Comments on Teaching Theory

Components of Theory

As we discuss in the "What Is Theory" section, we take the view that causal relations and causal mechanisms are necessary components of a good theory. We have also found that identifying these components with students is useful pedagogically. In the reader, we describe one way of analyzing causal relations and causal mechanisms – this is informally (and, as the text reveals, inaccurately) known as the "Coleman boat." While this is not the only or even the best way to analyze theory (and not all theories fit perfectly into this framework), we have found that diagramming theories allows students to easily compare causal factors and mechanisms across theories.

Further, providing visual representations of theories clarifies the components and the relations between them. Students sometimes have difficulty thinking about theory analytically – understanding causal order, distinguishing between the definition of a factor and the cause of the factor, and so forth. Diagrams provide a visual that can help students keep these distinctions clear. They also help students think about the empirical implications of theory.

Students tend to fall into talking about what they think about an issue rather than what a theory would suggest about it. We find that using the Coleman boat helps to keep students tied to the theory and to have them think about empirical implications in an analytic, systematic way. In the PowerPoint slides, we provide some examples of how we diagram theories using the Coleman boat.

Students

We have used the reader successfully both with very strong and with relatively weak students (weak in terms of their reading and analytical skills). We have found that a range of students benefit from identifying the components of theory and thinking about its empirical implications. Approaching theory in this way helps it to be concrete rather than amorphous. Rather than just being a course requirement that is disconnected from anything else, it becomes something that is relevant both for thinking about social problems and for the substantive material that students learn in their other courses,
We have used the reader in classes of 30 as well as classes of 200. While we use different combinations of lectures, discussions, and homework exercises depending on the size of the class, we have found that the material can be adapted to a variety of teaching situations.

We use the reader as a stand-alone text, but some instructors use it in conjunction with other more standard theory textbooks. There is a lot of flexibility in terms of how the reader can be used in a course.

Empirical Implications

When we teach theory, we work very hard to help students think about the empirical implications of alternative theories. We encourage students to ask 1) what does the theory predict about the likely consequences of something (the internet, urbanization, and so forth)? 2) how would the theory explain an empirical observation? and 3) what would the theory suggest about how to solve a particular social problem (crime rates, educational outcomes, global climate change, and so forth)? Often, we ask students to apply multiple theories to the same empirical problem. The process of applying theories to concrete, empirical situations, and comparing the differences in predictions, helps students to better understand the theories and see their relevance to contemporary issues.