

# Chaos in the Brickyard? So What! A Look at the Role of Theory in Research and Teaching

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Bernard Forsher's allegory titled "Chaos in the Brickyard" (1963) noted that bricks or "facts" of various sizes and shapes were scattered about the brickyard, because brick-makers or "researchers" were creating these products without any thought to their eventual use in the construction of buildings or "laws" in accordance with blueprints or "theories". This allegory could be applied to the area of Sport History today. Granted, historical research can be carried out without the conscious use of theory. If, however, the researcher is concerned with explanation and prediction rather than mere description, with attaining an ever greater degree of objectivity in knowledge, and with utilizing the work of other researchers in order to further the collective body of knowledge, then theory must be incorporated. Assuming that theory is thus integral to good history, this paper examines the role of theory in research and teaching, by examining how the characteristics of theory give definition and guidance to those processes.

Inherent in the definition of theory, and thus in the criteria for judging "good" theory, are four characteristics: theory is conceptual; it explains and predicts the relationship between variables; it is empirically relevant; and it has the capacity to generate new research. A knowledge of and commitment to these four characteristics must impact on our

style of research and teaching. In adopting a theory-based approach to research, the researcher must adopt the following assumptions:

- a) research problems must fit within a larger, logically consistent conceptual framework which incorporates research done to date
- b) variables useful in the explanation and prediction of phenomena become the "significant" facts
- c) to work towards objectivity, empirical testing and replication by others is essential
- d) research findings must return to, and be situated within, the theoretical framework in order to identify further research which can continue the process of theory confirmation.

In adopting a theory-based approach to teaching, the teacher must adopt the following assumptions:

- a) students can find "meaning" in historical facts through the larger theoretical framework
- b) the "significant" facts to be taught are those variables involved in relationships that can best explain and predict phenomena
- c) the transmission of "objective knowledge" to students demands the recognition of its empirical testing and replication by others
- d) knowledge set within a theoretical framework will enable the student to explain currently unknown situations or phenomena.

Thus, the acceptance and adoption of theory is essential to sport history and necessitates refinements and/or changes in our style of research and teaching. Our teaching must reflect theory-building as well as fact collection. Our research must also, collectively, reflect theory and theory-building as well as the collection of historical facts.