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# Does higher education research have a theory deficit? Explorations on theory work

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## ABSTRACT

Our contribution aims kick off a nuanced debate about theories and theorising in higher education research. Drawing on sociological literature that reflects on theories and theorising, we introduce the notion of ‘theory work.’ Theory work emphasises that theories are practical tools that can be used for a variety of purposes. To make different forms of engagement with theories visible, we develop in a first step three conceptual lenses that facilitate a nuanced observation of different forms of engagement with theories in higher education research: the lenses focus on (1) ranges of theories, (2) ways of engaging with theories, and (3) degrees of epistemic autonomy of theory work. In a second step, we operationalise these lenses for two thematic fields: we discuss theory work in research concerned with organisation and governance, and theory work in research on academic careers. Our contribution shows that there are both differences and similarities in theory work across thematic fields with in higher education research. Across these differences and similarities our conceptual lenses reveal a variety of forms of theories and theory work in higher education research. We conclude by discussing several benefits a conceptual toolkit on theory work can have for higher education research more generally.

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## KEYWORDS

Theory work; methodology; interdisciplinary fields; reflexivity

## 1. Introduction: for a nuanced discussion on theory in higher education research<sup>1</sup>

From its foundational years in the 1960s and 1970s to the present, higher education research has developed into a mature field that is characterised by its interdisciplinary outlook and its orientation towards application. From the latter it follows that the field is largely driven by questions that emerge from the social relevance higher education has for societies. A lot of research in the field is done in a demand-oriented mode for policy and practice, often based on normative questions. Therefore, project-oriented, time-limited research is typical within the field. Quality criteria are often determined

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by the societal contexts of application, especially politics, and not solely within the scientific community (Krücken 2012; Cantwell 2020).

Perhaps this brief characterisation of higher education research goes some way to explain why the field has always had a somewhat complicated relationship with theory. Already in the mid-1980s, commentators noted a preoccupation of the field with research methods and technicalities:

There is a sense that a powerful cheetah is being examined by hundreds of earnest persons with magnifying glasses, micrometers, and sketch pads. Dozens of published articles each year carry titles like 'Factorial Invariance of Student Evaluations of College Teaching.' (Keller 1985, 7; Peterson 1986)

This scathing criticism was repeated only a few years later, when Clifton F. Conrad (1989, 205) warned his colleagues that higher education research was 'preoccupied with data-gathering for narrow descriptive purposes, we have not emphasized understanding and interpretation that goes much beyond empirical generalization, narrow speculation, and low-level theory.'

John H. Milam (1991) confirmed Conrad's diagnosis for journal literature in higher education research in the mid to late 1980s. According to more recent contributions, the relationship between higher education research and theories has not become less complicated, and deficit diagnoses prevail (Tight 2004, 2012; Ashwin 2012). It is perhaps characteristic for the field that the debate on the lack of attention paid to theory is systematized with quantitative content analysis and is, thus, in the first place answered by means of methods rather than with a debate about theory (but see the book series 'Theories and Method in Higher Education Research,' edited by Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight).

Our contribution draws on this tradition of critical self-reflection in higher education research. However, we would like to depart from a deficit diagnosis and lend the discussion a more productive turn. Although calls for more thorough theories or a wider range of theoretical approaches might be well justified, these calls remain limited if the field of higher education does not have the conceptual tools to reflect on different forms of theories and different ways to engage with them. In fact, one cannot help but get the impression that, in the debate on a theory deficit in higher education research, 'theory' might also be used as a 'judgmental term' (Krause 2016, 23) that is mobilised to value a *specific* way of engaging with *specific* theories. This kind of boundary work then sweepingly devalues other theories and alternative ways of engaging with them.

To facilitate a more productive discussion on the relation between theories and higher education research, we would like to propose the notion of 'theory work.' With this notion we suggest understanding theories not as sterile and disembodied knowledge and, ultimately, uniform sets of propositions, but as tools that can be used for different purposes. Consequently, working with theories can be conceived of as a craft that can – and should – be made explicit, maintained, and trained. Our notion of 'theory work,' and our contribution more generally, is inspired by sociological literature on 'theory' and 'theorising,' ranging from classical contributions by Robert K. Merton (1968[1949]) to more recent approaches by, for example, Monika Krause (2016). We will review this literature and show how it can help us to assess various forms of theory work (section 2).

Drawing on this literature, we develop three lenses that help us to assess the manifold forms of theory work in higher education research in a nuanced and productive way, thereby moving the discussion beyond the all too prevalent theory-deficit hypothesis: our first lens zooms in on different forms of ‘theory.’ Particularly, it distinguishes theories according to their range, denoting the level of abstraction of a theory from empirical cases, and, thus, also the range of theoretical statements that are made – from general and universalistic statements to case-specific empirical interpretations. The second lens facilitates a particular focus on the role of theory within the empirical research process and on a spectrum of ways of working with theory, ranging from applying, testing, and combining theories to adapting, modifying, and building theories. Through the third lens, we observe different degrees of epistemic autonomy of theory work. For example, theory work can receive its questions and concerns from almost purely academic interests, or it may reflect political, cultural or economic interests in a relatively unfiltered way (section 3).

To put these lenses to use and exemplify how they can contribute to our understanding of theory work in higher education research, we have selected two thematic fields: research concerned with organisation and governance, and research on academic careers. We expect analytical leverage from this comparative discussion because we assume that theory work takes different forms across these thematic fields (section 4). Our contribution concludes with a discussion on how a reflection of theory work in higher education research can benefit the field more generally.

## 2. Reviewing sociological literature on ‘theory’ and ‘theorising’

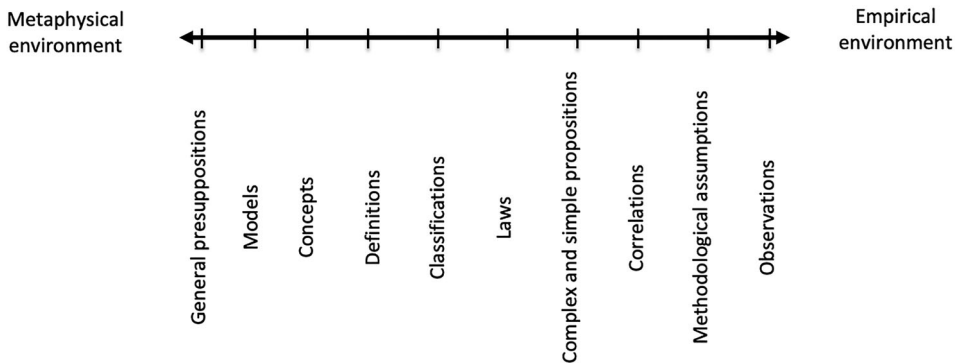
For our reflection on theory work in higher education research, we build on the writings by selected scholars of sociology. There are, of course, more reflections on theory and theorising in other disciplines. Above all, the philosophy of science is concerned with the theory of science and the relation of theory and knowledge production. There are, however, also more meanings of theory in source disciplines of higher education research that we do not capture here. For example, in economics, theorising can take place as empirical modelling or through natural experiments. In history, theory is important in the sense of a theory of history. We draw on sociological studies for three reasons: first, there is a lively and diversified body of sociological scholarship on theory and theorising that promises to be fruitful for higher education research.<sup>2</sup> Second, sociology is the discipline from which we, as authors, approach the field of higher education research. Other researchers might be better equipped to mobilise the literature on theory from their disciplinary origins. Third, although the field of higher education has never had one absolutely dominant discipline that has defined the intellectual heritage, the scope, and the borders of higher education research, sociological perspectives have been a decisive intellectual source since its emergence (Clark 1973; Gumpert 2007). Such kinds of disciplinary inputs have been important for the interdisciplinary research field because it is the disciplines that develop, advance, and perpetuate a particular body of theoretical and methodological knowledge.

In the 1940s, Robert K. Merton was one of the early proponents of developing a ‘methodology of theory’ and of advancing a specific type of theory. In the 1980s, Jeffrey C. Alexander proposed a relational position between theory and empirical observations.

In 2008, Gabriel Abend contributed to the debate with a meta-theoretical field observation in which he analyzed the meanings the term ‘theory’ within sociology. Most recently, Richard Swedberg and Monika Krause pushed the debate forward by advancing a perspective on the practice of theory and theorising. In this section, we briefly discuss their approaches to theory and will use aspects of their considerations in order to build conceptual lenses for the reflection of theory work in higher education research in the next section and, thus, make it productive for that field.

The goal of Merton’s considerations was to assess theories’ contributions to and limitations for the advancement of sociology. To this end, he distinguished types of theories instead of comprising all of them under the uniform roof of sociological theory as was common at that time (Merton 1945). Theory in Merton’s sense is a logically interrelated set of propositions about empirically observable phenomena that explain these phenomena. The range of a theory, serving as the main comparative dimension for the distinction of theory types, denotes the level of abstraction from empirical cases.<sup>3</sup> On this basis Merton (1945) distinguished seven types of theories from general and universalist propositions to ad-hoc theories, to empirical regularities, to empirical observations. Merton (1968[1949]) considered the type of mid-range theory the most promising one for the advancement of sociology. Although his typology does not explicitly distinguish between idiographic and nomothetic approaches, descriptions of characteristics of theories that point to variable-oriented methodological approaches to data prevail. However, Merton’s reflections on theory have initiated a broad discussion in sociology on the semantics, forms, and roles of theory.

Jeffrey C. Alexander took up the discussion in the 1980s and advanced the debate on the relationship between theory and empirical observations in a four-volume book on theoretical logic in sociology (Alexander 1982). Instead of distinguishing different types of theory with specific relationships to data, he bridged the distinction of the empirically observable environment and the non-empirical metaphysical environment by establishing an epistemological continuum between them. His main argument is that, ‘although scientific statements may be oriented more toward one of these environments than the other, they can never be determined exclusively by either alone’ (ibid., 2). In this perspective, ‘theory’ is a relative term (see Figure 1): statements closer to the left



**Figure 1.** The scientific continuum and its components. Authors’ depiction, according to Alexander (1982).

side of the continuum are considered 'theoretical' because their form is less based on direct observations. Statements closer to the right side of the continuum are typically considered 'empirical' because they are more strongly characterised by the criterion of an accurate description of observation. But, Alexander argued, it would be more accurate to see the distinctions as quantitative and not as qualitative because each element on the continuum contains both empirical and non-empirical properties and, thus, general and specific properties.

Gabriel Abend, explicitly building on Alexander, albeit with a shift to a semantic perspective, analyzed the use of the term 'theory' within sociology. He distinguished seven different senses in which theory is used in sociological language (Abend 2008). Abend's change of perspective is vividly expressed in the question he raises: instead of explicative and normative questions about what 'theory' does and should mean, he inquires the different meanings of theory 'out there' from a meta-field perspective. His analysis shows that not all meanings of theory are based on a notion of theory as an empirically grounded set of statements (as in, e.g. 'theory' as an explanation of a particular social phenomenon). Rather, 'theory' can also have exclusively non-empirical meanings (e.g. 'theory' as an exegetical interpretation of classics and their meaning). While the relationship between theoretical statements and data, in the Mertonian sense, is decisive in some of the meanings of theory distinguished by Abend, it is far less important for other meanings. With his distinctions of meanings, Abend contributes important nuances to the use of theories – nuances that go beyond a data-related definition of theory, and, thus, a monolithic (and often normative) treatment of theory.

Last but not least, we would like to include contributions by Richard Swedberg and Monika Krause. To recalibrate the relationship between empirical and theoretical engagement in the social sciences, Swedberg and Krause focused on 'theorising' instead of theories. Swedberg's primary argument is that methods (both quantitative and qualitative) dominate the contemporary social sciences, which are in turn 'severely hampered by the lack of attention being paid to theory' (Swedberg 2016, 1). Swedberg (2014) introduced the concept of 'theorising' to point out that 'theories' are not just completed and static sets of propositions and statements, but based on practices and processes of producing and designing theory. He aimed at shifting the attention to theorising and the actual practices and processes that precede the final formulation of a theory (and the trial-and-error of handling the theory part in empirical research). Consequently, Swedberg (2016, 2) claims: 'Before theory comes theorising.' Although Swedberg gave some very general practical advice on how to theorise (ibid., 3), Krause (2016) argues that he fell short on the different interpretations of the practice of theorising and the ways in which it can be accomplished. Therefore, she distinguished five different meanings of theorising, reaching from, for example, theorising as the interpretation of major figures, to theorising as the application of existing concepts to theorising as the development of new concepts. Krause's differentiations emphasise that theorising does not necessarily mean building theory entirely inductively from empirical considerations. Rather, it can also mean adapting, transforming, and expanding theorists' thoughts, theories, and concepts. In sum, Swedberg's and Krause's notion of theorising strengthens the focus on scholars' actual work with theory.

This brief review of selected sociological considerations conveys the complexity and multifacetedness of 'theory' and 'theorising.' Not least, it provides an analytical grid

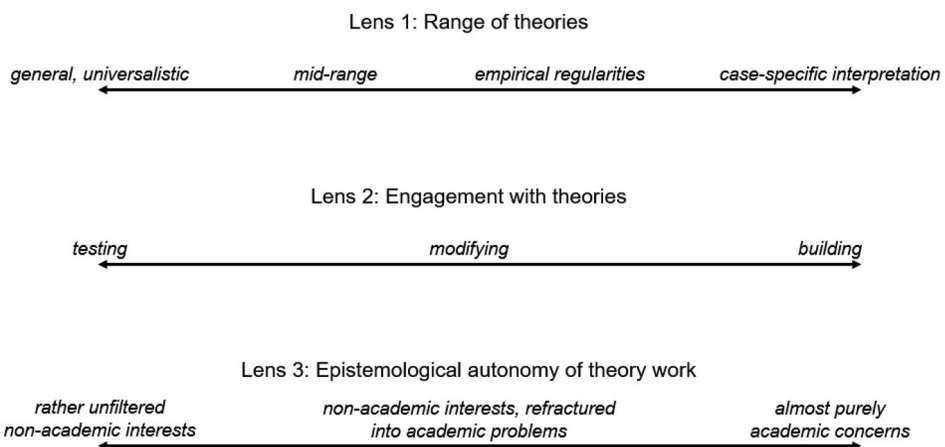
that directs our gaze and specifies what exactly we are looking for – and what not – when we want to make different forms of engagement with theory visible (see [appendix 1](#) for a tabular comparison of the types and meanings of theory by Merton, Abend, and Krause). Drawing on this grid, we will develop three conceptual lenses which we specify in the following section and which will facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the theory work taking place in higher education research.

### 3. Conceptual lenses for the observation of theory work

We use the above mentioned classical and contemporary sociological literature on ‘theory’ and ‘theorising’ to develop three conceptual lenses for our observation of the theory work in higher education research. For the development of these lenses – which can be considered theory work on its own –, we opted for a rather pragmatic, hands-on approach in which we draw on the considerations by Merton, Alexander, Abend, Swedberg, Krause, as well as on the work of Julian Go (2017), and Jana Bacevic (2017). Our aim is neither to integrate the different perspectives in the literature into one coherent framework nor to ‘apply’ any of the approaches in a mechanistic or comprehensive way. Rather, our goal is to operationalise insights from this literature and put them into practice. For this purpose, we selectively draw on different aspects and propose specific parallels between approaches to build three observational lenses that help us establish a broader perspective on the manifold theory work taking place in higher education research.

In this context, we follow a main argument from Alexander’s work and highlight the relational characteristics of theories, the relationship between theory and empirical research, and relative epistemic autonomy of theory work. Consequently, our three observational lenses have the logic of continuums (see [Figure 2](#)).

The first lens focuses on characteristics of theories and is concerned with the range of theories, depicted on a continuum from universalistic and general theories to empirical



Authors' depiction

**Figure 2.** Three lenses on theory work. Authors' depiction.

observations. For this lens, we draw on Merton's work to specify the abstraction of theory from data and to delineate ranges of explanations. However, deviating from Merton, we conceive of the relationships between theory and data, or explanation and cases, as a continuum on which abstraction is gradual rather than typological. The range of a theory becomes more general on the left side of the continuum, where we would locate, for example, Bourdieu's field and capital theory, and more case-specific on the right side of the continuum, where we would see, for example, accounts of how college affects students (see lens 1 in [Figure 2](#)).

The second lens zooms in on ways of engaging with theories and their relations to data. It depicts a continuum from testing and applying, to adapting and modifying, to building theory. For this lens, we draw on Swedberg's and Krause's work that emphasises theorising as a practice. We propose to locate different ways of theorising and engaging with theories on a continuum. On one side of the continuum, we see the practice of theory testing (e.g. 'Can Clark's Triangle explain national convergences and divergences in the governance of higher education systems?'). On the opposite side of the continuum, we locate the practice of theory building (e.g. 'What is the role of evaluation practices for status positions and recruitment in academic careers?'). Theory building does not necessarily have to proceed inductively. Rather, it can build on existing theories and modify them, create adaptations, or follow-up on re-interpretations of theories. Theory testing does not necessarily have to proceed in a strictly deductive manner. Rather, it can combine and adapt theories in order to derive testable hypotheses (see lens 2 in [Figure 2](#)).

The third lens allows us to look at the relative epistemic autonomy of theory work (Bourdieu 1988; Krause 2018). Drawing on Abend's and Krause's work, we propose the following continuum: on the right side of the continuum, theories receive their questions, problems, and concerns from almost purely academic issues, for example, from the interpretation of classical literature, from specific conceptual problems (e.g. 'How can we conceptualize higher education as a system?'), or from a priori theoretical frameworks (e.g. 'The world is divided into higher education systems'). On the left of the continuum, theoretical concerns reflect non-academic interests from political, economic or other realms in a relatively unfiltered way. On this side of the continuum, we see theoretical accounts with normative components, for example, post-colonial theories or accounts that conceive of higher education as a market, but also more specific concerns of theory work, for example, the question of how higher education research can contribute to equal access to higher education or to more competitive universities. It is important to note that even the 'purest' theory work is not free of non-academic effects. For example, theories on national higher education systems or their internationalisation have at least implicit political implications (Go 2017; Bacevic 2017). On the other side of the continuum, any unfiltered normative account is, in the end, an account that also makes theoretical claims (see lens 3 in [Figure 2](#)).

#### **4. Theory work in two thematic fields of higher education research**

After developing three lenses through which theory work can be perceived, this section is dedicated to putting these lenses to the test. This will demonstrate how they can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of theory work in higher education research, and thereby allow the discussion to go beyond diagnosing a mere theory deficit. A



prerequisite for assessing the manifold forms of theory work in higher education research is to take into account the diversity of thematic fields and their theoretical and empirical configurations. The delineation of such fields is inherently variable, depending on how they are constructed (e.g. via bibliometric studies, expert knowledge, panels of professional societies, etc.). In addition, thematic fields evolve over time (e.g. Teichler 1996; Tight 2014; Daenekindt and Huisman 2020). Lastly, research in thematic fields of higher education research is based on different compositions of disciplinary routes, of international comparative and nationally oriented perspectives, and has different shares of applied and basic research. These complexities notwithstanding, we have selected two thematic fields in higher education research based on which we will operationalise our three lenses on theory work. We have applied an expert approach for the selection of studies for both thematic fields. These selected studies cover the mainstream research in both fields in the past 20 years.

#### **4.1. Theory work on organization and governance**

The thematic field of governance and organisation is vast, as Musselin (2021) has recently described in a review of the development of knowledge in the field. On the one hand, it deals with the external governance of higher education organisations and higher education as a sector forming a macro-perspective; on the other hand, it is concerned with the internal governance of higher education organisations adopting a meso-perspective. From a macro-perspective, research focuses on the interaction between higher education organisations, their relationships to the state, and how they are affected by national as well as global transformations. From a meso-perspective, research rather focuses on organisational internal relationships, power relations, and decision-making structures for setting priorities, allocating budgets, and developing teaching and research programmes etc. (ibid). In both perspectives, national variations in the governance of the higher education sector and organisational variations amongst universities in different national higher education systems have a decisive influence. Accordingly, higher education research in different parts of the world has different key perspectives regarding the external and internal governance of higher education organisations. The following consideration on research in the thematic field of organisation and governance does not capture such nuances in national variations, but rather takes a more abstract perspective on theory work according to our three lenses.

The macro-perspective consists to a large extent of research in the tradition of Clark, who developed the classic governance triangle for the comparative study of governance of higher education. It is very typical for this part of the thematic field to conduct international comparative studies that aim at explaining national convergences and divergences in the governance of higher education systems (e.g. Kogan, Bleiklie, and Henkel 2000; De Boer et al. 2007; Paradeise et al. 2009; Whitley and Gläser 2014; Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2017). Our first lens for the range of theories and our second lens for the engagement with theory illuminate that research in this tradition typically aims at mid-range theory building by studying similarities and differences across countries. Such international comparative studies often combine qualitative studies that contribute to the national contextualisation of findings with quantitative analyses that aim at empirical regularities and contribute to generalisations. Furthermore, theory building

of this research typically uses a combination of conceptual building blocks from organisation and governance theory, mostly from sociology and political science, and modifies them. The focus on differences and similarities of national higher education systems made such studies very attractive for policymakers and supranational organisations such as the OECD, the World Bank, UNESCO and the European Union (EU). They have commissioned and funded numerous research on higher education organisation and governance, and reinforced the application-oriented character of parts of studies in the macro-perspective. The applied character has, in many cases, effects on theory work. Seen through our third lens on the epistemic autonomy of theory work, many studies are positioned more on the left side of the continuum towards non-academic interests.

But the macro-perspective on organisation and governance is not at all homogeneous and theory work is more varied. Besides studies with a focus on national higher education systems that build theory, studies apply field theories – Bourdieu’s field theory, neo-Institutional field and world polity concepts, or Fligstein and McAdam’s theoretical considerations on strategic action fields – for the study of organisation and governance of higher education (e.g. Naidoo 2004; Kauppinen, Cantwell, and Slaughter 2017; Frank and Meyer 2020). Such studies typically focus on power relations, tensions, and dynamics within the academic field or on isomorphic pressures and diffusion of rationalised myths within an organisational field. As already mentioned, our first and second lenses convey that such studies typically neither build nor modify theories but, rather, apply and test (and, in some cases, criticise) these rather wide-ranging and general theories (but see, e.g. Münch 2014 for modifications of Bourdieu’s field theory). Seen through our third lens on the epistemic autonomy of theory work, such research is positioned more on the right side of the continuum towards relatively pure academic interests, although the critical stance on the reproduction of power and aspects of the social world sometimes turns into normative positions and might move theory work more to the left.

Additionally, we see another body of work between the national system and the field perspective that works with theory in a slightly different manner and combines a comparative systems perspective with considerations on field dynamics. It has been observed that higher education governance shows considerable within-system diversification. Not all organisations within a higher education system are embedded into the system in the same way, but rather are differently related to spatial levels or fields (regional, national, supra-national etc.). Studies targeting this aspect have developed multi-level models of the macro-governance of higher education organisations (e.g. Marginson and Rhoades 2002; Välimaa and Hoffman 2007; Paradeise and Thoenig 2013; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013; Hüther and Krücken 2016). On the continuum of our first lens, theoretical models in this body of work can be positioned between mid- and wide-ranging theories as they are specific to higher education organisations but mostly claim universality on a geographical scale. On the continuum of the second lens, the engagement with theories might be located between modifying and theory building based on sociological field theories. On the third continuum, theories are clearly informed by rather ‘pure’ academic interests.

In the meso-perspective, transformations related to New Public Management (NPM) have been at the centre of research since the past 30 years. While organisational models of the university from the 1960s and 1970s tended to emphasise the distinctive

characteristics and specificities of universities as organisations (e.g. collegial organisations, professional bureaucracy, political arena, or organised anarchy), the NPM reforms have shifted the focus to recent policies aiming to reduce this specificity and transform universities into organisations like others (Musselin 2007, 2021). Previously decentralised, loosely coupled higher education organisations are increasingly seen as centrally managed organisations with strong levels of leadership, which is discussed in research as the construction of universities as complete organisations and organisational actors (e.g. Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000; Whitley 2008; Krücken and Meier 2006). Accordingly, conceptually oriented studies have contributed mid-range theories of models of organisation in meso-perspective, for example, the entrepreneurial university model (Clark 1998), strategic organisational actors model (Whitley 2008; Hasse and Krücken 2013; Thoenig and Paradeise 2018), or the penetrated hierarchies model (Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2015). Such studies use existing mid-range organisation theories and fit them to the context of higher education institutions. Seen through our conceptual lenses, these three models could be located somewhat differently on the first and second continuum: whereas the entrepreneurial university model is based on empirical regularities and corresponds more to theory building (of an ad-hoc theory), the penetrated hierarchies model and the strategic organisational actor model correspond to a mid-range theory. Theory work in the latter two cases seems ‘purely’ academically oriented, whereas theory work in the case of the entrepreneurial university model is also based on non-academic interests, and the model itself has also served as blueprint for higher education policy measures and initiatives.

Empirical studies on the managerial transformation of the internal governance of higher education organisations focus on diverse new elements, developments, and practices, for example, leadership, types of leaders and their behaviour and characteristics, the rise of new administrative managers and so-called third space professionals, the effects of performance incentives and evaluations, the role of university boards etc. (Fumasoli and Stensaker 2013, Blaschke, Frost, and Hattke 2014; Austin and Jones 2016; Hüther and Krücken 2018). Due to the variety of governance in different national higher education systems, within a system, or even within the same university, nationally based research and within-country comparative studies are much more common. Furthermore, studies are often funded by third-party grants from institutions that are interested in improving policy and practice. The theories mobilised in such empirical studies on new forms of internal governance of higher education organisations and their consequences typically aim at empirical regularities according to our first lens and can be located on the theory testing side of the continuum of lens two. Many studies have an applied focus and aim at improving university management and its governance practices. We would also locate parts of their theory work towards the left side of the continuum and non-academic interests according to our third lens on epistemic autonomy.

In summing up the reflection on theory work in the thematic field of organisation and governance, one might even divide the thematic field into two sub-areas, though many studies also combine both perspectives (e.g. Dobbins, Knill, and Vögtle 2011; Fumasoli and Stensaker 2013; Paradeise and Thoenig 2013; Austin and Jones 2016; Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2017). Due to the decisive influence of national variations in the governance of the higher education sector, research in the macro-perspective is often internationally comparative. Due to the influence of organisational variations amongst

universities in different national systems, research in the meso-perspective the focus of research is more nationally oriented. Moreover, theory work in both sub-areas differs. Whereas theory-building is more common from a macro-perspective, theory testing is more common in the meso-perspective. These are, of course, only tendencies and particularly the meso-governance sub-area has research niches that build and modify theory of higher education organisations and organisation theory. Theory work based on relatively pure academic interests can be found in both sub-areas, but studies with non-academically based theory work are more prominent in the meso-perspective.

#### **4.2. Theory work on academic careers**

Academic careers are a second important thematic field in higher education research. Careers are embedded in the academic profession, in organisations, in disciplines, and in higher education systems (Clark 1987). Trying to confine ourselves to the field of higher education research, we can build on and extend Tatiana Fumasoli's (2020) suggestion for a systematisation of the literature on academic careers alongside two perspectives: problem-centered perspectives concerned with specific issues, and cross-sectional or longitudinal comparative perspectives. Of course, the distinction between the two is analytical and inevitably fuzzy.

The first perspective of higher education research on academic careers can be described as problem-centered scholarship that zooms in on particular issues affecting academic careers. A first key topic in this regard is that careers are under pressure from managerial reforms like NPM (Clarke and Knights 2015). This affects careers both in their relation to professional values (Schimank 2005) and with regard to their embeddedness in institutional contexts (Duberley and Mallon 2006). Our first lens for the range of theories conveys that most contributions to this literature operate with mid-range theories that go beyond empirical regularities. One example would be Schimank's (2005) interpretation of recent implications of NPM as a threat to the traditional values of the academic profession. The second lens on the engagement of theories suggests that theories in this strand are rarely tested, and usually modified or built. This is the case when Duberley and Mallon (2006) apply Barley's (1989) structuration model of career to new institutional contexts, or when Clarke and Knights (2015) explain academics' frantic individualistic 'careering' as coping strategies designed to moderate the pressures of excessive managerial competitive demands.

In addition to pressures from managerial reforms, we can identify at least two more issues that are of importance for problem-centered research: a second key topic for this perspective are social inequalities. The literature on this topic focuses on how career trajectories and outcomes are affected by non-meritocratic factors like gender or class (Leahey 2007; Lutter and Schröder 2016, 2021; Blome, Möller, and Böning 2019). The literature is also concerned with exclusionary effects that new governance instruments have on academics (Carvalho and Santiago 2010; Watermeyer and Olssen 2016; Regnö 2017). It is somewhat difficult to apply the first lens and assess the range of theories used in this strand of literature: while a majority of the scholarship draws on theories with a rather general range (e.g. field and habitus theory, human capital theory, or a decision theory of subjective expected utility), the literature actually mobilises theoretical elements that aim at similarities and differences across countries

or disciplines, and thus claim a lower range. The second lens on engagement with theories reveals that this literature often applies and tests theoretical axioms without engaging in theory modification and building. Theory engagement in terms of theory testing and application is particularly pronounced in quantitative research (Lutter and Schröder 2016, 2021).

Issues of mobility and internationalisation of careers represent a third key topic for problem-centered research (Altbach 2013; Goastellec 2020). The literature on internationalisation is divided into large scale surveys (Huang et al. 2014) and in-depth qualitative studies (McAlpine 2012). This scholarship is linked to the previous key issue, social inequalities, by studies that scrutinise who is able to take advantage of global labour markets and collaborations (Kwiek 2016; Zippel 2017). Our first lens suggests that the literature on mobility and internationalisation is mostly concerned with empirical regularities and country-specific interpretations, mobilising theories with a lower range to articulate the phenomenon of mobility and internationalisation for specific regions. In contrast to social inequalities, where research can draw on different established concepts and definitions, academic mobility remains hardly measured because of issues with conceptualising and defining different types and degrees of mobility (Goastellec 2020, 1881). This is why the engagement with theories in the sense of the second lens often takes the form of theory building, for example, when McAlpine (2012) studies the effects of recurrent relocations on academic careers and extrapolates more general insights from this.

Because the literature that applies the first, problem-centered perspective on academic careers zooms in on particular issues affecting academic careers, we suggest locating the epistemic autonomy of theory work on this pole near the middle of the continuum of our third lens: while theory work is certainly not driven by unfiltered non-academic interests, research on managerial reforms, social inequalities, and internationalisation and mobility is evidently informed by political issues that the literature then refractures into academic problems.

The second perspective on academic careers is employed by scholarship that unfolds detailed comparative overviews through cross-sectional or longitudinal analyses. Studies applying this perspective are usually either based on in-depth qualitative inquiries or on large-scale surveys. The former, qualitative comparisons are concerned with, for example, the evaluative criteria that determine academic careers (Musselin 2010; Angermüller 2017), how higher education systems structure careers (Laudel 2017), or country-specific motivations for academics to enter the profession (Berthoin Antal and Rogge 2020). Our first lens on the range of theories reveals that this body of work mobilises theories with a lower range, for example, empirical regularities and country-specific interpretations. The country-based case studies on national developments of academic career systems in Altbach et al. (2012), Huang et al. (2014), and Finkelstein and Jones (2019) provide ample evidence of this orientation. The second lens conveys that the comparative and qualitative nature of this literature leads to an engagement with theories that is oriented towards theory-building, rather than testing. One example of this are Laudel's (2017) theoretical conclusions on the relationship between systems of institutions, academic careers, and research content.

Another body of work employing the comparative perspective is based on large-scale surveys. There have been three large international research projects on academic careers since 1992: the Carnegie Study (Altbach 2000), the Changing Academic Profession study (Teichler et al. 2013), and the EUROAC study on the academic profession in Europe

(Kehm and Teichler 2013; Teichler and Höhle 2013; Fumasoli et al. 2015). These studies facilitate broad comparative perspectives by focusing on national differences across dimensions like employment conditions, job satisfaction, or institutional contexts. Regarding the range of theories according to the first lens, large-scale, comparative surveys are usually concerned with empirical regularities across countries or country-specific interpretations. Our second lens reveals that the engagement with theories in this body of work is often rather modest. However, the research that does explicitly engage with theories usually either tests or modifies them. This applies, for example, to theories on professional identity formation (Clarke et al. 2013) or habitus theory (Clarke et al. 2015), and to the conceptual frameworks of internationalisation, mobility, research, knowledge, and academic work in Teichler et al. (2013). The third lens suggests that the epistemic autonomy of theory work in the survey literature is lower compared to the autonomy of theory work in in-depth qualitative inquiries. The former body of work appears to translate non-academic interests into academic problems – the political interest in, for example, international mobility, and the political relevance of country comparisons more generally, is obvious. In contrast, theory work in the latter literature seems to be motivated by more ‘purely’ academic concerns (Musselin 2010; Angermüller 2017). One reason for these differences in the epistemic autonomy of theory work could be the resources that are necessary to conduct large-scale surveys. These resources are often tied to the interests and policies of funding agencies.

Across the two perspectives discussed up to this point, higher education research on academic careers has drawn conceptual inspiration from neighbouring fields. For example, inspired by organisation and management studies, a recent debate was concerned with the relevance of boundaries for academic careers (Arthur 1994; Dowd and Kaplan 2005; Dany, Louvel, and Valette 2011). Another example are insights from sociology that have sensitised higher education research for the relevance that social processes of sense-making have for academic careers. This influence is evident from discussions on professional identity work (Henkel 2000; Whitchurch 2013; McAlpine, Amundsen, and Turner 2014; Clarke and Knights 2015) or from the recent literature on the role of evaluation practices for status positions and recruitment (Musselin 2010; Angermüller 2017; Sutherland 2017). The first lens suggests that the body of literature that draws on conceptual innovations from other disciplinary contexts often applies mid-range theories or observes empirical regularities. Because of the focus on conceptual innovations, the engagement with theories according to the second lens takes the form of either modifying or building theories.

Of course, these observations can grasp tendencies at best and remain necessarily fuzzy. However, summing up the overview of research on academic careers, it seems that theory work in this thematic field often concentrates on mid-range theories. The engagement with theories appears to range from testing over modifying to building theories. Lastly, the epistemic autonomy of theory work often leads to a refraction of non-academic interests into academic problems, and almost purely academic concerns are rare.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion: the benefits of explicating theory work**

Our contribution is an attempt to depart from a simplistic deficit diagnosis and to start a productive and nuanced discussion about higher education research and the field’s

relation to theory. For this purpose, we proceed from a notion of ‘theory work’ that allows the discussion to go beyond a uniform understanding of what theories are and how engagement with theories looks like. Rather, the notion emphasises, first, that theories and theory work can take many different forms, and second, that theories are tools and that an engagement with theories is a craft that should be explicated. A prerequisite for a discussion that takes these two aspects into consideration is a conceptual toolkit that can be applied to different thematic fields in higher education research. As a first step towards such a toolkit, we have developed three lenses on the range of theories, on different forms of engagement with theories, and on degrees of epistemic autonomy of theory work.

We have observed two thematic fields through these lenses to demonstrate how the lenses can further our understanding of theory work in higher education research. Even if our discussion of the two fields could only be cursory, and our account is probably biased due to its focus on English language literature, it has facilitated two main insights: first, on a general level across the two thematic fields, a more nuanced conceptual toolkit reveals that theory work in higher education research is indeed more diverse than previous stocktakings, which were primarily quantitative in nature, have suggested. We have seen that the theories mobilised in higher education research vary in their range, that there are different forms of engagement with theories, and that theory work draws from a range of influences, from rather non-academic to more academic concerns and interests. The second main insight is that theory work in higher education research is not only diverse, but that there are both differences and similarities across thematic fields within higher education research. For example, our second lens conveyed that both our thematic fields display a variety of forms of engagement with theories, ranging from theory testing to theory building. Another similarity, emphasised by our third lens, is that theory work in both fields often seems to be influenced by political interests. Although these interests are sometimes refracted into academic concerns, the epistemic autonomy of theory work seems to be relatively low in both thematic fields. This similarity notwithstanding, the way the fields are presented through the expert approach we took suggests that the epistemic autonomy in our first thematic field appears to be generally lower compared to the second. One reason for this might be the field’s concern with governance questions. According to our expert approach, another difference between both thematic fields is conveyed by our first lens and concerns the range of theories: while mid-range theories are prevalent in both fields, research on organisation and governance seems to lean towards theories with a more general range, whereas research on academic careers appears to have a tendency towards theories in the form of empirical regularities and case-specific interpretations.

Against the backdrop of the two insights, the diagnosis of a theory deficit in higher education research cannot be upheld and has to be revisited. It takes a nuanced approach to recognise – both in cognitive and in normative terms – the variety and diversity of theory work in higher education research. Future research should explore theory work in further thematic fields of higher education research. Some of them might be less varied and diverse, some even more. Our analysis of the two fields also suggests questions on both typical combinations and elective affinities of specific positions on the three lenses: does theory building (second lens) require a relatively high epistemic autonomy of theory work (third lens)? Why is the combination of theory building and universalistic

theories (first and second lenses) such a rare mode of theory work? Do specific manifestations on the first lens (the range of theory) typically go together with specific manifestations on the third lens (epistemic autonomy)? Future research should attend to such relations between the three lenses and should also develop and refine our observational lenses, as well as explore additional ones on theory work. For example, theory work in a thematic field might be influenced by a specific source discipline (e.g. sociology) or by a specific composition of prevalent source disciplines (e.g. sociology and political science), while in another thematic field it might be strictly interdisciplinary. Therefore, an additional lens that focuses on the disciplinary background of theories might be useful. Additionally, our lenses, which have been developed from sociological literature on theories, are likely to be biased towards sociological theory work. Future research should therefore develop lenses from literature based in other disciplines.

Beyond the specific insights our contribution provides on theory work, we would also like to highlight benefits that explicating theory work can have for higher education research more generally. First, it has the potential to propel the intellectual development of the field because theoretical choices, practices, and their consequences can foster scholarly exchange and, indeed, have integrating effects for different strands within the field. Related, explicating theory work has an important educational function for early career researchers in the field. Rather than treating theory work as a secret lore, theoretical expertise should be trained and developed like methodological expertise. We think that our lenses are promising for such an educational engagement because they facilitate a reflexive distance on one's own theory work.

A second benefit of explicating theory work is that it inspires new perspectives on the development of thematic fields. At first glance, one might prefer relatively 'strong' thematic fields, which are theoretically consistent and repeatedly test a limited set of (general) theories, over 'weaker' ones, which utilise a multitude of different theories and exhibit a varied theory work as desired development of a thematic field. However, our nuanced notion on theory work facilitates a debate on the diversity of theories and theory work, and whether such variety is necessarily a weakness, or whether it might have advantages in terms of the innovation potential of a thematic field (see Merton 1996 on 'theoretical pluralism'). Borrowing from Karl Weick's (1976) and James March's (1991) ideas on tight and loose coupling and exploitation and exploration, one might argue that the more varied and loosely coupled theory work in a thematic field is, the more room for uncertainty and for exploration and, thus, new findings and innovation we might see in such a field. On the opposite, the less varied and tightly coupled theory work in a thematic field is, the more we might see exploitation and path dependencies that might hinder innovative findings and groundbreaking innovation in such a field.

A third benefit of explicating theory work is that it can serve as a corrective against all too direct instrumentalization of the field by political interests and concerns. The close relation between higher education research and policy raises questions of power (see the literature on theory as symbolic power, Bacevic 2017; Go 2017). This is not a call to retreat into an ivory tower: of course, scholarship cannot and should not be independent from societal realms. However, as a field that responds rather directly to immediate political concerns, higher education research could employ theories as measures of epistemic distancing and alienation from such influences. Theory work should not fend off external influences altogether, but it can help to refracture them into scholarly concerns.



It is in light of these general benefits that our contribution should also serve as an encouragement for higher education researchers to engage more decidedly in theory work and to make this engagement explicit.

## Notes

1. Initial thoughts on the relationship between theory and higher education research have been presented as a keynote at the 32nd CHER conference. Significant elements of the following arguments have been developed together with Christian Imdorf during the preparation for the HERSS Summer School 2021 'How to make Theory Work.' We would like to express our gratitude for the collegial exchange. Needless to say, all remaining errors are our responsibility.
2. There is a vast amount of literature that reflects on theory within sociology. Analytically, we can distinguish four strands of literature that are, of course, empirically intertwined: the first strand has a primarily instrumental stance towards theory with a normative idea of what 'good theory' looks like (e.g., Merton 1945, 1968; Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Becker 2014). The second strand adopts a praxeological perspective where the focus is not on 'good theory' but on how researchers accomplish 'theory' in their daily routines (e.g., Swedberg 2014; Schmidt 2016; Farzin and Laux 2014). The third strand reflects on the use of the term 'theory' and on forms of theories from a meta- and field perspective highlighting the multivalence of the notions and practices of theory, also reflecting on the state-of-the-art in the field (e.g., Alexander 1982; Abend 2008; Krause 2016). Fourth, there is literature developing a political perspective on theory as epistemic power that can also translate into material power relations. In this sense, theory is an attempt to define what society is about, and the question is who can make such theoretical claims and who is excluded from making them (e.g., Bacevic 2017; Go 2017).
3. Merton's argument on the range of theory partly overlaps with Popper's (1959) arguments concerning the range of explanations. As mentioned above, we stick to the sociological discussion on theory and theory work.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix 1. Conceptions of theory and theorising, according to Merton, Abend, and Krause

Merton (1945, 1968)	Abend (2008)	Krause (2016)
<i>m1: Sociological theory</i> : law; statement of invariance derivable from a theory, appears when the generalisation is conceptualised in abstractions of higher order, introduces a ground for prediction	<i>a1</i> : A general proposition or logically-connected system of general propositions which establishes a relationship between two or more variables ( <i>general, universalistic</i> )	<i>k1: Theorising as the interpretation of major figures</i> : practice consists in reading the work of scholars deemed to be theorists and trying to understand their work (refers 'a4' by Abend)
<i>m2: mid-range theory (1968)</i> : limited sets of assumptions that deal with differing spheres of the social world from which specific hypotheses are logically derived and confirmed by empirical investigation	<i>a2</i> : An explanation of a particular social phenomenon ( <i>what x causes y?</i> ; <i>specified by phenomenon, time, region etc.</i> )	<i>k2: Theorising as the application of existing concepts</i> : practice relates existing concepts to empirical phenomena (existing concepts are often associated with one or several major figures or theoretical schools)
<i>m3: Empirical generalisations</i> : an isolated proposition summarising observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables; statement of social uniformities	<i>a3</i> : A hermeneutical task and original 'interpretation' or 'reading' of a certain part of the empirical world ( <i>understanding what x 'is all about'; better interpretation</i> )	<i>k3: Theorising as linking observation to existential issues</i> : practice of linking new facts or observations to existential issues or historical trends, to questions about progress, or decline (epochal sociology, Zeitdiagnose)
<i>m4: Post-factum interpretation</i> : interpretation after the observations have been made; designed to "explain" observations and to derive fresh hypotheses to be confirmed by new observations ( <i>e.g. ad-hoc theory, compelling evidence</i> )	<i>a4</i> : An interpretation of classics and their meaning ( <i>from Marx, Durkheim, Simmel to Bourdieu etc.; exegetic reconstruction</i> )	<i>k4: Theorising as the development of new concepts</i> : practice of coining new concepts in relation to empirical observation of new phenomena (giving a phenomenon a new name (Swedberg))
<i>m5: Analysis of sociological (key) concepts</i> : constitute the definitions (or prescriptions) of what is to be observed; guide the collection and analysis of data ( <i>e.g. Gemeinschaft, status, role etc.</i> )	<i>a5</i> : Weltanschauung = overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world ( <i>e.g. postmodern theory, poststructuralist theory etc.</i> )	<i>k5: Theorising as the linking of concepts to testable hypothesis</i> : practice of linking concepts to a testable hypothesis (linear causal explanations, but also narrative forms of explanation, functionalist explanation or explanation via comparison and conditions of possibility)
<i>m6: General sociological orientations</i> : broad postulates that provide a general context for inquiry; indicate types of variables which are somehow to be taken into account rather than specifying determinate relationships between particular variables	<i>a6</i> : Accounts that have a fundamental normative component ( <i>e.g. critical theory, postcolonial theory, feminist theory etc.</i> )	
<i>m7: Methodology</i> : logic of scientific procedure, e.g. knowing how to test a battery of hypotheses	<i>a7</i> : Study of certain special problems in the ways in which 'reality' is 'socially constructed' ( <i>e.g. micro-macro problem, structure-agency, builds often on a4</i> )	