RELEVANCE OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK IN SCIENTIFIC INITIATION. AN APPROACH FROM POLITICAL SCIENCES AND THE STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

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LA RELEVANCIA DEL MARCO TEÓRICO (MT) EN LA INICIACIÓN CIENTÍFICA: UNA APROXIMACIÓN DESDE LA CIENCIA POLÍTICA Y EL ESTUDIO DEL DESARROLLO HISTÓRICO INSTITUCIONAL

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Resumen: El siguiente artículo tiene como finalidad abordar y presentar la relevancia del marco teórico en la iniciación científica, su rol en el proceso de investigación y los modos de su construcción. Se reúnen en el texto diversos enfoques y herramientas para la construcción de un marco teórico definido tanto por la literatura como por la experiencia del autor, usando como ejemplo el estudio del desarrollo histórico institucional en el campo de la ciencia política. Una conclusión general que resulta de este trabajo es que el marco teórico, como cuerpo conceptual, establece el sustento de los objetivos y las hipótesis planteadas por la investigación, transformándose en un tipo de paraguas epistemológico que define la posición del autor en el campus del debate. En términos más específicos, identificar con precisión el nivel de abstracción de la teoría seleccionada aportará luces del alcance y el marco metodológico del estudio en ciencias sociales.
Palabras clave: Theoretical framework, research, scientific started theory, marco teórico, investigación, iniciación científica, teorías.
Keywords: Theoretical framework, social research, theory

Introduction

When dealing with scientific research (natural, factual or social) aimed at contributing to knowledge, getting closer to the truth or describing a reality, we turn to our most abstract knowledge base, which defines our interest in any topic to be studied (Trigo, 2020). Initially, the most common thing is for us to have a topic of interest that we intend to approach or pursue. In that case, we already are a step ahead of our research, as the definition of the topic grants a notion of the theoretical framework that helps identify the conceptual grid that outlines the field of action.

The exercise may occur inversely, we might have an *a priori* theoretical framework of interest which helps shape the topic of interest. This also constitutes significant progress, yet it is more complex in terms of enclosing it and approaching a research topic, this is due to the fact of its own particularity. Both cases are logical and reasonable research exercises, and it is up to the researcher to follow either one, contemplating factors such as time, resources and infrastructure.

This work intends to address the relevance of the identification of the theoretical framework in scientific research beyond an epistemological perspective. As an exercise and an introduction to the task of generating knowledge, it is useful to understand it in a methodological sense, which will allow us to apply the scientific method professionally, without disregarding the contribution of epistemology as a critical science that propels us out of our comfort zone.

Hence, what is the relevance of the theoretical framework and what is its role in the scientific research process? How can it be built for operationalization?

Method

This article is framed in the deductive methodology, it addresses the schematization of key concepts to build the theoretical framework in social sciences, through the documentary compilation of different manuals of research methodology and specific studies on historical institutionalism based on path dependence, inserted in the field of political science. The aforementioned with the purpose of delivering a general outlook of what is found in different manuals, focusing on a specific study through the use of an illustrative exercise on how to build a theoretical framework.

Results

1. An Overall Review of the Theoretical Framework (THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK)

1. 1. What is the Theoretical Framework

The following citation provides an enlightening introduction to the theoretical framework:

The theoretical framework in a quantitative research project is the theoretical-scientific context that acts as the basis of the scientific problem research. In qualitative research, it known as literature review. For both approaches, it constitutes the theoretical foundation of the research, because in that item, the researcher proves his/her theoretical-scientific knowledge of the theories that support the research problem. It is said that research is a process that goes from the known to the unknown, precisely, understanding the theoretical framework of an object-problem is a guarantee for a good start. Nobody can research an object-problem if they are unaware of its theoretical grounds (Ñaupas et al., 2014, p.173).

This point is key because scientific research is based on those assumptions, *a priori* judgements, as proposed by Kant, with a theoretical foundation that is not isolated, but is a grid of theories of a scientific program, of interconnected conceptual units (Gomez, 2014).

The literature that strictly addresses methodological aspects of scientific research (referring mostly to social sciences), similarly defines and understands the theoretical framework, with slight differences in the level of abstraction of this concept. But if, as an introduction, were to consider a definition that is wide enough, it would be as follows: "The theoretical framework constitutes a *corpus* of concepts with different abstraction levels articulated among themselves, and that direct the way in which reality is grasped" (Sautu et al., 2005, p.34). Different levels of abstraction refer to the degree of generality covered by that theory to explain and define phenomena, a more general degree entails a higher level of abstraction, while a more specific degree comes closer to the phenomenon in particular. An example is the scheme introduced by Ruth Sautu et al. (2005, p.35).
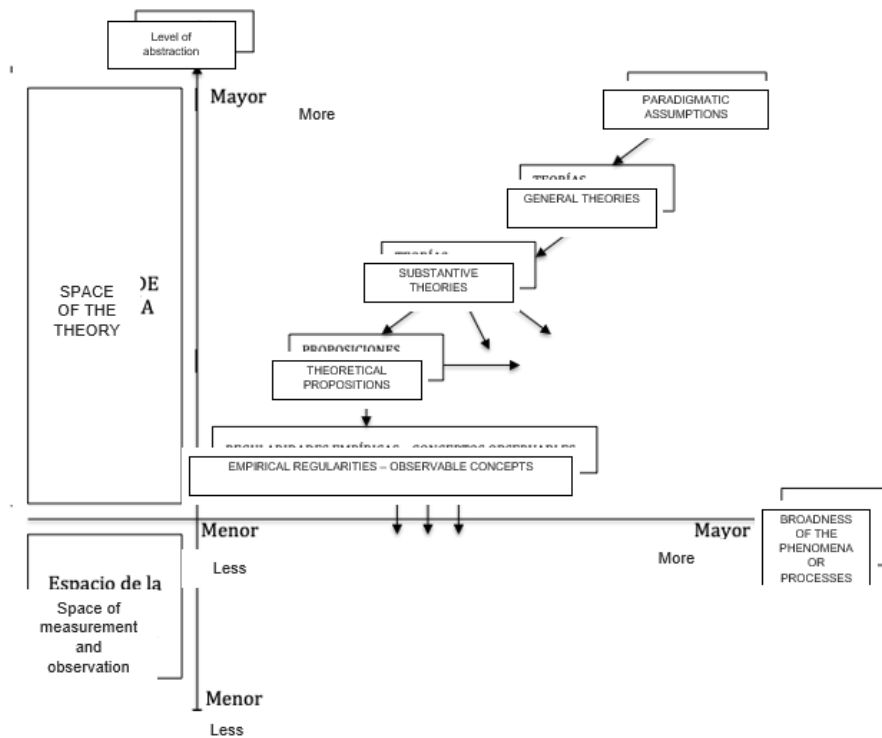
Figure 1
Coordinates Map of the Theoretical Abstraction Scale
Source: Sautu et al. (2005, p.35).

Therefore, according to **Figure 1**, the level of abstraction of the theoretical framework is directly related to the level of broadness of the phenomena or processes, meaning, our subject of the study. More broadness of the subject of the study means more level of abstraction, incorporating paradigmatic assumptions as the inception of the conceptual *corpus*. Less amplitude means less level of abstraction, which implies the incorporation of substantive theories, theoretical

propositions or a heap of empirical observations by prior research on the phenomenon or process of the study. In any case, in any level of abstraction, it will lead or define the space of measurement and observation as delimiting agent of the research objectives. Therefore, the theoretical approach is constituted as a basis of research inspiration through epistemological fundamentals by inspiring the way in which we concretely plan the study (Flick, 2015, p.38). In sum, "A theoretical framework is built by getting to know how other authors have explained the researcher's phenomenon of interest, and which variables to select in order to study it" (de Cid, 2007, p.33).

1.2. The Purpose of the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is the core of scientific research, it defines the course of action based on diverse theories that enable to describe, analyze and interpret the subject of the study (Pimienta, 2017), becoming a key element for the development of the research process' different stages; it also grounds the research in paradigms of the academic field (Fuentes-Doria, 2020).. This is relevant because it allocates the theoretical framework a role as abstract *corpus*, as well as an operational role that steers the research's planning and execution. In the words of Hernandez-Sampieri (2006, p.64), the theoretical framework: "(…) is a process and a product. An immersion process into existing and available knowledge that may be connected with our proposal of the problem, and a product which is part of a greater product".. The theoretical framework as a process and a product, a process of compiling ideas, stances, authors, concepts and definitions, which will become the basis of the research (Arias, 2006, p.106), thus defining the parameters that will lead the process of problematization and, consequently, the emergence of the research questions (Ander-Egg, 2011).

The theoretical framework, just as a theoretical construct that reveals paradigms and theoretical assumptions, is also a process that nurtures the different components of a research. The theoretical framework provides the necessary basis to develop the scientific method. Its most general components are as follows:

a) **Problematization**: in most common research process' schemes, problematization or proposal of the problem is the second step, following the definition of the topic of interest (Ñaupas et al., 2014, p.153). As expressed in the concept, problematization is the stage in which the question to be answered pertaining to a phenomenon or process of study is proposed. The formulation of the question will define the scope of the research and its objectives. Although it is true that in many formal research programs, the theoretical framework is inserted after the problematization, the theoretical input and the selection of the theories takes place before, this is due to the fact that proposing the research problem demands a conceptual approach to our inquiries.

Supposing that our research question is as follows: How is social status related to electoral behavior in the commune of Santiago in the 2017 municipal elections? Although this question may be completely broken down, we will focus on the field of the theory. The concept of "social

status" implies baggage (at least in Weber's social class theory) and an implication in sociological social stratification approaches, as well as the concept of electoral behavior deriving from the behavioral theories of the mid-20th century which gathered aspects of social psychology into electoral analyses, such as Lazarsfeld and McPhee's (1954) pioneering work.

Although it is true that formality and different academic programs in research stipulate that building a theoretical framework comes before problematization, it is clear that proposing the concept of "social status" or the "electoral behavior" in our research problem, from a behavioral theory, requires a prior approach to a general theory, or at least substantive theory about what we want to research; from that perspective we are able to use that or another concept in the problematization and not another (Cortes, Norman-Acevedo, & Rodriguez, 2019). Evidently, at the moment of formally developing the theoretical framework, the terms proposed will be developed more precisely, yet it is undeniable that an *a priori* presence of the theory is vital in this stage of the research (Norman-Acevedo, E.; Daza-Orozco, 2021)

b) **Hypothesis**: What is a hypothesis?: "The hypothesis is an answer (provisional and subject to verification) to the research question" (Saez, 2008, p.226). Not only subject to verification, but also to "falsifiability" (Popper, 1962), i.e., a null hypothesis. In any case, the hypothesis is tightly connected to the theory that supports the research, as a logical statement made up by concepts defined in the theoretical framework , which provide meaning and direction (Daza-Orozco, C; Cera-Ochoa, 2018). Going back to the example of the problematization: How is social status related to electoral behavior in the commune of Santiago in the 2017 municipal elections?, we may tentatively respond that:

Examples

H1: Voters with a high level of education and greater income in the commune of Santiago preferably vote for candidates who represent their own class.

H0(null): In the 2017 municipal elections in the commune of Santiago, the electoral behavior is not linked with voters' social status, insofar as electoral participation does not allow establishing generalizations on the voting results and electors' classes..

Therefore, the theoretical framework is present in the proposal of the hypothesis to the extent that it contributes the conceptual framework and the framework of reference of the tentative answer to the question. This means that if our framework of reference responds to "social status" and "electoral behavior," one or several tentative answers may not be proposed through other theoretical resources, for instance the Marxist class theory or the spatial theory of voting, because it would generate a theoretical imbalance, distorting the findings of our observations.

d) **Variables, dimensions and analysis categories:** the theoretical framework supports the entire process and stages of scientific research, largely because it comprises the definition and operationalization of

concepts in their different levels of abstraction. A significant aid of the theoretical framework is the definition of variables, dimensions and analysis categories which will assist in the interpretation of observed processes or phenomena, in agreement with the selected theory (Ballesteros, 2014).

To understand the contribution of the theoretical framework to these research components, it is necessary to contemplate that it follows the same rationale of levels of abstraction than theories. That is, variables are the most general components of analysis, they are proposed in the problematization and are formulated in the research question (Daza-Orozco, 2015). Following the example of the problem proposed *a priori*, variables would correspond to "electoral behavior" and "social status," each would be divided into dimensions, categories and analysis indicators, with a lesser level of abstraction, i.e., a process of operationalization of the single or multiple variables of the study (as seen in Figure 2).
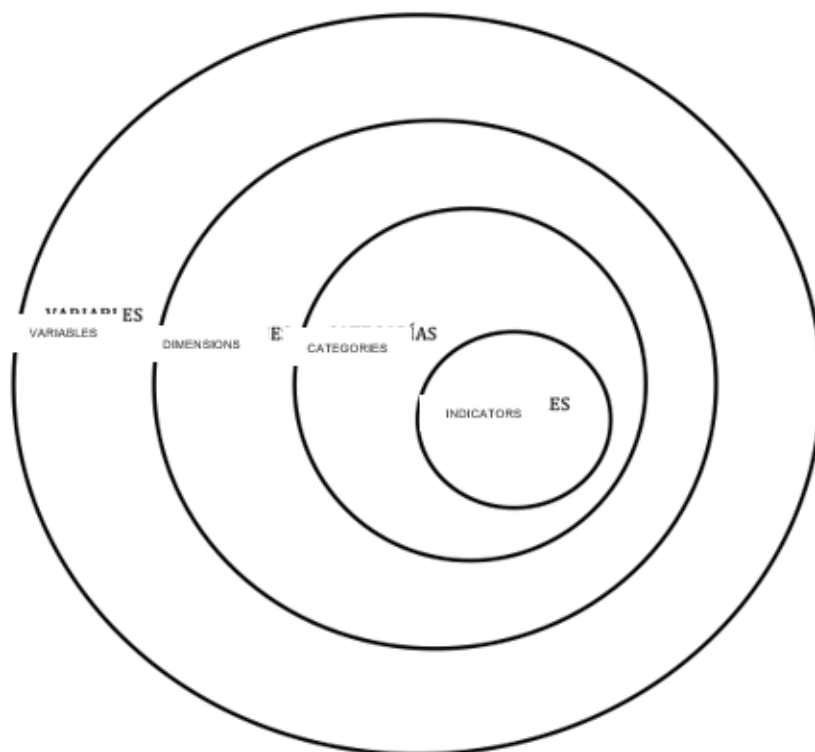

Figure 2
Abstraction Scheme
Source: Arias (2006).

Therefore, variables as characteristics or traits, magnitudes or quantity, are susceptible to change and can act as object of study by being broken down into less abstract observation dimensions, with categories acting as the elements of the dimensions that allow to articulate the most particular concepts that will be measured with the indicators (Arias, 2006, p.57-66).

The theoretical framework supports these processes of breaking down and of operationalization of the analysis variables, since each of these elements may agree with our research's general or substantive theory.

If one of our variables is "electoral behavior," the spatial or territorial dimension should be considered, which would allow to link it with the "social status" variable if we suggest, for instance, the assumption that there are differences of social status or class in Santiago according to the communal territory. Then, the vote or the territorial spatial dimension would be defined by a substantive theory and, to a lesser level of abstraction, by an analysis model or approach.

2. How to Build a Theoretical Framework. An Example Based on the Development of Political Institutionalism.

Beyond the structural aspects of a theoretical framework, we would like to offer some examples of theoretical systematization by means of bibliographic compilation. In this point, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is no formal or exclusive way to do it, but we can conduct a review from a common vision or from our experience in social research.

To illustrate the process of building a theoretical framework, we will resort to the study on institutional changes and continuities based on a path dependence analysis model, its level of abstraction implies an approach from the theories based on a historical twist of social sciences and neo-institutionalist approaches, i.e., from historical institutionalism (Trigo, 2016). The approach to the phenomenon to be developed is evinced in the proposal of the assumption that will help define the level of abstraction of the theoretical approach or approaches, for instance:

(…) the current study of institutional processes seeks to incorporate new approaches to observe the same institutional ideas, meaning, the notion of political institution is upheld, what changes are the ways in which we observe it. It is not the same view as that of legalistic studies of the beginning of the 20th century, which assimilated institutions as a static "thing", nor of neo-institutionalist approaches of the beginning of the 21st century, which grant characteristics of dynamic structures. (Trigo, 2015, p.82–83)

To define this type of proposals, a bibliographic compilation and systematization process is required to educate ourselves in the topic of interest, but to take a stand in the field of the theory, be it general or substantive, as in the case of the path dependence analysis. To achieve it, several tools and techniques will assist us in the process of building the theoretical framework. In this regard, two useful instruments are noteworthy: bibliographic systematization and theoretical schematization.

2.1 Bibliographic Systematization

Bibliographic systematization is a significant tool when reading and compiling existing theories. When doing so, we must necessarily process the information to achieve a more efficient reading and select those that are more adequate or that fit better into our topic of interest, revealing that decision is to be expected.

One way to systematize bibliography is using a record log, it will help with an overall reading and a diagonal pattern reading of the main theoretical statements. For instance, an approach to the debate of the theoretical focus that defines the path dependence analysis model,

compiles the principles, arguments and counter-arguments (criticism) to locate our research in the general spectrum of the discussion. A bibliographic record log may include several classifications; some will be exemplified below.

Principles	Argument	Authors	Criticism
1) The past affects the future.	Events that take place in the past will affect the results of the present.	North (1998); Castaldi and Dosi (2005); Tilly (2006)	It is a *minimalist* approach, *because it fails to offer a specific distinction of the mechanisms operated by this causality* (Mahoney, 2006).
2) *Initial* conditions are causally important.	Initial conditions are historically specific configurations of a variable at the beginning of a sequence of events, and these conditions determine the results of the future.	Somers (1998); Arrow (2004)	Initial conditions are not causally effective in path-dependent sequences, rather the important causal action is through the events that immediately follow the initial conditions (Arthur, 1989 and 1994; David, 1985; Goldstone, 1998b; Mahoney 2000). Initial conditions are not deterministic but rather stochastic (Page, 2006)
3) *Contingent* events are causally important.	Contingency as necessary condition for path dependence. A trait of unpredictability and stochastic relationship between initial conditions and final results.	Goldstone (1998b); Orren (1991)	Defining path dependence only in terms of contingency is highly restrictive, it inevitably turns the path dependence model into a rare and isolated phenomenon (Mahoney, 2006).
4) *Lock-in* occurs.	Certain units may find themselves in development trajectories from which they are unable to get out.	Arthur (1994); Pierson (2004); Kominek (?) Liebowisk and Margolis (1995)	Highly deterministic (Greener, 2005). Increasing returns are not the same as path dependence (Page, 2006). Political institutions are more prone to change than to continuity (Alexander, 2001).
5) A *self-reproduction sequence* occurs.	Those in which a given result is steadily reinforced in time.	Arthur (1994); Pierson (2004); Kominek (?)	Self-reproduction understands change as exogen. (Greener, 2005). Positive feedback and increasing returns are more useful to think about institutional resiliency, more so than institutional change (Thelen and Streeck, 2005).
6) A *reactive sequence* occurs.	Non-self-reinforcing type of sequence. Coupling of events in which each event is a prior occurrence and a cause of posterior occurrences. Sequential analysis.	James Mahoney (2006); Abbott (1995)	Understanding reactive sequences as path dependence broadens the definition to the acknowledgement of many other sequences, i.e., any non-self-reinforcing may be a reactive sequence (Pierson, 2000; 2001).

Table 1
Bibliographic record log: debate on the idea of path dependence
Source: Mahoney and Schensul (2006).

As we can see, at least six theoretical approaches are identified in terms of what path dependence is and is not, which immediately locates us in an approach to address our phenomenon of study with that specific bibliography, adding efficiency to the research process.

2.2 Theoretical Schematization

A "scheme," per the Real Academia Española, has two illustrative definitions, namely.: **1.** Graphic or symbolic representation of material and immaterial things; **2.** Summary of a text, discourse, theory, etc., tending to its most significant lines or characters. Therefore, schematizing or schematization implies decreasing or simplifying a statement or explanation of a scheme, considering its most significant characters.. Theoretical schematization helps us simplify our

bibliographic systematization and accomplish a global and visual outlook of the theories that were recorded or selected.

Although there are different ways to schematize our information, the concept map is considered very useful. Its purpose is to establish meaningful relationships between concepts (Novak & Gowin, 2006, p.33), becoming an instrument and a means that transforms statements or propositions that may be explicit or implicit into a scheme (Ontoria et al., 2012, p.33). Concept maps have been useful in the educational field and fruitful in self-education, facilitating the research process and its subsequent writing process.

Continuing with the example of the path dependence debate, thanks to bibliographic systematization, we have identified the field of the theoretical debate. We know that there are at least six different approaches pertaining to path dependence, and we are able to decide which theoretical principle to use to steer our study or research. Nevertheless, we may also decide to use all of the principles in the debate and articulate them in a more comprehensive model, to the extent we consider the different approaches not to be excluding, but complementary. Thus, that fragmented debate may help define a dynamic model of path dependence, placing each principle in its function within the general theory instead of the base model. The following concept map seeks to schematize the theoretical structure of this reconversion of the debate to an integrating model, ultimately defined as a dynamic model of path dependence.
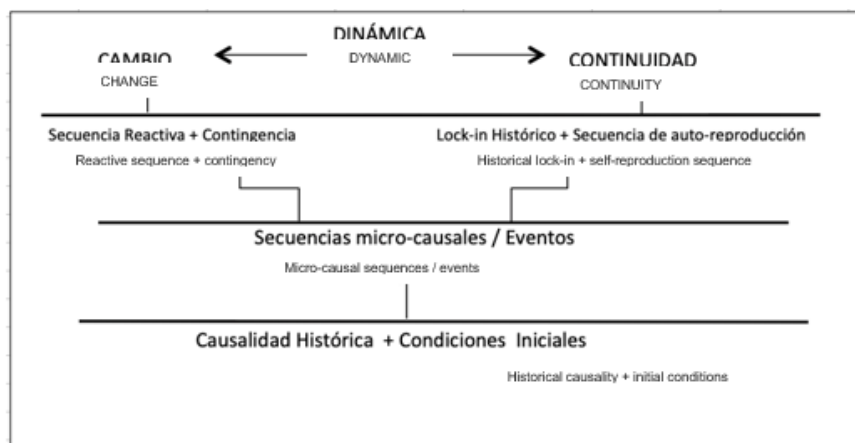

Figure 3.
Concept Map: dynamic model of path dependence.
Source: Trigo (2015).

So, if in the debate on the theoretical principles that define path dependence, each aimed at being constitutive of itself, this unification allocated a function in the general grid to each theoretical principle. Overall, from top to bottom of the concept map, the model is supported on the fact that each analysis of institutional development has to consider historical causality and the initial conditions by which a political institution was established. The development of the latter, in turn, needs to be studied considering micro-causal sequences or sequence of

concatenated events that would allow explaining the change or continuity of said political institution. Finally, institutions have a permanent dynamic of closure or opening.

These two tools have assisted in building an overall theoretical framework to steer the study of our selected phenomenon, which in this case pertains to institutional development. Defining a conceptual framework and its operationalization will guarantee the conditions to set up a robust analysis model.

Discussion and Conclusion

The theoretical framework does not just define the theoretical support of our topic, it is also a process of building and making decisions about principles with different levels of abstraction. It is relevant to consider that this process needs to be systematic and schematic, so as to obtain the conceptual input required to define our research objectives, hypothesis and the analysis variables entailed by the selection of methodological tools for the analysis categories.

It is essential for research to have a selection of game theories that is well defined, and for this selection to be manifested in the researcher's transparency and honesty. Conclusions and results of a research may rely on an incorrect application of the base theory or on the application of approaches that are exclusive, resulting in theoretical imbalance. At least, it will offer an opportunity to lay down a critical position of our own theoretical proposition, which is a significant contribution to the field of science. We are not obligated to force our theoretical base to prove a hypothesis.

As stated before, building a theoretical framework requires systematization and schematization. There are several tools or means that allow us to compile theoretical principles for our research: bibliographic logs and concept maps are of significant help to start building our theoretical framework. Bibliographic logs help identify and define the propositions that address our topic and research problem, producing a synthesis that helps make an epistemological decision about the most suitable theory for our research and provides the necessary input to schematize ideas. This schematization may be done with concept maps, which are a clear image of our theoretical selection, subsequently translated into the conceptual framework.

Finally, the example of the path dependence dynamic model, systematization and schematization enabled us to identify the debate and its propositions, evincing its possibility of articulation and unification. In other cases, it will serve to evince that the unification of the debate may entail a theoretical imbalance, implying an epistemological weakness for our research and in each of its stages. The takeaway is to be careful with theoretical decisions that may affect the results, and therefore, lead to weak conclusions in its own gnosiology unit. In many cases, theoretical decisions are much more feasible when following one theory or approach

instead of many, the second one comes with a risk of having sterile or low-scope conclusions.

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