

Answered Questions from the GGA Post graduate seminar sessions

Can a wrong theory be used to explain research or are there no wrong theories in research work?

Reply: There are theories which are stronger/weaker in explaining what you are studying. Weaker theories tend to disappear quickly because they don't stand up to challenge. If you are one of the first to engage with a theory to show it is weak then great; if it is known to be a weak theory and your argument is it's a weak theory it won't gain much if any traction - however, if you think it has been criticised too much and there is something to be recovered, that can be a good theoretical contribution.

Can we use multiple theories in research?

Reply: Yes. You will want to compare them - what are their various strengths and weakness. For example, is one theory good to address one research question, but another better for understanding your second question

Is there a situation where a theory can be criticized for being Western-biased? In other words, the theory can't be used in African context?

Reply: Absolutely. Too many theories are Western biased. The key is to demonstrate their blindspots and then reflect back those weaknesses and how new or different theories are needed to explain what is happening in, say, the African context.

How does a theory help us understand real-world situations, and what are its main limitations when applied in practice?

Reply: A theory claims to have the answer or explanation. Often this is then what gets picked up and applied in policy/practice.

If you use a theory in a research work and critique it yourself as the researcher using the theory, wouldn't it rather defeat the whole purpose of using that theory?

Reply: There is a happy medium. Theories, frameworks and models are there to be tested and challenge. At one extreme, if you use it uncritically that is not good because you are assuming it is *the* answer in which case you are not going to make an original contribution – only confirm what we already know because the theory claims to tell us that. At the other extreme, if you deconstruct the theory so much you're saying there is very little that is worth using it for – as you say this is self-defeating. 99% of research does not confirm or reject theory. 99% of research amends, develops, expands, and

refines theory (or models, frameworks, concepts). So when you critique it, you are recognising what its strengths are but equally you are identifying potential weaknesses, blind spots, contradictions, and the like. This means the theory is still useful, but your work (i.e. your theoretical contribution) is going to improve it in some way.

Should secondary factors be considered in deciding which journal and if yes, should any secondary factors be prime as opposed to primary factors in deciding which journal to submit to?

Reply: For the answer to that question, I think I'd say that after topic fit; how our paper is engaging with questions that others in the journal is asking; and journal quality (citation index; impact factor), we might also want to consider where scholars that we admire are publishing a lot, or if the journal is connected to a wider network (such as the RSA).