

THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Edited by Jeroen Huisman
and Malcolm Tight

THEORY AND METHOD IN
HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

VOLUME 9

**THEORY AND METHOD IN
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RESEARCH VOLUME 9

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HIGHER EDUCATION
RESEARCH**

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

Editorial matter and selection © 2024 Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83797-521-1 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83797-520-4 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83797-522-8 (Epub)

ISSN: 2056-3752 (Series)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This is the 2023 volume in the annual series *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research*, which we launched in 2013 in the belief that there was a need to provide a forum specifically for higher education researchers to discuss issues of theory and method.

About half of the contributions in this volume lean more towards theory than method. Thus, we have Kawai reconsidering student development theory; Yeo pleading for a critical race theory (CRT) applied to international students; Björnö examining critical language theory; and Andrews, Fay, Huang and Ross exploring linguistic approaches to higher education research.

Methodological contributions include those of Kim and Clasing on quasi-experimental methods, Burgos considering arts-based research, and Clark on using reflective dialogues.

Two contributions address both theoretical and methodological issues. Österlind, Denicolo and Apelgren address both theory and method from a constructivist perspective. Tight's contribution reflects, amongst others, on the use of theory and method in leading higher education journals.

As in previous years, the volume displays an international authorship, although the group of authors is less diverse taking into account their country affiliations. Authors stem from the United Kingdom (8), the United States (3), Sweden (2), Finland (1), Japan (1) and Chile (1).

Anyone interested in contributing a chapter to a future volume is invited to get in touch with either, but preferably both, of the editors.

Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight

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CHAPTER 1

TOWARDS THE CONSOLIDATION OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORY: DEVELOPMENT, ISSUES AND CRITIQUES

Toru Kawai

ABSTRACT

Development theory in college describes and explains how students develop. This chapter explores ways to balance and consolidate differentiation and integration in this theory. First, it traces the origins, history and current development of the theory, which evolves from an integrative understanding to a differentiated one. Subsequently, it identifies the tensions between integration and differentiation in this evolution. This chapter consider two directions towards the theoretical consolidation of differentiation and integration: (1) returning to how integrative understandings were achieved and exploring research directions that further advance integrative understandings; (2) recognizing the parallel evolution of North American student development theory in theorising about learning from a critical realism perspective, and, by overlaying this theory upon such a perspective, reconstructing it towards consolidation. This chapter concludes by discussing two implications for further higher education research that draws on student development theory.

Keywords: Student development theory; theorising; critical realism; tensions between integration and differentiation; theoretical consolidation; post-secondary education

INTRODUCTION

In higher education research, college student development has become a research topic of some interest. Studies meta-analyzing research trends through citation analysis have confirmed that students and their experiences are a key theme and that the relevance of theory to practice has been complex (Smith, 2019; Smith, Wofford, Friedensen, Stanfield, & Jackson, 2021). Research on theories of college student development – i.e. theories that describe and explain how college students develop – has evolved in North American higher education since the late 20th century. Development theory has been advanced by the *Journal of College Student Development*, an increase in introductory postgraduate courses (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009) and the publication of textbooks (Abes, Jones, & Stewart, 2019; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009; Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). In recent years, college student development theory has made advancements in enriching perspectives on analyzing the impact of structural and systemic contexts (Jones, 2019; Jones & Stewart, 2016).

At the same time, many researchers have cautioned against the fragmentation of higher education research, which includes the field of college student development. Research reviewing large numbers of articles has metaphorically described higher education research as national containers, separate silos and archipelagos (Daenekindt & Huisman, 2020; Macfarlane, 2012; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). Along with the problems of national containers, in which research findings can only be applied to each country's specific contexts, higher education research in particular has been criticized for the divide between North America and the rest of the world (Tight, 2014, 2018). This point applies to college student development theory as well. There is concern that higher education research and college student development theory is a low-consensus field (Renn, 2020; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2019), and this has been empirically confirmed in a network analysis of topics and citations (Smith & Brown, 2021). Higher education researchers and college student development researchers have to grapple with a double barrier: being 'stuck on their island' (Daenekindt & Huisman, 2020, p. 584) with their research topic, they also face the challenge of going beyond their national container.

Parallel to diverse theorising, a tension about theorising has emerged in research on theories of college student development: it is the question of how to consolidate a balance between theoretical differentiation and integration of understanding regarding student development. Here, differentiation means the detailed diversification of explanations in response to diverse contexts, while the integration of understanding refers to generalization, which implies a comprehensive application of theory across contexts. The history of theories on college student development has been one of waves of differentiation and integration (Jones & Stewart, 2016). As with the Tight (2018) research project, we need to trace this history to understand how this tension has come about. And we should also search for different ways of looking at this tension in theory by crossing boundaries and examining the research outside North America.

Even though college student development theory has been accumulated in North America, theorising dealing with college student development has been elaborated outside of North America. A parallel advance can be seen in a series of higher education research projects that share a common feature in terms of analyzing influences from structure: this body of work incorporates a framework of structure and agency, with critical realism as its meta-theory. In this era of higher education scholarship, where practitioners engage with difficult issues by crossing boundaries and building relationships with outside partners (e.g. community and industry members) or inside partners (e.g. academic affairs and student affairs) (Hasted & Bligh, 2020), theoretical research cannot remain complacent and confined to separate silos.

This chapter aims to explore ways to balance and consolidate differentiation and integration of theories in college student development theory. First, it traces the origins, history and current development of college student development theory, particularly in North America. It then identifies a conflicting tension between differentiation and integration, and issues in the theorising of college student development theory. It next considers how to deal with this, drawing on theories with frameworks of structure and agency based on critical realism that have been applied to research into teaching and learning outside of North America.

ORIGINS AND HISTORY

Student development theory evolved in North American higher education, particularly in the field of student affairs. Its origins are recognized in the guiding principles of *The Student Personnel Point of View*, which was published in 1937 by the American Council on Education to bring attention to the experience and needs of students, and of *Tomorrow's Higher Education Project*, which was published in 1975 by the Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education, emphasizing students' dignity, the development of the whole student and the need for research (Schwartz & Stewart, 2017). This history of student development theory has provided the theoretical foundation of student affairs (Evans et al., 2009). From this beginning, the history of student development theory can be divided into three waves (Abes et al., 2019; Jones, 2019; Jones & Stewart, 2016; Patton et al., 2016; Torres et al., 2019). This section traces that history of the theory so that the next section can identify the tensions in it.

Foundational Theories

The first wave of student development theory, based on knowledge from disciplines such as developmental psychology and sociology, generated theories in the cognitive and psychosocial domains, such as Perry's (1968) intellectual and ethical development theory and Chickering's (1969) identity theory. Fundamental questions about the subject (who are college students?), process (how does development occur?), interaction with the environment (how does the

environment affect development?) and purpose (to what kinds of end should development in college be directed?) were established (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978).

Perry's theory was representative of cognitive development theory in college. In this theory, the stages of intellectual growth were broadly divided into dualism, multiplicity, relationalism and commitment – more specifically, into 10 positions. In dualism, one moves from being passive and dependent on authority to being open to a multitude of ideas and thoughts in multiplicity. And in relationalism, knowledge becomes organized rather than being multiple fragments of knowledge. In commitment, the student becomes able to construct their own beliefs and make ethical choices on the basis of organized knowledge.

Chickering's theory was recognized as the typical psycho-social development theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This posits seven developmental vectors, covering psychosocial development areas: (1) developing competence, (2) managing emotions, (3) moving through autonomy towards interdependence, (4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity. Developmental vectors are broader than cognitive development, with the psychosocial ones including emotional and personal development.

The first phase of progress established the foundational theory, and several empirical studies were conducted to apply theory to practice. From the positivist paradigm, empirical research pursued a generalization using several measurement scales. Those research projects contributed to the advancement of the integration of understanding based on student development theory. At the same time, critiques revealed that the main participants in empirical studies were young white males, and that the empirical studies in the first phase did not represent the voices of diverse social groups. These critiques advanced student development theory towards research that captured marginalized voices (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

Expansion of Theories

The second wave expanded the range and variety of theories both in cognitive and psychosocial development. Cognitive development theory produced various concepts and models: women's cognitive development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), the reflective judgement model (King & Kitchener, 1994), epistemological development (Baxter-Magolda, 1992), epistemic doubt (Chandler, Boyes, & Ball, 1990) and epistemological understanding (Kuhn, Cheney, & Weinstock, 2000). In relation to psychosocial domains, the development theory of social identity expanded. Social identities included the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, trust/spirituality, disability and social class. The theory of social identity development describes how it occurs and explains the barriers in it.

In the second phase, as theories expanded, graduate schools began to offer a number of introductory courses on student development theory (Kuk & Cuyjet, 2009). The seminal textbook, *Student Development in College* (Evans et al., 2009), covers cognitive, epistemological, moral, self-authorship, spirituality and social

identity development of themes such as gender, race, disability and class. Other topics addressed include Kolb's theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and Schlossberg's theory of transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Student leadership development has a shared foundation with student development theory and, with the modelling of leadership identity development (Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005), it also came to form an important field of study in higher education research (Komives, Dugan, Owen, Wagner, & Slack, 2011).

Another important achievement of the second phase was the theorising of self-authorship as a holistic development (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2012). The theory of self-authorship is framed by Kegan's (1982) theory of structural development, which states that the growth phase moves from an externally dependent phase to a crossroad phase to reach self-authorship. Whereas development theories previously did not connect cognitive and psychosocial domains sufficiently, self-authorship theory consists of three juxtaposed dimensions of interpersonal, intrapersonal and epistemological relationships, thereby becoming more holistic.

In the second wave, the mainstream research paradigm adopted constructivism. The research methodology of qualitative research, such as grounded theory and narrative inquiry, produced studies that focused on understanding the meaning of students' narratives. Research constructed models to identify key factors of development based on students' narratives, rather than applying theoretically formulated stages to students. The second wave of theories advanced the synthesis of theoretical accounts of college student development, in that they inherited the cross-contextual generalizations of the first wave, and incorporated the three dimensions of interpersonal, intrapersonal and epistemological relationships, thereby elaborating the developmental models and stages across these dimensions.

Emerging Criticality of Theories

The third wave arises from a critique of the failure to examine normativity in student development theory, which is derived from the main research participants being young white males; conversely, the second wave only ends up in listening to diverse and marginalized voices. From a critical and post-structural perspective, third-wave development theory research critically foregrounds the structural and systemic effects of privilege and oppression with an orientation towards social justice. The third wave of student development theory advances the differentiation of understanding on student development in these diverse contexts.

This perspective critiques constructivist assumptions and draws on alternative conceptualizations. With their work grounded in research from this perspective, Jones and Stewart (2016) consider three basic assumptions of developmental constructivism (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2012), which is the main theoretical underpinning of the second wave, in greater depth rather than uncritically accepting them: 'first, understanding of the self is formed in community with others (that is, constructivism); second, that it is dependent upon increasing

complexity (that is, developmental); and third, individuals are assumed to be reliable witnesses of and articulate about their knowledge of self and others (that is, capable of making meaning of their own lives)' (Jones & Stewart, 2016, p. 23).

Jones and Stewart started to criticize the third assumption because the cognition of an individual is situated in and caused to fluctuate by the contexts. They emphasized these characteristics of cognition and highlighted the influence of individual cognition in the contexts. They then proposed an alternative research framework that analyses the influences of the implicit contexts through critical reflection on those influences, promoting a differentiated understanding of student development.

The alternative lens also looks differently at the coherence, stability and fixity of identity and meaning-making. Viewing identity as a social construction rather than as essential and fixed is an important achievement of the constructivism paradigm. The third wave critical and post-structural perspective pushes towards exploring the process of identity formation and studies the dynamics and fluidity of the identity formation process and environmental influences thereupon (Jones & Abes, 2013). There are also diverse studies that draw on critical and post-structural perspectives. One of these uses the conceptualization of intersectionality as a research framework and explores the oppressive effects of the intersection of multiple social identities (Duran & Jones, 2019). Other studies adopt concepts from queer theory such as performativity and liminality (Butler, 1990) against theories of self-authorship and attempt to deconstruct heteronormativity norms (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Theories such as critical race theory (e.g. Okello, 2018; Torres & Hernandez, 2007), critical disability studies (Abes & Wallace, 2020; Brown, Peña, Broido, Stapleton, & Evans, 2019) and critical whiteness (Foste & Irwin, 2020) have been brought into student development theory to explore the meaning-making of student development from a critical and post-structural perspective. Since the second wave, student development theories have diversified, and in the third wave we can see further diversification, even in the area of identity development.

A critical and post-structural perspective enables us to consider how structural context facilitates or constrains student development and highlights the workings of personal agency in navigating within those contexts. The characteristic of personal agency includes not only the individualistic aspect of 'increasing individuation and separation from others in order to achieve control, autonomy and independence in relationship to others' (Baxter-Magolda, 2001, p. 141), but also expands resistance and resilience in the face of oppression (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Hernandez, 2016).

Throughout the history of college student development theory, theory has been a lens for interpreting the issues and methodology adopted in a study (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, 2021). The waves of research have established guiding principles for college student development theory, overlaying multiple theories and considering contextual influences.

Overlaying multiple theories directs theory applications in a hybrid way with the aim of exploring the meaning of student development. A study provides the first interpretation of data from the perspective of constructivist theory, and then

overlays the second interpretation of the same data from the perspective of critical and post-structuralist theory. For example, [Abes \(2009\)](#) adopted the expression ‘borderlands’ between theoretical perspectives from [Anzaldúa \(1999\)](#) and added the interpretation from queer theory to the constructivist interpretation of student narratives. [Perez \(2019\)](#) also explored the critical perspectives on development self-authorship and refined them through an examination of the plural paradigms of constructivism, social constructivism, critical paradigm and critical constructivism. Alongside the overlaying of theory, applying student development theory should reflect recursively on the theory itself, questioning constantly and critically what student development theory allows and blocks.

Research in the third wave of student development theory should consider contextual influences in order to analyze the effect of structural and systemic oppression and privilege on student development. Theory as a lens is utilized and recursively scrutinized throughout, rather than being part of research design, participant recruitment, data collection, analysis and discussion ([Duran & Jones, 2019](#)). The critical and post-structural perspective, established in the third wave, is oriented towards critiquing various forms of inequality and discrimination in everyday life ([Denzin, 2017](#)) and thus student development research should consider contextual influences for connecting to critical reflection on them. Therefore, the third wave further diversified student development theories and complicated the differentiated understanding of student development in various contexts, overlaying plural perspectives and analyzing contextual influences.

TENSIONS AND CRITIQUES: WHERE ARE SOURCES OF TENSION?

The three-wave evolution of student development theory is moving in two directions. One integrates understanding of student development holistically, based on generalization across contexts in the first wave and the incorporation of three dimensions of intrapersonal, interpersonal and epistemological relationships in the theory of self-authorship from the second wave. The other differentiates and is partially derived from the diversification of student development theory and then more fully from the advancement of analyzing interactions with context, such as the theories of social identity. This is consistent with the history of research on student support in higher education ([Schwartz & Stewart, 2017](#)) and with co-citation analysis of research on college student development ([Smith, 2019](#)).

Herein lies a source of tension. Despite the formulation of holistic theory, student development theories get lost in fragmentation when they provide analysis of the detailed contextual interaction.

The first source of tension lies is because, although critical structural perspectives support differentiating understanding of student development, they do not find a way to consolidate their integrative understandings and face the risk of fragmentation. These perspectives, while allowing us to consider the influences of structural oppression, have not been created with student development theory in

their origins, and do not focus on insights into developmental mechanisms (Lange & Duran, 2021; Torres et al., 2019). The history of student development theory supports understanding this first tension, as it evolved from a generalization-oriented interest in development mechanisms to an interest in diverse development processes (Evans, 2016). Critical and structural perspectives have moved further towards analyzing contextual oppression, dividing students into groups of social categories such as race, sex, gender, class and ability, and then have considered their intersection and scrutinized their context-specific effects. Any number of social categories, and even contexts, can be differentiated, and further differentiation is possible when intersectionality is added. Research from these perspectives recognized diverse voices, along with the evolution of qualitative research methodologies (Jones et al., 2014, 2021), and it contributed to understanding the spread of social injustice. An understanding of student development based on this differentiation, however, provides a limited understanding about one aspect or experience of growth. The result is a situation where policymakers and managers concerned about college student development and its mechanisms are perplexed in the face of the differentiated understandings that are continually being produced. In the worst case, tensions may arise between academic scholarship, policy and practice.

On the other hand, if student development theories give up differentiated understanding, they face a second source of tension. If they retreat to a holistically integrated theory, such as that established in the second wave of self-authorship theories, tension arises from the undermining of criticality. The second tension revealed that the foundational theories in the first and second waves that target development mechanisms have an ambivalent evaluation by scholars who teach student development theory and practitioners who study and use it. On the one hand, the third wave criticized them, but, on the other, courses in graduate school should teach them as an essential part of development theories to understand as practitioners (Harris, 2020). These theories contribute a foundation for an integrated understanding of college student development. Abandoning such a foundation would fall into danger of losing sight of what is to be understood and may end up doing nothing but criticizing. Thus, with the persistent sense of crisis around the tensions between theory and policy/practice in higher education research, there is a call for both critical and generous thinking, a search for consensus and syntheses between groups of theories (Renn, 2020; Torres et al., 2019). For the purpose of consolidating differentiation and integration of theoretical understanding, it is not possible to return to the second wave state of theory and forget the third wave. It is neither appropriate to integrate with ignorance of differentiation, nor to remain satisfied with differentiated understandings and abandon integration.

Theorising cannot exert its full potential if the problem of these tensions is left unaddressed. The problem is that while the focus has shifted towards considering the effects of structural and systemic oppression and towards differentiated developing processes, the theories in the third wave cannot sufficiently articulate how to understand development mechanisms in an integrated way. Whereas the first and second waves of student development theory generated the centripetal