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Church-Based Research: Using Theories, Concepts, and Operationalizations

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Abstract

Church-based research requires working with abstract concepts ranging from sin to sanctification. Theories, concepts, and operationalizations allow us to work with these abstractions. Theories are sets of statements describing how specific concepts relate to each other. Concepts are broad ideas that exist in our thinking that can be used to describe phenomena, both within and exterior to the church. If we measure the concepts in our theories among multiple people, we can determine to what degree the relationships in our theories are true or discover under what conditions they are true. Sometimes concepts can be measured directly; other times they must be measured indirectly. Operationalizations are the specific processes used for measuring each of the concepts. As we test and refine our theories, we can more effectively accomplish the ministries to which we are called.

Jesus was born, lived, died, and rose again. The foundation of the gospel lies in observable, concrete phenomena. But many very abstract concepts and phenomena are associated with what he did: faith, repentance, the

new birth, spiritual growth, holiness, and love. One of the goals of church-based research is to understand how these abstract concepts and phenomena are related to other abstract ideas as well as how they are related to more concrete phenomena. These phenomena are not limited to what Jesus did as recorded in the gospels, but also include the mundane such as phenomena related to parking lots, video projectors, and social media. Sometimes we want to know what phenomena exist in our church (e.g., what do people do in my church's small groups?). Other times we want to know how common a specific phenomenon is in a group of churches (e.g., how many churches in our denomination have Instagram accounts?). Even more important is discovering relationships between these phenomena (How, and under what conditions, can Instagram content influence a church's small groups?)

Some, if not most, of the questions to which we would like answers require research. We need to go collect data and make conclusions. But how to do so is not obvious, especially for more complex problems where many factors come into play. Improperly designed ministry-focused research might produce a mishmash of information that does not lend itself to credible answers, wasting everyone's time and resources, or even worse, leading us to believe something that is not true, something that makes our disciple making ministry less effective, rather than more effective. To prevent this from happening, both concrete and abstract phenomena need to be examined appropriately. Theories, concepts, and operationalizations are all used to do this. High-quality research will focus on concepts that fit together in a theory and can be measured by using operationalizations.

Theories

Theories are found at the top level of abstraction in research. A theory can be defined as a set of statements describing some specific concepts and how they relate to each other (Morling, 2021; Sutton & Staw, 1995). A theory is typically presented in some convenient way that summarizes what the author believes to be true about the concepts and how they relate (Crano et al., 2015). A theory does not try to describe every possible phenomenon that is associated with the chosen concepts, but rather it describes general principles of how these concepts relate to each other. The purpose of a theory is to enable decisions to be made concerning the related concepts and to guide our observations of experience in applied, real-life settings. For Christian workers concerned with disciple making, theology is usually the most familiar use of theory.

Theology is theory in that it is typically a set of statements about God, including a description of his nature, what he desires, and how he interacts

with the world. A theology is typically based on divine (or special) revelation (e.g., the Bible), applied to a more or less general context through rational argument. Different theologies develop (e.g., Reformed, Arminian, Restorationist, and Pentecostal) because of differences in prioritization concerning the biblical texts or the use of different rational arguments to connect the various concepts together.

In addition to theology, many other theories have been developed that a Christian worker may encounter. Some theories are not especially relevant to disciple making (e.g., the theory of relativity, which is only relevant at astronomical distances or extremely high speeds, quantum theory, which is only relevant on the atomic and subatomic levels, or any of myriads of scientific theories that are only marginally relevant to human behavior). Some theories are relevant to the degree that they help us understand culture or direct our apologetics to respond to people's needs (e.g., evolution and critical race theory). However, other theories, especially those that describe human behavior are very relevant to disciple making and other church-based ministries.

An example of a secular theory that is relevant to disciple-making, taken from the field of social psychology, is the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001, 2003) which states that positive emotions enable a person to better explore new ideas and take risks. Experiencing positive emotions (like joy, peace, awe, love, or gratitude) usually indicates that we are in a safe psychological space. This allows us to consider new information and ideas (rather than be on the defensive, where we often become closed to new ideas). This enables us to learn, that is, to broaden our knowledge base and build upon it. For disciple makers, this is an important phenomenon since Jesus said that one of our main responsibilities is to teach people "to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). This means that creating an atmosphere that generates positive emotions, makes it more likely that, when we teach this material, people will be ready to reflect on it and incorporate it into their lives as they broaden their knowledge of what God desires of and for them and build their capacity to respond in Christ-like ways to the various situations that they encounter as they go through life. Creating positive emotions does not mean that we need to limit our teaching to simple, non-offensive ideas presented with jokes and lighthearted stories. Rather, we can present all the difficult teachings of Jesus, ranging from counting the cost of discipleship to complex theological truths to counter-cultural expectations for behavior in families and in the church, if we present it in a way that demonstrates its benefits, that is, if we can show that it is advantageous to follow Christ whole-heartedly compared to the

alternatives. Presenting Christ's teachings in this way will create the targeted positive emotions, although it requires much preparatory work.

Another example of a secular theory relevant to disciple making is inoculation theory (Compton, 2013; McGuire, 1961) which states that people can be inoculated against arguments attacking what they believe. To inoculate people against such influence, they need to be introduced to arguments against their beliefs and how to respond to these arguments. These responses are called counterarguments and need to be presented before the argument against one's beliefs is presented by someone who does not share these beliefs. Extensive empirical evidence has demonstrated that the presentation of counterarguments protects people's beliefs even when later faced with strong evidence against what they believe (Banas & Rains, 2010). In a period when abandoning the faith, often called deconversion (Streib, 2021), is becoming more common, the relevance of this theory is clear. Simply explaining to people that God exists and what the Bible says may not be sufficient when they are bombarded with arguments on the internet against the existence of God, Christianity, and the veracity of the Bible (e.g., [reddit.com/r/atheism](https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism)). People, especially youth, need to hear Christian leaders address the arguments that they will hear from their peers and online. If they do not, they can assume that the arguments against God and Christianity are valid because their pastors and teachers have never presented evidence against them. If they cannot come up with counterarguments, their faith may be shaken (Dunaetz, 2016). A meta-analysis of over 50 studies (Banas & Rains, 2010) found that counterarguments provided maximum immunity for about two weeks before people became more susceptible to arguments against their beliefs. This would mean that Christians susceptible to questioning their faith should be exposed to counterarguments to what atheists are arguing at least twice a month.

These are just two examples of secular theories that are relevant to disciple making. Countless others could be included. Although theology (at least evangelical theology) is primarily developed through interacting with biblical texts (special revelation), theories focusing on how humans interact, both with each other and with God, can be based on observation (general revelation). However, because there is so much variety in human behavior, many observations need to be made before theories can be generated and tested (e.g., Nehrbass, 2022, in this issue for how a theory can be generated).

Theories should never be considered complete or unchangeable. They are not complete because, by definition, they only seek to explain relationships between several (typically only a few) concepts. For example,

many churches and parachurch organizations emphasize training in personal evangelism so that more people come to know the Lord. The underlying theory of programs such as Evangelism Explosion in its original form (Kennedy, 1970) describes how some people, when confronted with the gospel, will make decisions to follow the Lord. Therefore, Christians should be trained in how to share their faith accurately and concisely with everyone they meet. This theory links training in personal evangelism, communicating the gospel, and individual conversions. It does not claim to be a complete theory of evangelism, that is, it does not claim to describe how other forms of evangelism work, all the ways that Christians can be trained, or how most people actually come to know the Lord. It simply describes how training in personal evangelism can lead more people to Christ.

Theories are not static because they evolve both with additional research and for social reasons. Additional research can provide a better description of how the phenomena described in the theory relate to each other (see Hong & Botner, 2022, in this issue for how competing notions of humility relate to following Christ.). Additional research may also introduce new concepts and show how they relate to the concepts described in existing theory. Typically, advances in theory are relatively small (See Scheuermann, 2022, for a small but important advancement in apologetics), but sometimes there are major innovations that seem to have the potential to change everything (e.g. saturation evangelism where the gospel is presented to people through modern technological and commercial means rather than through individuals). As our experience with the innovation grows, it may create a radically different way of viewing the phenomenon (a paradigm shift; Kuhn, 1962), or more likely, will eventually be incorporated into our existing theories (e.g., saturation evangelism is one way to present the gospel among others and sometimes opens doors for a personal presentation of the gospel).

Theories can also evolve for social reasons (Crano et al., 2015). As technologies and cultures change, new research questions arise such as “How can social media be used for evangelism?” (Bocala-Wiedemann, 2022; Teasdale, 2022, in this issue) or “How is the use of technology related to stress in church planting?” (Dunaetz, 2022). As these research questions are answered, our theories of evangelism and church planting evolve little by little. Theories can also evolve because of trends, the ebb and flow of popular personalities or researchers, and cultural forces which influence what people pay attention to. When cultural forces make a biblical faith more attractive, our evangelism theories will focus on growth (e.g., McGavran & Wagner, 1990), and when cultural forces make a biblical

faith less attractive, evangelicals may be tempted to downplay the importance of evangelism and focus on social actions and theories that are more culturally attractive.

Concepts

Theories explain how concepts relate to each other. Concepts are broad ideas that exist in our thinking that can be used to describe phenomena. Some concepts are observable and even measurable. By collecting data related to the concepts in our theory, we can test to what degree or under what conditions the various parts of the theory are true.

Take, for example, social identity theory (Hogg, 2006; Turner, 1982) which states that our beliefs about ourselves (our identity) are influenced by the groups to which we belong, and our perception of others is influenced by the groups to which they belong. In contrast to our personal identity (which is based on our traits and abilities, especially those which make us different from others), our social identity is based on the perceived typical traits of members of the groups to which we belong (Stets & Burke, 2000). For example, my personal identity is strongly influenced by my former career as a church planter and by how God opened the doors for me to become a professor of organizational psychology. My social identity includes being an evangelical Christian, a faculty member at Azusa Pacific University, a member of Purpose Church in Pomona, California, and a white Gen X American with a secular Judeo-Christian heritage.

Among other things, social identity theory describes that when group membership is salient (e.g., emphasized by others or in our own thinking), several phenomena tend to occur. One is ingroup favoritism which causes us to interpret ambiguous information in a way that makes members of our ingroup look better. Another phenomenon is outgroup derogation which causes us to interpret ambiguous information in a way that makes members of our outgroups look worse. One of the underlying mechanisms which cause these phenomena is our desire to maintain our self-esteem; we are motivated to view ourselves as better than others (Balliet et al., 2014; Branscombe & Wann, 1994). This desire to see ourselves as better than others, sometimes even better than God, is a human problem that goes back to the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-13).

From a theological perspective, social identity theory partially explains why Paul's statement in Colossians 3:11 describing the church is so important, "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (NIV). Whereas emphasizing demographic group memberships leads to ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation, emphasizing that

following Christ is the central aspect of our identity provides a basis for true reconciliation and unity with believers of other demographics (cf. Eph. 2:11-12, Gal. 3:26-29).

Returning to the notion of concepts, we see that social identity theory describes the relationships between various concepts. We have *identity*, people's beliefs about who they are, *group membership*, the idea that a person can identify as belonging to various groups defined by demographics, beliefs, values, interests, or virtually anything else, *ingroup*, people with whom we share a salient group membership, *outgroups*, groups of individuals of which we are not a member, *favoritism*, adjusting our thinking and actions to benefit some people more than others, and *derogation*, adjusting our thinking and actions (especially our speech) to provide evidence that some people are less valuable. These concepts are all linked in statements describing their relationship to each other, making social identity theory a theory, and not just a set of concepts.

Typically, concepts described in theories can vary for different people, different groups, or different situations, and can thus be considered variables. In social identity theory, identity varies among individuals, just as the group membership varies among individuals. Similarly, the degree to which people practice ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation varies by individual and it also varies by circumstance. When there is variation in human behavior as in these examples, it is typically *normally distributed*, that is, there is a normal or average amount of behavior displayed by humans; most humans' behavior is fairly close to the average, but there are a few who display the behavior much more than others and a few who display much less of the behavior.

Because human behavior varies so much, it is often difficult to determine if one group differs from another group, on average, for a given concept or variable. For example, we might want to know if people are more committed to their church in one congregation than in another. Without collecting data, it would be hard to make a call. This is especially true because variation within groups is almost always greater than the variation between groups. For example, both congregations that interest us will have people who have very high commitment and people who have low commitment, that is, there is a lot of variation within each congregation. It is likely that the difference between the average level of commitment of the two congregations (the variation between churches) is much smaller than the variation within the congregations. Typically, we use inferential statistics (i.e., not just descriptive statistics that describe each variable separately) to test the idea, or hypothesis, that one

congregation has a higher level of commitment than the other by collecting a sample from each and making inferences based on what we know about normally distributed variables (like church commitment).

Some concepts, or variables, are easily observable and can be measured in a very straightforward manner. If measuring the variable is more or less objective, such as a person's age, sex, city of residence, or educational level, a single question on a survey might be enough to measure it. If we are measuring a complex phenomenon, several questions might be necessary to capture its various aspects. The difficulty of measurement also depends on the level of analysis being used in the study: Are we collecting data on individuals, small groups, churches, or denominations? Generally, getting data from smaller units of analysis is easier than getting it from larger ones. It is much easier to collect data from 300 individuals than it is from 300 small groups, 300 churches, and especially from 300 denominations.

Any time we wish to collect data on a concept, it is important to first clearly define what we want to measure. Even with relatively objective measures, especially as the unit of analysis grows, we need to be as clear as possible to reduce the error in our data. For example, if the unit of analysis is the church, we could ask the question "What was the average attendance of the church over the last year?" However, it is not clear what "average attendance" means. Is it the average number of people that come to the campus each week? Is it the average total attendance of the worship services on Sundays? Is it the average of the sum of the number of people in all the meetings that a church has on a Sunday morning (thus double counting people who attend Sunday School and the worship service)? Does it have to be based on data from 52 weeks, or is two weeks' worth of data enough? There is no right answer, but to collect meaningful data we need to be clear as possible concerning what we would like churches to count.

Some concepts that we would like to measure to test our theories (or hypotheses, if we are only testing parts of a theory) are not directly observable. Our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and attitudes are not directly measurable because they exist in our heads and are only available subjectively. However, researchers have developed quite reliable ways of measuring such mental phenomena (Crano et al., 2015; Katz, 1960). In these cases, the concepts or variables are called *constructs* because natural measures of them do not exist but need to be constructed by using indirect measures (Crano et al., 2015; Edwards & Bagozzi, 2000), typically by asking someone to indicate how much they agree with a series of statements related to the construct.

Constructs that could be of interest in church-based research include

church commitment (Covarrubias et al., 2021), personality traits of leaders such as extraversion, humility, and conscientiousness (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Lee & Ashton, 2004), characteristics of small group Bible studies (Hartwig et al., 2020), pastoral attitudes toward various ministries (Dunaetz & Priddy, 2014), and any of a myriad of other phenomena that might reflect or influence people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in churches.

When measuring any variable, clear definitions need to be the starting point. We have seen this previously with church size, but it is equally important for psychological constructs which cannot be measured directly. For example, church commitment can be defined in many different ways. Since the church is the body of Christ, one could define it as one's commitment to the person of Christ. But churches are also human organizations, so definitions focusing on the organizational side of commitment could be used instead (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Three definitions of organizational commitment are affective organizational commitment (how much a person is emotionally attached to an organization), normative organizational commitment (the degree to which a person believes he or she has a moral duty to stay in an organization), and continuance organizational commitment (the fear of loss that comes from leaving an organization). All four types of commitment are very important because they influence people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors when they participate in church activities and ministries. When conducting a study, we would need to choose one definition to study, or perhaps we could choose several and treat them as different dimensions of commitment to see how they influence people differently.

Once we have a clear definition of what we want to study, we can develop a way to measure it. This is known as the *operationalization* of a concept or construct and involves clarifying the procedures (e.g., counting church attendees) or determining the instruments (e.g., sets of survey items) that we will use. Once we have chosen operationalizations for the concepts in our theories or hypotheses, we can begin collecting and compiling data from individuals, groups, churches, or whatever else we are studying.

Operationalizations

Good operationalizations of the concepts we want to measure lay at the heart of science. Independent researchers should be able to measure a concept in the same individual and get approximately the same result (Crano et al., 2015). Operationalizations should be both valid and reliable. An operationalization is valid to the degree that we measure the true value

of whatever we have defined. Note that most scientists who hold to the belief that we can measure real phenomena more or less accurately are working from a postpositivist perspective (Kuhn, 1962; Popper, 1959). This is the idea that objective reality exists, but because of human biases, imperfections, and other limitations, we may not be able to measure it accurately. From a theological perspective, postpositivism is completely compatible with the biblical view of the world which would hold that reality exists, and that God perceives its condition perfectly, while humans who are made in his likeness but are fallen and marred by sin can perceive reality to some degree (by both natural and special revelation), but our perceptions are likely to be less than perfectly accurate.

An operationalization is considered reliable if different researchers can use it to measure the variable or construct and obtain close to the same result. For example, if there are specific instructions on how to count people on Sunday morning (an operationalization), two different researchers should be able to follow the instructions and get the same results. To tell how well they matched up, they could each measure attendance for several Sundays at the same church. A correlation could be calculated to see how well their counts matched. The average of the counts could also be compared to see if one person was systematically counting more people than the other. Furthermore, to determine if an operationalization is reliable, if the measure is administered twice, it should yield the same result in situations where it is reasonable to assume that the underlying phenomenon has not changed. If we are measuring a person's commitment to a church (e.g., Covarrubias et al., 2021), we want an operationalization that does not vary much from week to week. If the person were to complete a survey one week, their commitment score should not vary much from what they would indicate if they were surveyed a week or a month later, apart from extenuating circumstances.

It should be noted that there is no "correct" operationalization for a given concept. For example, God knows our personality. He would not use a 7- or a 10-item survey to determine our level of extraversion. He might not even think in terms of extraversion and introversion. However, if we want to measure people's level of extraversion, we will want to use a validated scale that is known to be reliable. Several such scales exist (John & Srivastava, 1999) but none can be considered the "right" one. As long as it accurately and reliably measures the construct as we have defined it, then we can use any of these. Similarly, there is no single right way to measure church commitment or the average number of people who attend a church. If we can accurately and reliably measure attendance as we have defined it using one of several operationalizations, any of them is fine, as

long as we use it consistently.

Conclusion

Theories, concepts, and operationalizations make research possible and are among the tools that help us better understand our world where the Lord has called us to make disciples. Theories provide explanations of how concepts relate to each other. When we operationalize these concepts, we can test our theories to see if they are true and discover specific conditions under which they are true or not. We can test various aspects of our theories by collecting data which allows us to examine specific hypotheses. When we more clearly define concepts and refine our theories, we can become more effective servants of the Lord as we better understand what works and what does not work to help others follow him.

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