

Anyon, Jean (2009). *Theory and Educational Research: Toward Critical Social Explanation*. New York and London: Routledge.

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I volunteered to review this book because I have done a fair amount of thinking and writing about using theory in educational research, and am always looking for new perspectives on this complex and difficult issue. I was not familiar with Anyon's work when I agreed to do this, and had an ambivalent attitude toward critical theory, finding some of it of considerable value and other parts dogmatic and tendentious. I'm pleased that this book has enlarged my perspective on both the use of theory and on critical theory itself.¹

The book consists of an introduction by Anyon, six chapters by her former doctoral students, and an epilogue by Michelle Fine, plus a brief series editor's introduction by Greg Dimitriadis. There is an inherent tension in this book, one that is reflected in

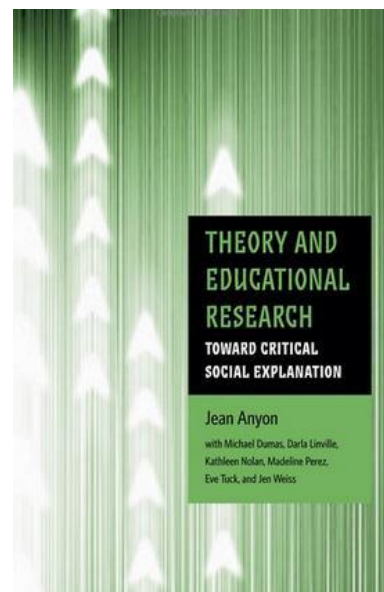
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the title. “Theory and Educational Research,” implies a focus on how theory in general is relevant to, and can be useful for, educational research. However, the subtitle, “Toward Critical Social Explanation,” indicates that the emphasis is on a particular type of theory, what is generally called critical social theory; Anyon lists as examples Critical Race Theory, Marxism, feminism, and postmodernism. This can be a productive tension, and Anyon uses it well in her introduction, a trenchant and valuable overview of key issues in bridging the theory/research divide and in effectively using theory in educational research. While her focus is on critical theories, much of what she says is applicable to the use of theory in general. She makes several key points about the use of theory:

1. No fact, investigation, or conclusion can be theory-free; as William James said, you can’t pick up rocks in a field without a theory. The issue is whether you are aware of the theory you are using, and whether you are using it critically or uncritically.²
2. In order to understand any educational phenomenon, you need to also look at the larger social, economic, and political contexts within which that phenomenon is embedded, and to seek out theories that connect these.
3. Theories can be used not just to understand the individuals, situations, and structures studied, but also to change them. In my view, this is true not just of critical theory, but in principle of any theory. The physicist and sociologist of science Evelyn Fox Keller, writing about the physical sciences, argues that scientific theories are “both models of and models for, but especially, they are models for; scientific theories represent in order to intervene, if only in search of confirmation. . . . From the first experiment to the latest technology, they facilitate our actions in and on that world, enabling us not to mirror, but to bump against, to perturb, to transform that material reality. In this sense scientific theories are tools for changing the



world.” (Keller, 1992, pp. 73-74) Reactionary theories are just as much tools for changing the world as progressive ones; the issue is the nature of the change that is sought.

4. You need to avoid simply citing theory to buttress your argument, and to actually incorporate theory into the logic of your study and use it to deepen your research process.

However, the heart of the book is the six middle chapters, in which the authors describe the research they did for their dissertations and how they used theory. The studies presented are all qualitative, and all used some form of critical theory, broadly defined, but they are quite diverse otherwise, ranging from ethnographic studies of school discipline, or of Black/White community relationships, to interviews with students to understand their use of poetry as a form of resistance, to participatory action research with youth or Latina parents; the particular theorists invoked are also quite diverse. Three of the chapters focus specifically on sharing theory with participants, in order to develop a collaborative and empowering investigation of some issue. A particularly valuable component of these chapters is a reflective piece by each researcher on how they came to use the particular theories they employed and their struggles and insights in using theory. Some of the authors describe their initial resistance to theory, and how Anyon’s approach to theory helped them to overcome this.

Michelle Fine’s epilogue focuses on how these researchers have used theory in their work. She distinguishes conceptual, methodological, and epistemological roles of theory, drawing specific examples from each of the chapters. Her focus is specifically on critical theory, and she devotes a significant part of her epilogue to describing how critical theorists reconceptualize dispossession and resistance. She ends by discussing how the researchers deliberately integrated theory and qualitative investigation, using the former for a macro perspective and the latter for a micro-level “thick description” of the phenomena studied, and interrogating

common-sense assumptions and using theory to inform their research design and methods.

This has been a valuable book for me, and I recommend it to anyone considering using social theory in their research, particularly doctoral students. My main concern about the book is that the authors don't engage in much criticism of the theories they employed. Although Anyon states that she "ask[s] students when they are in the field to write each day about what they are seeing or hearing that confirms the theory they go in with, or that contradicts it" (p. 12), the authors present few direct challenges to, or data that are discrepant with, the particular theories they use. The main form of criticism in this book is the use of critical theory to challenge past research on the topic they are investigating (e.g., p. 9).

The most overtly critical of the dissertation authors is Dumas, who emphasizes that "no one theory will ever do," as well as the lesson he learned growing up in the Black community, that "theory is too often the nonsense of a bunch of people just interested in running their mouths" (pp. 104-105). However, his practical focus is mainly on the first of these points (integrating Fraser's distinction between redistribution and recognition politics with Dawson's concept of a "Black counterpublic sphere"), rather than the critical evaluation of the theories he employs. He applies the latter mainly to his own theorizing, worrying that he "might end up like the pontificating brotha in the barbershop" (p. 106), rather than engaging in explicit analysis of possible blind spots, errors, or limitations of Fraser's or Dawson's work. Similarly, Nolan argues that "a systematic empirical inquiry demands a systematic interrogation of theory," but this is equated with "the search for yet more relevant theories, and the revision of old theories as the researcher places 'her' theory in conversation with both the empirical reality she observes and the myriad theories produced by informants" (p. 52).

This issue is not limited to these studies, or to the use of critical theory specifically. Dressman (2008), in a study of 69

studies in literacy journals that made substantial use of social theory, found that in 60 of the 69 studies, “researchers seldom challenged any precepts of the social theories they referenced,” and that in almost half of the studies, “the empirical findings of a study were used as illustrations of a theory’s complete relevance in describing a social phenomenon” (p. 92). He argues that such uncritical use of social theory threatens not only the credibility of the findings of these studies, but the ability of the research to contribute to our general understanding of education.

The point here is that no theory is a complete, accurate reflection of the complex realities we study; every theory is a lens for making sense of the world, and every theory both reveals some aspects of that reality, and distorts or conceals other aspects (Dressman, 2008, pp. 69-71, 97-99; Maxwell, 2005, pp. 41-46; 2008). This dual nature of theory is the basis for the writing teacher Peter Elbow’s distinction between what he calls the “believing game” and the “doubting game” (Elbow, 1973, 2006). In the believing game, you accept the theory and look for ways it can deepen your understanding of the phenomena you study; in the doubting game, you challenge the theory, looking for its limitations and distortions. Both are necessary for the most effective use of theory.

The value of the believing game is powerfully illustrated in Tuck’s chapter by the sort of reading—“suspending disbelief, generous, ambivalent” (p. 116)—that she did of Deleuze and Guattari’s work, and how this enabled her to see herself as a competent theorizer and to use their concept of “rhizome” as a metaphor to inform her work with a participatory action research collective studying the lived value of the GED credential for New York City youths. Tuck also exemplifies one aspect of the doubting game in seeing that a rhizomatic approach is in conflict with the importance for her, as an Indigenous woman, of her roots in her own culture; like many of the other authors in this book, she uses a multiplicity of theories to inform her research. However, she never explicitly challenges any aspect of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s theories, failing to note that their

oracular pronouncements that “a rhizome is . . .” have very little relationship to actual plant rhizomes, or to ask in what ways Deleuze and Guattari are simply “running their mouths.”³ The philosopher Thomas Nagel (1998), among others, has argued that many scholars on the Left have been captured by a radical relativism and postmodernism (of which Deleuze and Guattari are examples) in which obscurity and a lack of coherent argument are taken for profundity—a stance that ultimately reduces these scholars’ ability to effectively critique oppression and injustice.

Other dangers of the believing game have been addressed by the qualitative sociologist Howard Becker (1986, pp. 146-149) in his discussion of the deforming power of established theory—how accepting a theory as authoritative prevents you from noticing things that don’t fit the theory, or seeing that there are other ways of conceptualizing the phenomena you study. He describes how his own early research on marijuana use was deformed by the prevailing theories of drug use in sociology and criminology, focusing his attention on showing that these theories were wrong and preventing him from seeing a much more interesting and fundamental way of making sense of the phenomenon. This is an issue for which Dressman’s book, which discusses in detail the importance and practical challenges of critically evaluating social theories, provides a valuable complementary perspective to Anyon’s. An additional useful source for critiquing existing theories is C. Wright Mills’s classic *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), particularly his “translation” of the theories of the sociologist Talcott Parsons into plain English.

In this way, Anyon’s book is like any theory; it can’t present a complete, total understanding of its topic, and is always subject to criticism and the need for complementary approaches that address its limitations. However, this is inherent in all writing and theorizing; the virtue of this book is that it provides an illuminating and empowering perspective on using theory in educational research.

Endnotes

1. In particular, my statement that “while [critical theories] contain some premises about the nature of the phenomena being investigated, they function more as normative frameworks than as theories in the traditional sense” (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2008, p. 876) clearly needs revision.
2. If this is so, then to characterize the currently dominant quantitative/experimental approach to educational research as avoiding theory, as Anyon does (p. 1), is potentially misleading. Such research may avoid explicit reference to systematic theory, but it is important to be aware of, and to criticize, the “theory-in-use” of such research (e.g., Maxwell, 2004).
3. I actually think that the basic idea of Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between “arborescent” and “rhizomatic” systems is a powerful and useful one. However, I see this distinction as very similar to Hume’s distinction (1739/1978) between resemblance and contiguity as modes of association of ideas. This distinction was systematically developed by Saussure (1916/1986), Jakobson (1956), Barthes (1968), and others, and variously expressed as that between similarity and contiguity, or paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships. (For a more extensive discussion of this distinction, and its value for a theory of qualitative data analysis, see Maxwell & Miller, 2008.)

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