

Comparative Approaches to Teaching Family Theory

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ABSTRACT. We argue that a comparative approach is a pedagogically useful approach to teaching family theories. Currently, many of the most popular texts on theory use a “within” theoretical framework to present material to students (e.g., Smith & Hamon, 2012; White, Klein & Martin, 2014). The recent exception to this is Fine and Fincham’s substantive issues approach (2013). We propose a comparative approach situated between the purely substantive issue approach and the more abstract “within” frameworks approach. First, we discuss the current situation of teaching family theories based on formats of extant texts. Then we detail our proposed comparative approach. Finally, we detail two examples of how to use this comparative approach in teaching family theories.

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Background

Our knowledge is always structured. This observation is most evident in our teaching materials and resources. When we teach theory, our syllabi and texts provide students with a perspective. The text for a theory course often formats our knowledge about theory with distinctions, such as inductive and deductive logic and frameworks. In this paper we take texts as our data. The text for a theory course on family theory reflect and inform teaching style. This assumption may not be accurate for all instructors, but it is probable in many cases since teaching theoretical material is usually structured by the way texts format the material and most textbooks today are supplemented by ready-made PowerPoint slides and exam question banks.

An examination of theory texts reveals two basic approaches. The “within” frameworks approach represents one of these approaches (e.g. Hill & Hansen, 1960; Christensen, 1964; Nye & Berardo, 1966; Burr, Hill, Nye, & Reiss, 1979, volume 2; Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993; Winton, 1995; Klein & White, 1996; Ingoldsby, Smith & Miller, 2003; Chibucos, Leite, & Weiss, 2005; Smith & Hamon, 2012; and White, Klein & Martin, 2014). The other is the substantive issues approach (e.g. Burr, Hill, Nye, & Reiss, 1979, volume 1 and Fine & Fincham, 2013). The frameworks approach (e.g. Rational Choice, Symbolic Interaction, etc.) is discussed in terms of theoretical assumptions, concepts, propositions, and applications. In the substantive issues approach, authors introduce the theory or theories that explain elements of a substantive area (e.g., division of labor).

We propose using a comparative approach to teach family theory where aspects are borrowed from frameworks and the substantive issues approaches in a “problem based” manner. This problem-based approach draws on deduction and interpretation. The deduction (*a priori*) part uses at least two theories to deduce an outcome (ideally, different outcomes). This helps students understand how assumptions and the context of the application constrain propositions (see Hempel & Oppenheim, 1949; White, 2015). Students can then consult the empirical literature to resolve the dispute. The interpretation (*a posteriori*) part starts with an observed outcome or question, then proceeds to see how we might combine and enhance our interpretation and explanation of an outcome.

Critiques of Established Approaches

Frameworks and substantive issue approaches have strengths and weaknesses. First, the orientation to substantive issues often confuses students because it combines concepts and propositions from different schools of thought to come up with explanations. The problem arises because this leaves large areas unexplained, including assumptions behind concepts such as exchange or choice and the boundary conditions under which application of these concepts is appropriate. For instance, such questions as “Do higher order levels of analysis such as dyads or social groups have ‘choice’?” are left largely unexamined. This gives the student little of the theoretical discipline aligned with framework approaches and follows a more eclectic form of explanation.’

By contrast, the frameworks approach often seems otherworldly and overly abstract to students. The very idea that explanation is deduction is foreign to many students and propositional formats may be too abstract for them. Although concepts and propositions are properly situated along with assumptions and boundary conditions, all this may be a foreign and arcane language to undergraduates. Therefore, while the frameworks approach highlights coherence of thought and definition, it lacks the interesting substantive appeal of the issues approach.

Finally, substantive issue and frameworks approaches confuse students with inductive and deductive approaches. Deductive explanations that are *ex post facto* (after the observation) are similar to inductive approaches. Indeed, both approaches have problems with excluding other plausible explanations. We contend that using both approaches (issues and frameworks) and carefully laying out the terrain of inductive and deductive approaches, along with *a priori* and *aposteriori* explanation, is the most complete approach to teaching theory and offers students strong practical problem solving skills.

Comparative Approach

The comparative approach to family theory borrows from both extant approaches: deductive and inductive. The unique contribution of the “comparative” is that it is a “problem based” approach. In the “deductive” approach, we use two or more theories to predict contradictory outcomes and establish an intellectual problem: namely, that two contradictory predictions cannot be correct at the same time. For example, rational choice theories would predict different mate selection activities than would a biosocial approach using pheromones or even inclusive fitness, or would conflict approaches (such as Marxism). Using at least two theories to predict outcomes compels students to understand how assumptions constrain general propositions and how context of application particularizes these propositions (see Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948; White, 2015). A typical student assignment might be to use two theories to make different predictions and then go to the empirical literature to resolve the dispute. In the “inductive” approach we begin with an empirical question and attempt to develop a theory to answer “why and how” questions about the empirical observation. For example, the question “Why did Bill and Sally get divorced?” can be answered using arguments from several different theories. A typical student assignment would give students an issue and ask them to structure the best interpretive explanation by coming up with a theory to resolve the issue.

Objectives

Using the comparative approach, students will (a) realize that deduction and interpretation are different ways of thinking, (b) formalize ways of thinking, (c) develop the idea of “critical tests” of competing explanations (at the deductive level), and (d) develop the idea of multidimensional and complementary arguments (at the interpretation level).

Procedure

Learning Through Deductive Application

The deductive (*a priori*) approach compares and tests two theories to determine implications of data. This is sometimes referred to as *top-down* logic because it starts with a general framework based on an existing theory and works down to a specific hypothesis (or hypotheses) that one can test and observe using specific data generated from the results in order to confirm or disconfirm the original theory (Trochim, 2006). In this logical process, instructors begin with a conclusion as the basis, yielding valid conclusions from factual knowledge that must be true since their premises are true (Johnson-Laird, 1999). Compared to the inductive (*a posteriori*) approach, which moves from specific observations and data towards a more generalized framework, the deductive approach is concerned with testing and confirming a hypothesis (Trochim, 2006).

To teach theory following the deductive approach, students receive guidance and resources they need for identifying assumptions within two theoretical frameworks, and for applying these frameworks to concrete situations in order to draw logical conclusions. Depending on the course level (introductory/advanced), this guidance may include step by step teaching of theoretical assumptions, concepts, and propositions before students attempt application (for introductory courses) or guided reading questions (for advanced courses) where students must outline relevant assumptions they need in order to do the application. By the end of a unit, students should be able to explain different implications of each theoretical lens and to move from the abstract to the specific. This approach differs from lecture-based education where instructors act as experts disseminating knowledge to potentially passive audiences. Deductive application is based on learner-centered teaching that prioritizes active learning. This approach provides learners with opportunities to identify and acknowledge why and how a particular theory's components are analytically useful, rather than to simply memorize the theory's key tenets. Active learning strategies are conducive to creating environments where students can engage in theoretical applications (Holtzman, 2005; Pedersen, 2010). Lessons based on active learning help students connect personalized meanings to course concepts and encourage students to feel a sense of ownership over the content they engage with (Barkley, 2010; Tileston, 2006).

Since students are learning about each theory as they apply it, incorporating flipped classroom elements can enhance the deductive process (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). To help students prepare for application during class, the instructor may wish to provide a brief online pre-reading or a short video clip outlining elements of one or more theories that students will work with. By allowing students to begin engaging with theoretical content before class, the instructor can layer the learning process and maximize use of class time.

Below, we provide an example of how students could learn about two different theories, social exchange and opportunity structure, in a comparative, applied manner. Rather than learning only the fundamentals of a theory (the frameworks approach), or learning about a theory primarily through a social problem (the substantive issues approach), the comparative deductive approach allows students to learn actively about theories through focused application and to

compare the implications of this application across two different theories. In this example, instructors ask students to deduce the likelihood of heterosexual men and women engaging in marital infidelity (by using social exchange theory for men and opportunity structure for women). Infidelity is known as violation of a couple's commitment to emotional and sexual exclusivity to one another (Weeks, Gambescia & Jenkins, 2003).

Before the in-class activity, students receive background explanation of the two theories in question. This explanation could be provided through lecture or, ideally, in a flipped classroom manner – through prior reading and/or online presentation. In class, students in small groups receive various prompts to help them work iteratively through (a) key propositions within each theory, (b) implications of each theory in relation to marital infidelity, and (c) the ways both theories overlap and/or diverge in their approach to this issue. Instructors may choose to have all groups work on both theories, or to have half the groups work on one theory while the other half works on the other theory, with presentations and discussion or debate between groups to follow. We expect group work and sharing to take up an entire class period of 50 to 80 minutes. We provide one set of sample prompts below.

Sample #1

You have been asked to act as an expert witness in a heterosexual divorce case based on marital infidelity. Both spouses deny their own infidelity and assert that their partner engaged in extramarital sex. The wife's lawyer is using arguments from social exchange theory to explain the likelihood of the husband's infidelity. The husband's lawyer is drawing on claims from opportunity theory to explain the likelihood of the wife's infidelity. Your role in the court case is to provide a balanced overview of these two competing family theories for explaining marital infidelity. For your court appearance, you must be able to identify the key propositions within each theory, and to explain the implications of these theories for men's and women's likelihood of engaging in marital infidelity. In preparation, please work with your group to respond to the questions below:

(Optional scenario additions: Both spouses are middle aged [45-50], career-enthusiast [Wife: Doctor; Husband: Marketing Executive], no kids, own 2 properties. Varying the contextual factors among groups will emphasize the importance of contextual factors in the application of these theories.)

1. What is social exchange theory? How might you summarize this theory for a group of non-experts in a court room?
2. What is opportunity structures theory? How might you summarize this theory for a group of non-experts in a court room?
3. What are the propositions within (a) social exchange theory and (b) opportunity structures theory with regard to what men and women value in heterosexual marriage?

4. What does social exchange theory suggest about the marginal utility of marital sex for men?
5. How is human capital relevant for examining men's extramarital sexual activity within social exchange theory?
6. What does the opportunity structures approach assume about women's infidelity?
7. Can social exchange theory and opportunity structures be interchangeably used in explaining infidelity amongst both the husband and wife?
8. What do each of these theories indicate about whether a husband or wife are more likely to commit infidelity?
9. What contextual factors are relevant for interpreting the likelihood of men's and women's infidelity?
10. Which theory is most relevant for this particular divorce case?

Following the activity, it may help to ask students to examine empirical literature on marital infidelity and gender, particularly in relation to sexual desire, intimacy, extramarital sexual relations, and relationship expectations (see Glass & Wright, 1985; Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011; Peplau, 2003; Treas & Giesen, 2000) to determine empirically whether these theories support or refute their conclusions.

Social Exchange Theory

Applying the social exchange framework in a marital relationship allows for analyzing interactions between both individuals based on examining costs and benefits to each member of the relationship (Wang, 2004). In social exchange theory, rewards are a positive exchange of resources that bring pleasure and satisfaction to the individual, while costs are perceived as a negative exchange of resources associated with loss or punishment (Wang, 2004). The purpose of this social behavior is the result of exchange in a social relationship, where individuals intend to maximize benefits and minimize costs. Regarding infidelity, it is believed that men are more likely to engage in extramarital sex as a result of social exchange theory combined with the declining frequency of marital sex and declining human capital investment, viewing marital dissolution as a lesser cost and sexual satisfaction as a greater reward.

To support social exchange theory there can be application of the sub-theory of diminishing marginal utility, which implies that the value of a reward may decrease as one receives more of it or receives it more often (Liu, 2000). Diminishing marginal utility suggests that the value of sex as a reward decreases over time during the marital duration, thus affecting the decline of marital sex as a reward with marital duration (Liu, 2000). The second sub-theory applied that can affect marital sex is the human capital investment, which looks at marriage as a long term relationship and the ability of both spouses to contribute human capital into their

relationship and a network of profitable exchanges, such as companionship, empathy, and the ability to fulfill sexual pleasures (England & Farkas, 1986). Human capital investment theory predicts that with an increased human capital investment in the marriage, the pleasure of marital sex would increase as a result of the knowledge and skills exchanged in the relationship, creating an increasingly positive effect on marital sex over the course of the marriage duration (Liu, 2000). By adding the human capital effect and diminishing marginal utility, both can affect changes in the frequency of marital sex and the likelihood of extramarital sex (Liu, 2000).

Chien Liu's *A Theory of Marital Sexual Life* (2000) predicts that at a point in the marriage referred to as the "critical value of marital duration" (i.e., around the 18th wedding anniversary), the marginal utility of marital sex for a man decreases along with satisfaction and exchange of human capital investment. This means that the longer men are married, the more likely they are to engage in extramarital sex because the expected rewards of sex outside marriage (e.g., sexual fulfillment and variety) become greater than expected costs associated with being unfaithful to wives (e.g., marital dissolution) (Liu, 2000).

Previous research found that physical pleasure for men is more important in a sexual relationship than it is for women, which implies that men may seek sexual satisfaction in relationships more than women do (Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1992). When marginal utility and the human capital effect decrease over the course of a marital duration, the man may seek a higher level of pleasure from sexual variety, building on a stronger incentive to pursue sex outside marriage (Liu, 2000). This hypothesis predicts men are more likely than women are to engage in extramarital sexual relations because of social exchange theory and perceived benefits of sexual satisfaction with a new partner.

Opportunity Structures

According to Liu (2000) and others (Buss, 1994; England & Farkas, 1986; Masters et al., 1992), women are less likely to engage in extramarital sex as marital duration increases because of human capital investment in the relationship. The problem with this hypothesis is that it overlooks opportunity structure for women through the structuralist approach in social exchange theory (White et al., 2014). Because of opportunity structures, wives may have access to different opportunities because of external factors that influence their environments (White et al., 2014).

In this alternative approach, women are as likely as men to engage in extramarital sex because of opportunity structures. Opportunity structures are the access to opportunities as a result of exogenous factors that influence an individual's environment (White et al., 2014). This hypothesis makes infidelity an "equal opportunity" activity for men and women, especially with women entering the workforce and becoming more economically independent (Atkins et al., 2001). Another opportunity structure that is important to consider is the World Wide Web, which increases women's chances of meeting potential sex partners online. Compared to a few decades ago when online communication was much less developed, the Internet is an opportunity structure that increases a woman's chances of engaging in infidelity because she now has the ability to find potential extramarital partners online. Given that opportunity structures will

increase, there will be greater chances for women to engage in extramarital sex as much as men do.

Learning Theory through Interpretation

The deduction (*a priori*) component discussed above requires learners to draw a logical conclusion by beginning with one or more theories and then suggesting different outcomes in relation to a specific case based on propositions within each theoretical framework. However, instructors using the interpretation (*a posteriori*) approach guide learners in examining key theories from a different starting point. Instead, students begin with a question or outcome and then identify types of knowledge they will need in order to connect (gradually) this question or outcome with theories most suited to interpreting it. The interpretation approach to teaching family theory is conducive to problem-based learning (PBL) (Biggs, 2003; Boud & Feletti, 1997; Kek & Huijser, 2011; Pease & Kuhn, 2011). In a problem-based learning classroom, students engage with a specific problem as the key impetus through which they seek information. The need to solve a tangible problem echoes how individuals learn in everyday life and helps students develop mental pathways necessary to recalling this information in the future (Woods, 1994). Working in small groups, students first become familiar with their assigned problems and then identify and acquire empirical and theoretical knowledge they need to solve the problem. The instructor provides learners with necessary resources and tools as they work through each step (e.g., readings and guided questions). PBL approaches center the active learning of the student, with the instructor acting primarily as facilitator and manager rather than traditional lecturer (Wikie, 2004). Beginning with a problem provides strong motivation for students to learn about available data and theories because they are able to understand immediate relevance and applications of these empirical and theoretical frameworks (Biggs, 2003; Woods, 1994). We provide an example problem based activity below.

The “Problem” of Online Dating Websites

Online dating is becoming increasingly popular. Some estimates show that hundreds of millions of people use Internet dating sites globally (Arvidsson, 2006; Lawson & Leck, 2006; Shtatfeld & Barak, 2009; Smith, 2005). To participate in a site, interested users input data about themselves based on a series of pre-determined questions. “Most of the existing search engines in use on dating sites today were set up by taking into account the conceptions and theories dealing with attraction and compatibility factors between romantic partners,” state Shtatfeld and Barak (2009, p. 20). Since many online dating sites operate for profit, customer satisfaction through successful matches is particularly important (Arvidsson, 2006; Fiore & Donath, 2004; Shtatfeld & Barak, 2009, p. 20; Smith, 2005).

To teach theory using the interpretation approach, students identify optimal formulas for making long term romantic matches on a dating website. We anticipate that the topic of online dating will attract the interest of young adult learners who may be engaging with (or at the very least are aware of) the many dating websites that are available. To structure this activity, students could work in small groups with all tackling the same problem, or each group could receive a slightly different problem to address (e.g., a different dating demographic). All groups could

present their work at the end of the session, followed by a discussion about different formulas for matching users based on interpretations from each theory. Instructors may present student groups with this sample problem:

Sample #2

You have just purchased an online dating website catering to straight single adults looking for long term relationships. The previous owner had problems retaining customers in the past. Your goal is to return the business to a profitable state with satisfied customers and a strong reputation based on high rates of successful romantic matches. To do so you will need to design a new algorithm to ensure that users are matched with the most suitable potential romantic partners. First, you will need to determine what is likely to make potential partners attracted to one another. Using the latest empirical research on interpersonal attraction between heterosexual men and women, come up with a formula for matching users with one another. Next, identify the key family theory that best aligns with the formula you have designed. You may want to structure your research based on the following prompts:

1. What are the characteristics that most online dating sites ask users about?
2. From the characteristics you have mentioned, which ones have been shown to be the most significant for matching users?
3. Are any characteristics overlooked by these sites?
4. Are all characteristics equally significant in all contexts?
5. Attempt to create a formula for automatic online matches between men and women.
6. What does social exchange theory assume about men and women seeking a partner?
7. What does similarity theory assume about men and women seeking a partner?
8. Compare the propositions within (a) social exchange theory and (b) similarity theory with regard to what men and women value in finding a partner through online dating.
9. Looking at the formula you created, which of the two theories presented best aligns with the formula?
10. Prepare a brief description for your customers that explains the validity and theoretical logic behind your formula.

The instructor may also make short readings and empirical data (such as statistical tables) available to student groups as they work to design the most effective formulas for matching website users. Depending on the depth desired, students could tackle the problem in one class session, in multiple classes, or as a group project to be completed outside class time (possibly by

using the course website). Next, after working through this empirical problem by accessing available data and browsing popular online dating sites, groups would assess specific family theories in relation to their empirical findings. Below, we discuss two potential theories for students to consider.

Social Exchange Theory

A central assumption within this theoretical approach that people are drawn to intimate relationships with potential partners who bring various resources including financial, educational, and physical traits that can be transformed into potential rewards.

In the past, women often sought resources such as money and status from men, whereas men often sought out beauty and youth from women (Rajecki, Bledsoe, & Rasmussen, 1991). Currently, people are more likely to promote themselves through selling enjoyable activities they engage in, making it harder to distinguish gender-based differences. As a counter-approach to similarity theory (discussed below), social exchange theory shows how people endeavor to maximize rewards and minimize costs when seeking potential partners based on looks, personality traits, and other demographic characteristics. Using social exchange theory, students could imagine the thought processes of online dating users as they browse profiles and weigh pros and cons of each potential match.

Similarity Theory

Heterosexual attraction based on similarity is a well-studied phenomenon. For instance, scholars have examined relevance of romantic partners on similar characteristics with regard to education (Schwartz & Mare, 2005), religion (Heaton, 1984), race and ethnicity (Kalmijn, 1993), and attitudes (Snyder, 1964), among others. Homogamy has been connected to a variety of positive relationship outcomes such as shared humor, beliefs, ways of spending time, and mutual understanding (Kalmijn & Bernasco 2001). When considered in relation to online dating, similarity theory would suggest making ideal matches based on the parallel characteristics of users. However, within the interpretation approach the tenets of similarity theory are not meant to guide student learning. On the contrary, students get the tools to draw upon empirical data and to develop a tentative conclusion before assessing the fit between their algorithm and similarity theory.

Reflection

Using the comparative approach requires much pre-planning on the instructor's part. What examples shall instructors present to students so that there is coverage of all desired theories using the comparative approach? Which theories should be assessed deductively versus inductively (interpretively)? How much background information must instructors present to students before the activity? This will depend largely on the course level and the student's previous experience with the theories. Therefore, some pre-assessment of knowledge would be useful for gauging what resources are required (see Angelo & Cross, 1993). Using the flipped classroom approach also requires inclusion of student incentives to motivate students to be

prepared for class (e.g., read assignments ahead of time) such as participation points or other tools. Previous research demonstrated effectiveness of activity based/problem based learning, so there is justification for the extra effort. Some instructors may want to assess whether learning has improved. They can accomplish this by comparing class sections (e.g., traditional versus comparative approach to teaching) or within their class by using the comparative approach on just a few theories (compared to outcomes of traditional teaching on other theories). Finally, assessing student reactions to these various teaching methods would be valuable.

Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed the comparative approach, an advantageous pedagogical approach for teaching family theories. Our suggested approach provides a potential alternative to the established substantive issues approach (Fine & Fincham, 2013) and the theoretical frameworks approach (Smith, & Hamon, 2012; White, Klein & Martin, 2014) that are common in popular textbooks. In outlining the comparative approach, we described key components of this proposed teaching method. We also provided practical scenarios, sample theories, and activity prompts as examples. The comparative approach is conducive to development of numerous additional scenarios and activities in the future.

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