, as against accounts of the local*. The issue here is what we might refer to as the socio-geographical spread or scale of the phenomena that an account refers to; with the term 'theory' being restricted to accounts that have a broad rather than a local focus. One source of this conception of theory within the social sciences is anthropological and sociological functionalism, which insisted that local phenomena can only be understood in relation to the whole social system. Another source is Marxism and Critical Theory, with their arguments that we can only understand specific events in terms of the social totality or the development of History (see Jay 1977). In fact, most

[3] For a useful discussion of the importance of abstraction in science, see Sayer 1992:ch3 and *passim*.

contemporary social theory adopts a macro focus.[4]

Several issues arise about this conception of theory, irrespective of whether it is assumed that a macro-focus is the only true perspective. One concerns the nature of the totality, knowledge of which is required in order to understand local phenomena. The macro can be interpreted as a whole community or national society; as the structure of a specific type of social formation, such as capitalism or patriarchy or racism, that transcends national societies; as the 'world system'; or even as the whole process of socio-historical development that, for instance, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Elias, Giddens, or Castells, has identified as characteristic of the West or the world more generally. There are also questions about how we can acquire knowledge of such spatio-temporal totalities. After all, if this is built up from investigation of local social phenomena, there may be problems of circularity: do we not already need to understand the whole before we can gain knowledge of the particular? Moreover, there are longstanding questions about the viability of or need for macro theories, as well as arguments extolling the importance of micro theories (Martin and Dennis 2010). Of course, post-structuralists and postmodernists have not only challenged all claims to knowledge of totalities, and all meta-narratives, but also argued that it was precisely the pretence to such knowledge that generated the forms of oppression carried out in the name of Marxism in the twentieth century (Dews 2007).

5. *Theory by contrast with description*: Here theories tell us 'what causes what', and such explanatory theories are sometimes treated as the main product of science. By contrast, descriptions simply tell us what exists, or existed, in particular time/place locations, what features some set of existing objects have, and/or what sequence events occurred in. While explanatory theories may be quite specific, offering an explanation for a particular event or type of event, they are generally held to assume some universal or more general pattern or process, by virtue of the fact that they rely upon counterfactual conditions: if we say that event A caused event B, we are implying that if A had not occurred then B would not have happened, other things being equal. This assumes that events of type A generally produce events of type B, when certain conditions are met.

   There has been much discussion about whether causality operates in the social world, or what character it has, and of the implications of this for the nature and role of theory (MacIver 1942; Ragin 1987; Warshay and Warshay 2005; Hammersley 2008 and 2010a). There are also some commentators who see theories as descriptive, in the sense that they describe generative mechanisms that operate in the world (for instance, Bhaskar 2008), as well as those who reject theory *in favour of* description under inspiration from phenomenology or ordinary language

[4] See Elliott 2009. This was not always so, a key example being the work of Simmel on the effects of group size and on secret societies (Simmel 1950).

philosophy (Hutchinson et al 2008).

6. *Theory as an explanatory language*: There is sometimes a refusal to apply the term 'theory' to a single explanatory principle – of the kind discussed under 5 – on the grounds that any true theory must be a *set* of principles that tell us about the *whole range of behaviour* of some type of social phenomenon. In these terms, theories are often seen as capturing the basic principles of causal systems, these being hidden from ordinary forms of perception and cognition. The models for this sort of theory are usually to be found in natural science, for instance the kinetic theory of gases or evolutionary theory in biology. Within the social sciences, Marxist theory approximates to this model in some ways, providing a set of concepts – social class, class struggle, ideology, commodification, overproduction crises, etc – that, it is claimed, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human social life, or at least the development of modern western societies.

   As with the previous type of theory, there are questions about whether this is viable, because of doubts both about whether causal systems operate in the social world and about how we could gain knowledge of them. However, there is a fuzzy line between this category and the next, of which there are plenty of social scientific examples.

7. *Theory as an approach or 'paradigm'*. What is distinctive about this final interpretation is that theories are treated as involving whole philosophies, in the sense of distinctive sets of ontological, epistemological, and perhaps also praxiological, assumptions. This type of theory often combines features from the other types: such theories may carry normative implications (as with sense 1), they operate at a relatively abstract level (sense 3), certainly claim to provide explanations not just descriptions (sense 4), and are not singular explanatory principles but offer a language for talking about social phenomena (sense 6). The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a huge number of self-declared 'new paradigms', though they often drew on older sources, usually philosophical in character. Moreover, some of these approaches, such as 'critical research', 'interpretivism', 'constructionism' or 'constructivism', and 'postmodernism' are very broad indeed, spanning many disciplinary areas. In some cases there is strong emphasis on a connection with political practice: Marxism of some kinds would fall into this category; Flyvbjerg's 'phronetic social science' is a more recent example (Flyvbjerg 2001).

   The concept of 'paradigm' derives, of course, from Thomas Kuhn's historical account of the natural sciences, where it refers to a well-defined framework of assumptions, incommensurable with other such frameworks, that is embodied in what are treated as exemplary studies within a 'mature science' (Kuhn 1970). However, it must be remembered that he viewed social science as pre-paradigmatic, and

raised doubts about whether it would ever move beyond this state (Kuhn 2000). Furthermore, he is often misrepresented as arguing that paradigms are impositions on our experience of the world that reconstitute it in ways that are essentially arbitrary. This was not his view, since he retained a concept of scientific progress.[5] An effect of this misreading of Kuhn is a tendency for social science paradigms to merge into ideologies, often operating as sets of blinkers, with the task of research becoming simply to 'demonstrate' the validity of founding assumptions or to validate particular political or practical conclusions (Hammersley 1984). Another set of problems arises from the fact that social science paradigms are rarely well-defined; indeed, most of them subsequently fragment into competing versions. At the same time, their adherents tend to assume too strong a relationship between basic assumptions and both ways of investigating specific phenomena and conclusions reached (Halfpenny 1997). There are also questions about whether some of these paradigms involve the abandonment of social science, through skepticism and/or an 'activist' concern with having an 'impact' on the world (Hammersley 2002 and 2010b). This final, very influential, view of theory tends to obscure the important differences between the others.

In outlining various meanings given to 'theory' I have raised many more issues than I can deal with in detail. In the remainder of the article I will focus entirely on explanatory theory, the fifth meaning discussed above, and on the problems surrounding it in the context of case study enquiry. This is a particularly pressing and significant issue in the context of higher education research, where case study is common, and where there have been influential calls for the development of explanatory theory (Tight 2004; Ashwin 2009 and 2011).

Case study and explanatory theory

The term 'case study', like 'theory', is used in a variety of ways, and its relationship to explanatory theory is contentious (Gomm et al 2000:Introduction and ch12). For example, some authors argue that case studies are, or should be, primarily concerned with describing the unique characteristics of particular cases, the aim being what Simons refers to as a 'singular science' (Stake 1995; Simons 1980 and 2009). By contrast, others treat case study as specifically directed at the development of explanatory theories (Bennett and Elman 2006). For those adopting this latter view, the aim would be, for instance, to study changes in a particular university *as an example of* transition from a collegial to a managerial form of organization, and perhaps also to compare it with other cases. So, the interest is not in what happened within this university at this particular time, but solely in those aspects of it that make it a case of the relevant theoretical categories (its collegiality, at one point in time, and its managerialism later). Indeed, we will only be interested in the case insofar as, and in the respects that, it helps us to develop and test a theory about this sort of transition.

Both of these approaches may involve explanatory work, but it is important to

[5] For useful discussions of Kuhn's work, see Bird 2000, Sharrock and Read 2002.

recognise the differences in how this is pursued. If we are interested specifically in what happened in a particular university, we will probably look at many aspects of it that are of interest to us, and then at various factors that my have produced these features, or brought about changes in them, *in this context*. By contrast, if we are concerned with developing a theory about why universities change from one organizational form to another, what this involves, what its consequences are, etc, we will focus only on those features that we take to be generic to the theoretical type with which we are concerned. The aim here is a theory that will explain what happens whenever some set of conditions occurs, rather than what happened in this case. The two accounts produced would almost certainly be significantly different, along the lines of the difference between a historical explanation and a sociological theory of organizational change.

I will refer to this as the distinction between case studies that focus on 'explaining' and those that are concerned with 'theorizing' (Hammersley 1997). To underline the difference, the first aims to account for why some particular event or set of events, of intrinsic interest, happened, when and where they did, and in the ways that they did; or what consequences of interest have followed from some earlier event or set of events.[6] The second activity aims at producing a theory about what types of factor tend to produce a particular type of outcome, or what type of outcome is generally the product of a particular type of prior event. Of course, when we explain particular events we draw on general ideas, in other words on explanatory theories of some sort, about what tends to cause what, but here we are *using* these theories as tools, rather than developing them and testing their validity; and we may well use more than one explanatory theory simultaneously to illuminate a single case.

Both these approaches are of value, but they are incompatible. Nevertheless, much case study work seeks to combine them, with the result that, often, neither task is done well. Moreover, what sometimes appears to be involved is simply the importation of theoretical concepts from the literature, and a 'peppering' of the text with references to currently fashionable theorists, whether this is Bernstein, Bourdieu, Butler, Foucault, Kristeva or whoever (see Tooley and Darby 1998). But there are serious questions here about the grounds on which one theoretical concept rather than another has been selected, about the 'fit' between concept and data, and about what contribution the use of such concepts makes: does it amount to anything more than a re-description of the phenomena studied, in a language that is taken to have more kudos than everyday, or previously fashionable, terms? Above all, does it provide increased explanatory power? Very often this seems doubtful. There are also questions about the validity of the theories on which case study researchers draw in the task of explaining, defined in the narrow sense I indicated above: must these have already been systematically tested if they are to be used? After all, most have not been.

Even where a more systematic approach to the development of theory *is* explicitly adopted, such as Glaser and Strauss's grounded theorizing (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998), there is often a considerable gap between what is specified as necessary in the methodological sources of this approach and

[6] Incidentally, the events involved may be relatively small-scale or large-scale, in other words micro or macro.

what many studies claiming to use it actually do; indeed, sometimes it seems that what is involved is little more than appeal to a legitimatory label. But there are, in any case, questions about how successful grounded theorizing and other such approaches are in tackling the problems that face anyone using a case study approach if they are to develop and test an explanatory theory. Glaser and Strauss are ambiguous about whether their approach tests hypotheses rather than simply generating fruitful ones, and there are other methodological issues too (Dey 1999). Nor do competing methods, such as analytic induction and qualitative comparative analysis, escape problems (see Hammersley and Cooper 2011). This is not to be dismissive but simply to point out that none of these approaches can be adopted as off-the-shelf solutions to the problem of developing explanatory theories through case study work. It is important to recognize that the task is more difficult and demanding than often seems to be assumed.

In the literature that deals specifically with case study method, rather than with qualitative research more generally, the issue of producing explanatory theory is usually dealt with under the heading of generalization. Whether or not case study work can produce valid generalizations is, of course, a matter that has been in dispute for a long time (see, for instance, Lieberson 1992). However, several writers have drawn an important distinction between two kinds of generalization, which I will formulate here as a contrast between empirical generalization and theoretical inference (Mitchell 1983; Yin 2009:ch2; Hammersley 1992:ch11). These two processes can be outlined as follows:

- *Empirical generalization*. Here, conclusions are drawn about the features of a larger, *finite, and probably actually existing*, population, on the basis of what is discovered by studying some sample drawn from it.

- *Theoretical inference*. Here, inference is from cases studied to all the cases (an infinite number) assumed to fall within the scope of the theory being developed and/or tested; in other words, to *all members of a theoretical category*, those that occurred in the past, are occurring in the present, will occur in the future, and *could* occur.

This distinction is frequently ignored by researchers using case study, as well as by those employing other qualitative approaches, and quantitative methods too, with the result that the status of the conclusions reached is often unclear. Furthermore, the two goals place quite different demands upon the research process.

It is sometimes argued that case studies cannot, or should not, aim at empirical generalization, that only survey research relying upon statistical analysis of random samples can pursue this aim effectively. But this argument is false: the use of statistical theory is not the only legitimate means of producing empirical generalizations (Hammersley 1992:ch5), nor is its use for this purpose unproblematic. Of course, it is important to be clear about the requirements of the task, the threats to validity associated with it, and the limits that often attend the use of case studies in producing empirical generalizations.[7] The main point I want to make, though, is that empirical generalization, in the sense intended here, does not offer a basis for

7 For an excellent discussion of many of the issues, see Schofield 1990.

producing explanatory theory; and, in fact, this is true even when statistical analysis *can* be employed (Hammersley 2011a). Theoretical inference is quite different in character from empirical generalization: the model for the former is the kind of knowledge produced by experimental research, where the intended product is a set of statements about what *types* of factor tend to cause a particular *type* of outcome, *wherever they occur*; rather than what features members of a population are likely to have given the distribution of features in a sample.

So, what is required in case study work if sound explanatory theories are to be produced via theoretical inference? One promising outline is to be found in a currently influential strand of case study work within political science (Ragin 1987, 2000, 2008; George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2006); though the same ideas, in one form or another, can be found elsewhere. Here, two main strategies have been identified:

1. *Process-tracing*: generating ideas about relevant candidate causal processes via detailed investigation of particular cases over relevant time periods.

2. *Comparative analysis*: systematic comparison of cases in such as way as to develop and test causal hypotheses. What is involved here is comparing cases where candidate causal factors, or combinations of factors, are present and absent, or are at different levels.

These two strategies are complementary, not least because any conclusions from process tracing alone can be no more than hypothetical. It is not possible simply to *observe* causal relations, all we can see are patterns of co-occurrence, co-variation, or sequence over time, within a case, which we may *hypothesise* are causal in character. In order to go beyond this, we need to find ways of checking that the pattern always or mostly occurs when the conditions identified in the theory hold, other things being equal, so as to assess the counterfactual assumption on which the hypothesis relies. For this task, comparative analysis is essential.

Process-tracing, in some form, is characteristic of much case study work, even if this is not always done with the degree of rigour suggested by some commentators (George and Bennett 2005). By contrast, comparative analysis is much less common, and in most fields is rarely carried out in the manner necessary if sound conclusions are to be reached. Sometimes there is a failure to recognize, or to accept, that systematic comparative analysis is required. One cause of this is the frequent tendency to label studies 'exploratory', as if this somehow exonerated the researcher from any deficiencies, and also from the need to go beyond this ambition in subsequent work. Other reasons for the limited use of comparative analysis are more practical: logistically, it is often very demanding in terms of time and resources. There are significant constraints built into case study work as regards the number of cases that can be investigated; though if we operated in terms of *programmes* of enquiry – rather than single, one-off studies whose relationship to previous work is weak – capacity would be increased. More problematically, the cases needed may not exist or they may not be open to investigation (for example because they occurred in the remote past and insufficient information is available about them, or because while they exist in the present there are insurmountable barriers to accessing the necessary

data).[8]

Aside from these practical matters, there are also some fundamental questions to be asked about the very possibility of theoretical inference and explanatory theory, relating to the assumptions about causality on which they rely. In some versions of comparative analysis, notably analytic induction, a causal relationship is defined as one where a specified type of outcome is produced *always*, *and only*, when a given type of prior event, or set of events and features, occurs. In other words, causal statements identify necessary and sufficient conditions. If this conception of cause is sound, then the study of a single case can test a theory: if a prior event of the relevant sort has occurred, and the conditions are met, but no event of the outcome kind occurs, then (assuming no significant errors in the research process) the theory has been falsified. Generally speaking, though, weaker conceptions of causation are adopted by case study researchers, not least because of genuine doubts about whether this kind of 'strong determinism' operates in the social world, or (for that matter) more generally. So, it is frequently assumed that we can only discover factors that *increase the likelihood* of a particular type of outcome occurring, these factors being neither necessary nor sufficient. Yet, if this is the nature of social causality, studying one or even a few cases is unlikely to provide much evidence about what causes what: relatively large numbers of cases would be need to be investigated in order to pick out probabilistic trends. Moreover, these cases must cover different levels, and combinations, of relevant factors.[9]

Even where a relatively large number of cases are studied, it is rare for this sort of comparative analysis to be deployed. For instance, in their investigation of the decisions that applicants make about choice of university in the UK, Reay et al (2005) used questionnaire data from over 500 students, and interview data on 120 students, based in 6 educational institutions. This meant that the scope for process tracing was limited, but that there was the opportunity for comparative analysis to identify probabilistic trends that could indicate causal processes. However, while associations among key variables are reported, in verbal or numerical terms, and some cases are compared and contrasted in particular respects, there is little evidence of a systematic attempt on the part of these authors to test out hypothetical causal relations, either in variable-based or case-based terms.[10] For all the interest of the data, and the suggestiveness of the conclusions reached, the validity of the explanatory theory produced remains uncertain (Hammersley 2011b), and this study is by no means unusual in this respect.

Of course, many qualitative researchers question whether any conception of causality is applicable to the social world. But if explanations are to be possible there must be generative processes of some sort operating there. One alternative to the search for causal relations is to view the general principles we draw on in explaining people's behaviour as rational models, in other words as patterns of intelligible behaviour that we would expect to occur if people are pursuing a particular goal or if

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8 A classic illustration of one version of the problem is Skocpol's (1979) study of revolutions, where the number of cases in history that fit her definition of this phenomenon is very small.

9 See, for example, Cooper and Glaesser's application of Ragin's qualitative comparative analysis to large data sets (Cooper 2005; Cooper and Glaesser 2010).

10 On this distinction see Byrne and Ragin 2009.

they have particular sorts of interest or motive. Moreover, it can be argued that such models do not need to be produced through empirical research, since human beings necessarily develop them in the course of dealing with one another in social life. Equally important, they may not be open to testing since whether or not they operate in any one case tells us nothing about whether they will operate in other similar cases: they could do, but they may not. So, here it is assumed that human behaviour is highly contingent and open-ended in character, not even conforming to the sort of probabilistic causation assumed by much social science. If this is right, it has a profound implication: that developing explanatory theories is not a viable or a desirable task for social scientists, we would be restricted to explaining particular events, drawing on whatever cultural resources are available about potential patterns of motivation, and testing their applicability *in the specific cases with which we are concerned*. This seems to have been the position taken by Max Weber, though for practical rather than ontological reasons (Ringer 1997; Hammersley 2010a).

My main point here is not to argue for, or against, any conclusion about the possibility and desirability of using case study research to develop and test explanatory theories. Rather, the aim has been to highlight the fact that there are some difficult questions surrounding the task of producing such theory in the field of higher education research, and elsewhere; issues that are typically given little attention. They are currently unresolved, and, as we have seen, they have major implications for how case study research should be carried out.

Conclusion

I started this article by exploring the very different meanings that can be given to the term 'theory'. Whether theory is important for higher education researchers, and for what purpose, depends upon which sense of the term is being employed. Furthermore all these varieties of theory involve serious methodological and philosophical issues. In the second half of the paper I explored one set of these: the question of whether case study research can, and should set out to, produce explanatory theories. I noted some important distinctions that need to be made if we are to address this question, and I examined a variety of difficulties lying in the way of the enterprise. Some of these even throw doubt on whether explanatory theory is a viable or desirable goal for case study work, or indeed for social science more generally. It is important, as Thomas (2007) has argued, that theory should not be treated as a sacred cow, but there are many important questions associated with the concept of theory that demand attention.

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