



Exploring the feasibility of theory synthesis: A worked example in the field of health related risk-taking



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ABSTRACT

The idea of synthesising theory is receiving attention within public health as part of a drive to design theoretically informed interventions. Theory synthesis is not a new idea, however, having been debated by sociologists for several decades. We consider the various methodological approaches to theory synthesis and test the feasibility of one such approach by synthesising a small number of sociological theories relevant to health related risk-taking. The synthesis consisted of three stages: (i) *synthesis preparation*, wherein parts of relevant theories were extracted and summarised; (ii) *synthesis* which involved comparing theories for points of convergence and divergence and bringing together those points that converge; and (iii) *synthesis refinement* whereby the synthesis was interrogated for further theoretical insights. Our synthesis suggests that serious and sustained risk-taking is associated with social isolation, liminality and a person's position in relation to the dominant social group. We reflect upon the methodological and philosophical issues raised by the practice of theory synthesis, concluding that it has the potential to reinvigorate theory and make it more robust and accessible for practical application.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in the synthesis of theory. Although academics have always brought together different theories to generate greater theoretical insights (e.g. Cockerham, 2005; Dixon and Banwell, 2009; Zimmerman, 2013), there is increasing evidence of a more systematic approach to theory synthesis (Hardeman et al., 2005; Lorenc et al., 2012; Bonell et al., 2013). The current impetus for this has its roots in an evidence-based approach to intervention design within public health (Craig et al., 2008; NICE, 2007) and in a concern with the role that theory plays in the effectiveness of interventions (Glanz and Bishop, 2010; Prestwich et al., 2014). However, researchers seeking theories to inform interventions sometimes find that the sheer volume of theoretical literature can be overwhelming, that many apparently distinct theories overlap with one another and that it is seldom clear which theories are appropriate for a particular purpose (Hardeman et al., 2005; Davis et al., 2014). For those interested in the application of

theory then, theory synthesis offers the possibility of collating, evaluating and combining theories for practical use.

The notion of taking a systematic approach to the synthesis of theory predates the current public health interest, however, and has been a subject of discussion within sociology since at least the 1980s, where it is commonly referred to as 'metatheorising'. Ritzer (1990) notes that a systematic approach allows a deeper comprehension of theories as well as the possibility of evaluating, critically analysing and improving them. He suggests that metatheorizing would benefit sociology by generating new theories, better understood theories, and overarching perspectives. Confusingly, however, Ritzer outlines a very wide-ranging approach to metatheoretical activity, including within its purview three different tasks: First, metatheorizing to attain a deeper understanding of theory, which he refers to as M_u . This is the identification of major cognitive paradigms within sociology and the study of theories, theorists, communities of theorists and the larger intellectual and social contexts of theories. Second, metatheorizing as a prelude to theory development (M_p), which entails the study of existing theory to produce new sociological theory. Third, M_o , which is the practice of studying theory in order to produce a metatheory that overarches some part (or all) of sociological theory.

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Ritzer's first type of metatheory (M_u) has a very broad reach and might more appropriately be called 'metasociology' (Fuhrman and Snizek 1990). Turner (1991), a sociologist and general theorist, comments that Ritzer's M_u and M_o approaches tend to serve mainly 'as a basis for endless 'discourse'' (267). He notes that his own approach to synthesising theory comes closest to Ritzer's M_p , and argues that the focus should be on the theories themselves rather than on theorists or paradigms (Turner, 1990, 1991). For Turner, theory synthesis involves pulling together existing theories and extracting and synthesising key aspects to produce robust theory that has relevance to the world outside sociology. He notes however, that his emphasis on the theories themselves rather than their intellectual context, often provokes accusations of naivety and lack of sophistication. Turner's insistence on focussing on the theories derives from a frustration with sociology and his sense that sociologists are more concerned with abstract, epistemological critiques than with developing coherent and useful explanations of social forces. As a result, he suggests, and because of a failure to synthesise knowledge and theory, sociology is ignored by policy makers (Turner, 1998). He argues that theory synthesis is the key to developing robust theories of practical relevance.

The idea of metatheory has also been adopted in the field of nursing, where it is interpreted in various different ways. Paterson et al. (2001) understands metatheory as a process of identifying major paradigms and relating theories to the larger sociocultural, historical and political context, thus taking Ritzer's more wide-ranging approach (M_u). On the other hand, Whittemore and Roy (2002), finding the 'adaptation to chronic illness model' unable to encompass all aspects of the experience of diabetes mellitus, identify several concepts in the diabetes literature with potential to enhance the model and then combine these concepts with the 'adaptation to chronic illness model' to produce a new model. They describe their methodology – the expansion of a model to include additional concepts – as theory synthesis. Yet another interpretation is provided by Walker and Avant (2005), who consider theory synthesis to be the pulling together of theoretically unconnected pieces of information to construct a theory.

Clearly the terms theory synthesis and metatheory have great potential to confuse. To promote clarity it seems to us that 'metatheory' might be more appropriately used to refer to the study of theoretical paradigms within a discipline, that 'theory construction' could refer to the pulling together of information about a phenomenon of interest to create a theory, and that 'theory synthesis' could refer to the more tightly focused activity of comparing and weaving together specific, related theories of interest. Although Turner has in the past referred to his methodology (which will be described in more detail below) as metatheorising and also as 'cumulative theorising', he now also describes it as theory synthesis (Turner, 2013).

The practice of theory synthesis has been challenged on philosophical grounds. In 2003 a debate was published on the feasibility of synthesis in the field of international relations. Smith (2003) rejected what he regarded as the implicit positivist assumption of a call for synthesis, i.e. that 'the truth' can be found by combining disparate theories. Moravcsik (2003), however, rejected pluralism (favoured by other contributors to the debate) on the grounds that it suggested all theories are equally valid (132). Hellmann (2003) observed that synthesis simply means to form a whole by putting parts together. We agree with his conclusion: 'Synthesis need not entail (anti-pluralistic) consensus nor imply some teleological notion of scientific progress. (...) Irrespective of whether we work on scientific or ordinary problems, we do so holistically by combining experience and intelligence in creative ways to come up with solutions to the puzzles at hand.' (149) Turner (1985) had earlier reached a similar conclusion, advising sociologists not to let

charges of positivism dissuade them from theory synthesis. Similarly sociologist Roger Sibeon (2004) observes that postmodernists tend to be opposed to theoretical synthesis, misunderstanding it as an attempt to stifle diversity and close theoretical debate. He counters that it is possible to accept theoretical pluralism at the same time as encouraging a cumulative approach to the development of sociological theory. Furthermore, he suggests that the synthesis of useful elements of theories is desirable not only within, but also across disciplines, and even across schools of thought that seem opposed.

We report here on the process of synthesising a small number of sociological theories of risk-taking. We have considered all the approaches outlined above but have chosen to follow Turner's methodology because it focuses squarely on the theories themselves. To our knowledge his methodology remains untested outside of his own use. Our aim then, is to explore the feasibility of achieving a meaningful theory synthesis using Turner's methodology and to reflect on the practical, methodological and philosophical issues it raises.

2. Locating the theories

The theories we used in the synthesis were identified as a result of a separate study which explored the ease of locating sociological theory for practical application (Pound et al., in press). Our field of interest was adolescent risk-taking and we searched for sociological theories with potential to throw light on this phenomenon. For that study we began by hand-searching all the abstracts of all volumes of the journals *Sociology of Health and Illness* (Volume 1, 1979–May 2012) and *Social Science and Medicine* (Volume 1, 1982–mid-June 2012). We reasoned that we would be more likely to find sociological theories in these journals than in generic journals of risk. We did not simply conduct an electronic search using the term 'risk taking' because we were aware that the phenomenon of risk-taking might be conceptualised in a variety of different ways and we did not want to rule out divergent ways of framing it. By searching within only two journals we undoubtedly missed some relevant publications and our focus on risk-taking may have diverted us from wider health-related activity. However, our aim was not to conduct an exhaustive search for all relevant theories but to determine the feasibility of *synthesising* theories.

Since we were specifically interested in sociological theories of risk-taking, we excluded sociological theories of risk and uncertainty as a feature of postmodernity (e.g. Giddens, 1990; Giddens, 1999), risk as a product of technological and scientific advancement (Beck, 1992) and sociocultural theories of the concept of risk (Douglas, 1992; Lupton, 1999a, 1999b). As our focus was on theories we also excluded the large body of research into lay experiences and perceptions of risk-taking, although empirical papers containing relevant theory were included. Reviews of risk-taking (e.g. France, 2000) were excluded after being scanned for relevant theories. We did not use a formal definition of theory, but followed Sutton and Staw (1995) in simply proposing that theory should be about the answer to the question why and about the connections among phenomena.

Sixty papers were identified for full examination, of which nineteen were considered relevant (Fig. 1). Promising references from the sixty papers were pursued, a process which produced a further eleven publications. In addition, two publications were found serendipitously, bringing the total to thirty two relevant publications, relating to sixteen different theories (Table 1). Five of these sixteen theories (or parts of them) related risk-taking to some aspect of social isolation and we chose these as the material for our synthesis. The theories span over a hundred years (Durkheim's 'Suicide' was first published in 1897 in France) and a variety of

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