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Brief Reviews of Books and Products

Open access in theory and practice: The theory-practice relationship and openness

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BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND PRODUCTS

Pinfield, S., Wakeling, S., Bawden, D., & Robinson, L. (2020). *Open access in theory and practice: The theory-practice relationship and openness*. Routledge. 332 pp., ISBN 978-0-367-22785-2 150.85 USD (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-429-27684-2 (ebk).

Open access (OA) is an approach that aims to eliminate barriers, increase accessibility, and improve the dissemination of research output. With the proliferation and popularity of OA, there is increased interest in studying OA as a phenomenon. This book states two aims: first, to investigate how theory has been used to understand OA and inform activity around it; and second, to explore the relationship—often characterized as a “gap”—between theory and practice. Within the context of their study, the authors define “theory” as any theoretical framework (e.g., Commons Theory, Social Exchange Theory, etc.) that may underpin an OA research study and define “practice” as a wide range of activities related to OA, including creating strategies and policies, developing processes and technologies, supporting communication and marketing, designing business and sustainability models, allocating funding and resources, etc. These practices are carried out by key practitioners, including policymakers and funders, publishers, OA service providers, librarians, consultants, and OA advocates, and are considered complex because they occur within social, cultural, and historical contexts.

This ambitious work competently meets its aims using methodological rigor. Using a theoretical framework and employing inductive analyses, the authors take us through a systematic literature review and qualitative data gathered from interviews. This work illustrates how theoretical frameworks are incorporated into the study of OA, and the extent to which OA scholarship filters into practice. The four authors are scholars and researchers with extensive experience in the field of library and information science (LIS) and OA issues.

The book is composed of five parts, with the first two parts covering foundational aspects of OA and theory, followed by two parts covering perspectives on theory in research and action. The final part deals with integrating theory, practice, and OA. A literature review of key aspects of OA—from beginnings and history, characteristics, benefits, and future directions—is provided in Part 1, Chapter 1. Chapter 2 offers an overview of the OA landscape through identifying actors, dimensions, and relational factors (attitudes and behaviors). The authors use analytic theory to present an OA environment model, a detailed conceptualization derived



from their expertise and deep engagement with the literature. The model is augmented with the study's findings in Chapter 10.

In Part 2, Chapter 3 focuses on theory definition and conceptions and identifies typologies of theory used in various disciplines engaged with research on OA. In Chapter 4, the relationship between theory and practice in the LIS literature is explored and is proposed to be overwhelmingly poor with a clear gap between theory and practice. These first two parts of the book inform the design and conduct of the empirical research study that occurs in Parts 3 and 4.

In Part 3, the authors provide an in-depth content analysis of OA literature that uses or generates theory (Chapters 5 and 6). From an initial pool of several thousand works on this topic, and after the application of inclusion criteria for relevancy, the authors selected 152 short-form publications, 19 reports, and 7 books. Although these selected works are cited, they could be better displayed (as an appendix or online) for research replication or data sharing purposes. The authors lead by example by incorporating theory (e.g., Reynold's *Forms of Theories*) to guide their research study. Findings from content analysis indicate that OA research literature more often uses existing theory than generates its own theory, having four dominant theory types: evaluation and development; attitudes, relationships, and processes; systems; and method.

In Part 4 (Chapters 7 and 8), semi-structured interviews interrogate the value placed on theory in OA research, the challenges associated with theory engagement, and perceptions of the theory–practice gap (and how it might be bridged). A total of 36 interview participants were drawn from the UK and internationally, including individuals in a range of roles, both practitioner and researcher. Findings indicated that participants found it difficult to keep up to date with OA developments and defining “theory” was a challenge for most. All participants acknowledged that, although theory is valuable to practice, it often was not valued by practitioners. Participants expressed the perception of a theory–practice gap in which theory was juxtaposed in opposition to practice. Such a barrier contributes to the erosion of a collaborative environment needed to advance OA knowledge and innovation. Participants recommended solutions including increased researcher engagement and dialogue with practitioner communities, co-production of research by researchers and practitioners, and use of boundary spanners for creative translation between both communities.

The final part of the book integrates all previous sections, with a discussion on interpretation of research findings. Chapter 9 contains a new model describing the theory–practice relationship in OA, capturing processes, entities, and attributes. The model is expanded to identify “pressure points” where the relationship between theory and practice is challenged along three barriers to engagement: encounter, understand, and apply. Bourdieu's Social Practice

Theory informs the data analysis, providing explanations of the theory–practice gap, differences between professional groups, and differences between disciplinary communities. In Chapter 10, the OA environment model first introduced in Chapter 2 is refined to include an overlay of theories.

A strength of this book is that the content is logical and flows easily from first providing definitions and an overview to the study’s methods and findings, and finally to an overall analysis through discussion. Most critically, the authors use existing theory to inform their own research design. The application of theoretical frameworks benefits this study’s focus and organization, develops epistemic meaning through exploratory and explanatory power, and connects it to existing scholarship. This work is original and unique as a comprehensive investigation into how theory is developed and applied in OA research, with its findings providing new understandings into theory–practice relationships. The creation of two important models—the OA environment model and the theory–practice relationship in OA—are useful as theoretical frameworks. Both practitioner and researcher communities can benefit, not only by engaging with theory for its ability to improve research study design and understanding of OA in real-life application, but also by being encouraged to work collaboratively as two communities brought together in the advancement of OA research and practice.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mara De Giusti Bordignon is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education, Field of Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies (CPELS) at Western University. Mara enjoyed a career as an academic librarian during which she developed an interest in academic scholarship and open access, especially around issues of ownership, rights, and equity. This has led to her current research focus on open education policy discourse in Canadian higher education.