

Steps to Building a Good Theory — Embracing Diversity

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Abstract: In their commentary, Ye and Stam (2012) label Hong, Chao, Yang, and Rosner (2010) as logical empiricists who “restrict the nature and uses of theory,” and criticize their approach as limited. To provide a fuller understanding of theory building and to reap the knowledge offered by these diverse perspectives, in this rejoinder, we situate the discourse in the larger historical context, and argue that the apparent differences between the approaches proposed by Hong et al. (2010) and Ye and Stam (2012) can be bridged. We contend that each approach has its own scope and related limitations. While it is useful to inform readers of how these limitations might restrict the nature and uses of theory, it is also important to remain open and tolerant toward one another, and to avoid any essentialization of apparent differences.

Key words: theory; theoretical psychology; post-empiricism

Culture is a network of knowledge structures that are shared, albeit incompletely, by members within a given community (Chiu & Hong, 2007). Although we often associate the term “culture” with national or ethnic culture, different communities (e.g., academic ones) have also developed diverse cultures with unique characteristics. Hong, Chao, Yang, & Rosner’s (2010) approach to theory building and that of Ye and Stam (2012), reflects such diversity within the psychological community.

Our research on lay theory (e.g., Chao, Chen, Roisman, & Hong, 2007; Hong, Chao, & No, 2009; No, Hong, Liao, Lee, Wood, & Chao, 2008) has consistently demonstrated that individuals’ lay theories and assumptions about racial and cultural groups can color their perceptions of and reactions to diversity. Specifically, the essentialist lay theory is the belief that a social category, such as a racial or cultural group, possesses fixed qualities, or an inherent essence, that determine the attributes of its members (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). Research has shown that individuals who endorse

essentialist beliefs perceive different cultures as discrete entities with rigid boundaries; thus, rather than learning from other cultures and integrating diverse knowledge perspectives, they tend to overlook commonalities between cultures, exaggerate perceived between-group incompatibilities, and react against those perceived differences (No et al., 2008; also see Chao, Okazaki, & Hong, 2011).

Interpreting the discourse on theory building from the lay theory perspective, Ye and Stam (2012) label Hong and colleagues (2010) as logical empiricists who “restrict the nature and uses of theory” (p. 133). In addition, they contrast the presumably logical empiricist approach of Hong and colleagues (2010) from that of post-empiricists, essentializing the differences between these perspectives and arguing for the superiority of one (post-empiricism) over another (logical empiricism). In the critique, it is unclear how Hong et al. (2010) has *implicitly* adopted logical empiricism, and why the criticism regarding logical empiricism throughout the history of the philosophy of science is necessarily applicable to Hong et al. (2010). Thus, to provide a fuller understanding of theory building and to harvest the knowledge offered by these diverse perspectives, we attempt to de-essentialize the apparent differences between the approaches proposed by Hong et al. (2010) and Ye and Stam (2012), and situate this discourse in the larger historical context.

We maintain that instead of being fundamentally

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disparate, Hong et al.'s (2010) and Ye and Stam (2012) perspectives share a number of similarities. First, Ye and Stam's (2012) proposal of alternative approaches is consistent with Hong et al.'s (2010) caution to readers that, "there are many possible approaches to research; therefore our four-step approach should be treated as a guideline for researchers, rather than as the only approach" (Hong et al., 2010, p. 23). Ye and Stam's (2012) discussion of alternative approaches is, in fact, most welcome by Hong et al. (2010).

Second, similar to Ye and Stam (2012), Hong et al. (2010) also emphasize the importance of being reflective, a cornerstone of many post-empiricist approaches. Specifically, they point out that, "It is also noteworthy that theories are products of researchers' construction of reality, and thus are inevitably colored by the researchers' own historical, socio-political, and cultural backgrounds... Thus, when developing one's own research framework, it is useful to keep in mind that existing theories and their associated empirical works are historically and culturally embedded (Campbell & Russo, 1999), and that one should be open to other perspectives" (Hong et al., 2010, p. 23).

Furthermore, Ye and Stam's (2012) proposal of social constructionism lies close to the heart of Hong and associates' perspectives. This can be seen from the extensive research Hong and colleagues have conducted on how people construct meaning in different domains of their lives; this research has shown that the implicit beliefs one holds with regards to a specific domain (i.e., intelligence, moral character, and race) affects how that individual interprets the meaning of events that occur in that domain. This subjective interpretation ultimately leads to different personal and intergroup outcomes across individuals. Such research includes examining how implicit theories of intelligence affect responses in the academic domain (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999), how implicit theories of moral character affect the characterization of social identity and intergroup perceptions (Hong et al., 2003), and how implicit theories of race affect racial categorization and racial identity (Chao et al., 2007). In the domain of cultural psychology, Hong and associates (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000) have proposed the idea of *dynamic constructivism*, an emerging meta-theory of cultural influence; this

approach, together with other recent developments in cultural psychology, "represents one of the most successful and sustained attempts to integrate experimental social psychology and social constructionism" (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 179). In short, the main goal of this collection of studies is to understand how people make sense of the social world, which is also characteristic of the social constructionist approach.

Central to Ye and Stam's (2012) argument, as we understand it, has to do with the presumed relationship between Hong et al. (2010) and the long-standing debate between the positivist and post-empiricist approaches within psychology. The details of the debate between positivism and post-empiricism are beyond the scope of the present commentary, interested readers can pursue the argument further via the extant philosophy of science literature. As a primer, it may be useful to refer to Jost and Kruglanski's (2002) analysis of the estrangement of social constructionism and experimental social psychology. There is a history of mutual refusal, bordering on contempt, between the social constructionist and experimental social psychological approaches. Such infighting is unfortunate because "it belies the once close affiliation between these two perspectives... It also conceals the many shared assumptions and goals of both approaches... [Both approaches] are in fundamental agreement with the notion that human beings actively and symbolically construct the world around them" (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 169). Both traditions underscore "the ways in which children grow into the intellectual life around them by constructing shared reality in the practical context of social interaction... This work, in turn, provides the developmental basis regarding people as active, expectancy-laden perceivers in ever-changing social environments, a vision that has come to be shared by experimental social cognitive researchers and social constructionists alike" (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 170).

Moreover, the theory of social constructionism is predicated on the assumption that people are influenced by their historical, cultural, and political contexts, and can flexibly negotiate self-definition and meaning from different situations, as well as generate new responses as a result. As Ye and Stam (2012) also noted, "we respond to the knowledge of

what we are by possibly becoming something different. Unlike quartz, we respond to the theories that are posited about us (see also Gergen, 2010).” (p. 135). That is, our responses are not inevitable as we gain knowledge about the theories concerning our own psychology. Processes like these are the topics of investigation for experimental social psychologists; their findings provide bases for the endeavors of social constructionism.

The biggest rift between social constructionism and experimental social psychology is that the experimental social psychological approach believes in truth – at least as an entity toward which to strive – whereas social constructionists do not. However, “truth as a product of the scientific process is different from truth as a regulating ideal that may guide epistemic activity” (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 173). From a pragmatic point of view, truth may not be ultimately attainable, but the search for truth can fuel productive efforts at theory construction and validation. This is the perspective that Hong et al. (2010) endorse.

Each approach has its own scope and related limitations, and it is useful to inform readers of how these limitations might restrict the nature and uses of theory. We appreciate Ye and Stam’s (2012) commentary for calling attention to the debate between the positivist and post-empiricist views, and to alternative ways of theory construction — opening up the floor for discussion on these topics is certainly worthwhile.

Just as our societies are becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural, the intellectual world is also becoming more diverse than ever. Interdisciplinary and multi-method approaches have flourished in recent years. In the intellectual communities that are marked by diversity, it is important to acquire knowledge of different approaches and their attending methodologies. Understanding diverse perspectives should allow researchers to be informed of the biases and limitations with each approach. Furthermore, it is also important to remain open and tolerant toward one another, and to avoid essentialization of apparent differences. As we have demonstrated, oftentimes, there are more commonalities than there are

differences across cultural perspectives, and the observed differences are not necessarily incompatible. We hope that the dialogue on theory construction between Hong et al. (2010) and Ye and Stam (2012), as well as the present commentary, can help readers reflect critically on their research approaches and bridge the seemingly essentialist divide between social constructionism and experimental social psychology.

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包容多样性的理论建构

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摘 要 Ye和Stam (2012)的评论中将Hong, Chao, Yang和Rosner (2010)标签成逻辑经验主义派, 他们认为这个派别常常“限制”了理论的应用和其本身的价值。为了向读者们提供一个对理论建立过程的更完整的理解, 同时也为了从这些迥异的观点中汲取更多知识, 在这篇文章中, 我们比较 Hong等人(2010)与Ye和Stam (2012)所建议的两种不同方法论之间的差异, 并将其放入更广阔的历史背景下进行论述。我们的主张是: 每一种方法论都是有它自己的适用范围和局限性。对研究者来说, 保持在对待不同论点上开明和宽容的态度, 并避免本质化不同方法论间的差异也是十分重要的。

关键词 理论; 理论心理学; 后经验主义

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