

Innovation in teaching undergraduate Social Theory: towards an applied perspective*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the current offer of contemporary social theory in sociology programmes at the University of Southampton and proposes pathways for innovation. Drawing on module evaluation feedback (3 academic years), group interviews with students (n=12) and interviews with staff (n=3), this research sheds light onto the expectations of studying social theory, evaluations of teaching and learning activities, and avenues for higher alignment. The data analysed suggests that students experience a lack of connection between studying social theory and its applicability, and unawareness of the need for theoretically informed empirical skills. Interviewed members of staff highlight the need for a stronger alignment of assessment methods in the module. These complementing findings lead to proposed changes to the social theory offer by which we seek (i) higher complementarity between core social theory modules, (ii) stronger alignment of assessment methods, (iii) higher content of applied social theory in both teaching and assessment methods.

Key words: social theory, undergraduate, teaching, alignment, applicability, Sociology, UK.

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1. Introduction¹

This paper presents the results of a research project carried out in the framework of the teaching qualification *Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Teaching (PGCAP) Module 3: Enhancing Academic Practice*², Learning and Teaching Pathway. This research explores the current offer of social theory in the Sociology programmes at the University of Southampton. It does so by exploring the alignment between learning outcomes (LOs), teaching and learning activities (TLAs) and assessment methods of the year 2 module *SOC12031 Social Theory*, which is taken by all students enrolled in our Sociology programmes (including BSc Sociology, BSc Sociology with Anthropology, BSc Sociology and Social Policy, BSc Sociology and Criminology).

Social theory explains how social life emerges and why it is structured the way it is. Whilst social theory is an essential part of the undergraduate curriculum in social sciences degrees, its reputation of being disconnected from 'real life' events situates it in a suboptimum space in the experiences of students. Scholars argue that the role of social theory in the curriculum should be under scrutiny in order to increase its applicability and overcome this detachment. Drawing on how students and staff perceive the value of social theory per se, and/or its centrality in empirical research and its role in improving employability skills, this project explores the alignment between the LOs of studying social theory, the TLAs delivered and how the knowledge and skills acquired are assessed.

In order to unpack how these phenomena are perceived by our students and staff and improve our offer, this project draws on module feedback data and the narratives of staff (n=3) and students (n=12) in the department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology at the University of Southampton. The findings show that higher alignment is required so assessment can map onto LOs and TLAs, and stronger connections with empirical work and the dissertation in particular can be achieved. These complementing findings lead to several proposed changes to the social theory offer, amongst which we highlight here: (i) an increase in the share of sessions on 'applied social theory'; (ii) improving the complementarity with the remaining social theory offer in the programme; (iii) strengthening the offer of 'focused' activities in seminar teaching alongside peer marking/learning activities; and (iii) substitution of the final exam for an 'applied essay'.

The paper is structured as follows: the following section introduces the subject and how it fits within Sociology programmes, followed by a brief introduction to the module, the rationale for the project and main research aims. The methodology, methods and data collected are described, as well as the limitations to this research project. The minor changes implemented in the academic year 2018-19 are presented, followed by the students' and staff's voices and major changes proposed for forthcoming academic years.

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² More information about the programme [here](#), retrieved 05.04.2019

2. Situating Social Theory in undergraduate Sociology teaching

Social theory refers to those theories explaining social change and social action and the study of the social life of human beings; it also provides propositions about social phenomena, which allows us to produce testable hypotheses (Appelrouth and Edles 2016). Social theory is at the core of the sociological purpose since it defines concepts and underpins the way in which empirical research is planned (Scott 2012). Moreover, social theory is an important part of the undergraduate curriculum in sociology programmes because it helps us to differentiate sociological thinking from 'common knowledge' (Bauman 1990 in Miles 2001). Amongst other principles, sociology goes beyond common knowledge when its findings are based not only on our own actions, but we can make sense of others' actions by providing an explanation of why and how we experience life in the way we do. Social theory is necessary to explain collective phenomena in the empirical world (Parker 2003). It also provides the basis for understanding how social processes such as social order, action and change have been and are explained, as well as how individuals are reflexive beings, and whether we can study social structures or the agency of individuals as determining of social outcomes (Layder 2005; Ritzer 2001). Social theories are different from natural sciences theories because they are 'often rooted in implicit moral assumptions that contrast with traditional notions of scientific objectivity' (Appelrouth and Edles 2016:3), making them subject to further scientific scrutiny. Hence, students should have a good command of theories, concepts and approaches, so they engage with both conceptual and empirical work in a rigorous manner. We can also argue that these broad themes and approaches underpin most theoretical approaches used in a vast range of social sciences, helping students with crucial transferable skills when choosing optional modules and specialising their knowledge later on in their programmes or outside of the academy.

Despite all these important merits, social theory has the bad reputation of being disconnected from everyday experiences and practices (Miles 2001) and using an opaque language (Scott 2012). This divide between deep theoretical understanding disconnected from the 'real world' and shallow empirical work seems to have permeated to our student body. These are some of the reasons undergraduate students struggle to engage with the content. Social theory might not have immediate practical results (Craib 1992) leaving students, at times, frustrated with the purpose and content of these modules.

Advocates of enhancing social theory in the curriculum have highlighted that 'the legitimacy of the understanding of classical social theory for classical social theory's sake has been increasingly open to question[...] classical theory remains of considerable value, but only where it relates to themes of contemporary social change' (Miles 2001:3). Supporters of this approach highlight the importance of discussing the role of social theory in practice by accomplishing two things (i) students must be able to apply theoretical concepts to their everyday practices and (ii) should understand the connections between theory and social change (Hand, 2007). Translating sociological perspectives and concepts into applied knowledge can be executed in different ways: for example, teachers can produce case studies of real-life negotiations of distribution of resources to teach students the differences core theories such as between functionalism and conflict theories (Holtzman 2005). Teachers can also introduce themes, case studies or use cultural products (music, art, television) to illustrate social theories and help students 'theorise' from individual/micro level processes to higher levels of abstraction (Hand 2007). Including an applied dimension to social

theory also helps students to achieving other order thinking skills, which are aligned with more independent critical thinking, application and evaluation, aligned with Bloom's taxonomy (Forehand 2010) levels of 'analyse and apply'. In addition, these strategies can help students and staff to overcome disconnections from social theory, and to appreciate the purpose of social theory as a standalone subject and in relation to the empirical research process.

3. Context of the project: SOCI2031 Social Theory

[SOCI2031 Social Theory](#) is a Level 5 module, which is compulsory for all students enrolled in the programmes BSc Sociology, BSc Sociology with Anthropology, BSc Sociology and Criminology, BSc Sociology and Social Policy, BA Philosophy with Sociology (run from Humanities) in SSPC.

The module looks at key terms and debates within social theory that constitute the conceptual foundations for further study throughout the degree. It builds on a first year classical Social Theory module (SOCI1014) by examining contemporary authors. Classical social theory was concerned with explaining important processes of social change linked to modernisation, industrialisation and capitalism, whilst what we understand by 'modern social theory' is concerned with the experiences, values, meanings and beliefs of social actors living in these societies (Ransome 2010; Layder 2005; Ritzer, 2001). SOCI2031 draws on classical social theory to illustrate the shifts in understanding and in paradigms of contemporary social theory. Students also make extensive use of the SOCI2031 learning during the completion of their dissertations in year three, which makes this module a central component of SSPC programmes (Neumann 2010). The content of the module is structured in three separate parts: part 1 social order and the classics; part 2 micro social theory; and part 3 contemporary topics (e.g. gender, the body and social theory, power, etc.).

The delivery of the TLAs follows a standard format where lecturers deliver oral presentations (45 minutes) supported by lecture slides which are uploaded onto the virtual learning environment (VLE) Blackboard. A total of 20 lectures are delivered, including introduction and revision lectures. The module includes five seminar discussions taking place every other week starting in week 3. Seminar discussions are mainly organised around questions listed in the handbook that the students can consult in advance and use the readings to prepare their answers in order to facilitate deeper levels of learning (analysis and evaluation) (Krawthwohl 2002).

The module is assessed by three components: (i) 1,500 words essay (38%); (ii) exam (58%); and (iii) seminar participation (4%), the latter tracked by completing short reflective logs (e.g. 'what have you learnt during today's seminar?'). The different types of assessments are conducive of different levels of learning, which enriches the interaction of students with the module content (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice 2005).

4. Rationale for changes and research aims

The module presents certain limitations and 'unknowns' in its conception and delivery that require further scrutiny:

- **Challenges to assess constructive alignment** (Biggs 1999, 2003): the LOs are not clearly defined in the module handbook and include a mix of Aims and LOs. Since these are insufficiently defined, it is difficult to measure how constructive alignment is achieved.

- **Seminar participation:**
 - Format: the seminar format depends on students' dedication to do the readings, which is difficult to achieve, particularly after week 4 when students are under pressure to deliver other assessments. Moreover, the long list of questions included in the handbook cannot be answered in one seminar session and we were generally able to address only two out of the 4-6 questions. This creates dissonance between the learning objectives and the actual delivery.
 - Assessment: the seminar participation is graded (up to 4 percent) but not assessed- this creates dissonance between the LOs and assessment.
- **Feedback** to essay 1 is not utilised for assignment 2 (final exam): this requires further exploration to improve the role of feedback in the TLAs.
- The **disconnection between theory and empirical work** highlighted in the literature requires further investigation, which is particularly important for our students doing well in their year three dissertations where theory should have a central role.

Research aims

In order to address the aforementioned issues, this project aims at:

- Understanding the way in which students experience the study of social theory.
- Improving the alignment between aims, LOs, TLAs, and assessment.
- Generating higher levels of engagement with social theory amongst our students.
- Connecting the value of Social Theory *per se*, with its applicability.

5. Methodology, methods and data

In order to understand the expectations and experiences of social theory undergraduate students and staff, this project implemented a qualitative interpretivist epistemology (Bryman 2003) to capture how learning outcomes and the skills and knowledge gained are aligned from the standpoints of both staff and students.

In order to capture these experiences and processes I have conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with current and former staff teaching in the module SOCI203. Semi-structured qualitative interviews are conversations with research participants where the interviewer aims at capturing perceptions and experiences in relation to a particular subject (Kvale, 1994). These conversations with colleagues enabled me to gather data related to their experience teaching social theory and in the module in particular, their expectations in the module, the structure of the sessions they teach, their view on students' engagement and modes of assessment. Three lecturers were interviewed (two current, one former) towards the end of the semester. Colleagues were approached at the beginning of the semester to inform them that I would be running a small project for PGCAP and requesting their participation.

Initially I planned to conduct focus groups (Morgan 1996) with current and former students, in order to grasp collective experiences of learning where similar patterns and counterpoints would emerge. Students were recruited by announcements on the Blackboard module page and by sending an email to former SOCI2031 through the Dissertation module which they all take this year. I also posted a message on a departmental Facebook group. Students would get a small incentive

for attending the focus group of a £5 voucher to spend in a café on campus. Recruitment was challenging since some students would agree to attend but later on dropped out. This meant that I had to run group interviews instead of focus groups due to the low numbers (two group interviews of two and one of three, $n=7$) and individual interviews ($n=5$). In hindsight, the individual interviews, mostly with former students, were useful to capture individual processes in more detail, whilst the group conversations helped me to understand collective views of the module and diversity of learning styles. Themes inquired about related to the expectations about learning social theory in the programme, overlaps with other modules, understanding of the rationale of the structure of the module, preferred learning and teaching methods, assessment and feedback.

Table1. Summary of participants (students and staff)

Participant	Academic year	Programme/Role
Student 1	2017-2018	BSc Sociology and Anthropology
Student 2	2017-2018	BSc Sociology with Social Policy
Student 3	2017-2018	BSc Sociology
Student 4	2017-2018	BSc Sociology and Criminology
Student 5	2017-2018	BSc Sociology
Student 6	2018-2019	BSc Sociology
Student 7	2018-2019	BSc Sociology and Criminology
Student 8	2018-2019	BSc Sociology
Student 9	2018-2019	BSc Sociology
Student 10	2018-2019	BSc Sociology and Criminology
Student 11	2018-2019	BSc Sociology and Social Policy
Student 12	2018-2019	BSc Sociology
Staff 1	2017-2019	Lecturer
Staff 2	2017-2019	Lecturer
Staff 3	2015-2018	Former lecturer, seminar tutor, convenor

Interviews took place in my office and were audio-recorded and partially transcribed. The content was analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998), following an inductive-deductive coding (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) starting with the themes/codes from the interview guides and then drawing on new themes emerging from the data. Some of the codes used were 'expectations', 'applicability', 'assessment', 'complementarity', etc.

Ethics

The research project complied with the ethical requirements of the University of Southampton with approval reference number 45374. There were no risks for either students or staff associated with participating in this study, and some might have felt a sense of contribution to the improvement of the programmes and the teaching and learning in the department more broadly. I reflected upon the potential issue that current students might have felt obliged to participate since there are power relations involved between current students and the module convenor (myself). I made sure I explained that marking and grading are anonymised processes, and that contributing to the research had no impact (positive/negative) on their performance.

Limitations

In the completion of the project there have been some limitations in relation to the sample composition and the implementation and measurement of changes. In relation to the sample, self-selection bias is an important factor, since the students who self-selected into the study are generally students who have a positive perception of studying social theory and are particularly engaged with the subject. This might have some impacts on the positive tone of their contributions, which requires further consideration and balance with the actual module feedback received which includes a representation of the whole cohort.

The evaluation of the changes is divided into 'minor changes' and 'major changes' since the timeline of PGCAP M3 does not map onto the quality assurance timeline for major changes applied to modules at the UoS.

6. Findings

6.1. Enhancements 2018-2019: minor changes

During the year 2018-2019 I was able to implement minor changes to the module, which were mainly focused on the structure of the seminar activities towards a more focused and less 'reading-dependant' format, and to improve the quality and nature of the feedback provided. This process was started in 2016-2017, but the systematic use of focused activities was fully implemented in 2018-2019.

Seminars: in relation to the seminars, I have included peer learning; marking an exam script; short quizzes, and readings, video and discussion, etc. These changes have (i) improved students' engagement with the material and helped to provide feedback that would promote students' self-evaluation skills (Evans 2016). It has also helped students to make clearer connection between LOs and TLAs (Kennedy 2006). This has proved popular amongst our students, who perceive these activities as a vehicle to make the most out of the seminar session and to allow for different levels of involvement depending on the work done before the session, where you can 'test yourself' and you feel 'you are gaining something':

"I prefer seminars where **we do something**, not only discussion. If you have to discuss the readings or answer a question I don't know, I feel I am not learning much. But if you have to do something, **you test yourself**" (Student 9, BSc Sociology, 2018-2019)

"Seminars are sometimes **more interesting than the lecture**, but if you are in a group where people are not talking, they did not do the reading, you feel **you are wasting your time**. If you have a short reading, a short test, you have the feeling **you are gaining something**. **Everybody gains** something."
(Student 2, BSc Sociology and Social Policy, 2017-2018)

Feedback: This academic year, I have included an optional formative assessment through an essay surgery week, which involved feedback on essay outline before submission (12 hours available in week 5). This has proved useful to help students think of their essay design and how to improve their essay writing skills. Students convey that they now would use these resources when they

never did in the past (i.e. showing an essay outline to the seminar tutor), and that more essay writing support is needed:

“I like it [essay surgery week] being there. So, **I’ve never used an essay surgery or shown an essay plan** or anything before. It kind of feels like it’s the main reason it’s there, yeah, which definitely makes me think that I’m inclined to use it more this time round. Yeah, I’m not always as organised as I’d like to be, so I think this time it makes me attend, and get feedback before submitting the essay” (Student 9, BSc Sociology, 2018-2019)

“We need more guidance with essays, because I feel like we’re just kind of thrown into it, like ‘these are the essay questions, here’s the module handbook and you just have to pick one’ and all they tell you is pretty much the word limit, the deadline and the percentage of the essay... so **an essay surgery would be helpful.**” (Student 3, BSc Sociology, 2017-2018)

Analysis of module feedback and mid-term feedback

The introduction of these activities over the past years shows a good progression in module feedback for the overall satisfaction and the evaluation of seminar teaching. Scores on feedback have improved but they are still lagging behind the overall good progression of the module (see table 2).

Table 2. Summary of module feedback 2016-2019.

Academic year	Overall satisfaction	Seminar teaching	Feedback and assessment
2016-2017	3.9	4.6	3
2017-2018	4	4.7	3.5
2018-2019 (minor changes implemented)	4.13	4.8	3.5 New question on ‘timely feedback’ 4.25

6.2. Students and staff’s voices and proposed changes 2019-2020

Social Theory as a disconnected and abstract theme

Students’ narratives confirm what others have discussed before, that for most students ‘theory is often one of the most daunting aspects of sociology- it seems abstract, removed from the concrete events of their everyday lives, and therefore, intimidating’ (Holtzman 2005:206). Some of the interviewees convey this when they express how they foresaw studying social theory in the programme:

“Social Theory is more like philosophy, so **I never understood why I needed it.** It is not like in my future job I will be asked about phenomenology [laughs] (Student 3, BSc Sociology, 2017-2018).

“I enjoy it, but **I don’t see how I will ever use** what we are studying” (Student 6, BSc Sociology, 2018-2019)

“Some things seem more useful than others. It helps to think of how the theory can be used to study current themes, **not topics from decades ago**. How is it relevant now to study Parsons? (Student 12, BSc Sociology, 2018-2019)

“[Social theory] I found it really interesting and exciting, but also very **difficult to process**, so I’d have to read a lot of it a lot of times before I could start to make sense of it. So, I was a quite nervous about that, I guess, in that respect. And even then, lots of things that didn’t make sense when kind of reading it on my own.” (Student 9, BSc Sociology, 2018-2019)

Preference for applied topics

Related to the former point about disconnection, students explain how they prefer the content related to part 3 of the module, where ‘contemporary applied topics’ are studied. These feel more connected to ‘real-life’ events, more current and relevant to their studies and life more broadly. This is how they convey it:

“I felt like the second half, so this part [pointing at the ‘contemporary topics section’], was **much more interesting** than the first, personally.” (Student 2, BSc Sociology and Social Policy, 2017-2018)

“People do come with these pre-conceived ideas that social theory is boring, and so immediately turn up and they are not engaged ... but the part with the **application to contemporary topics** definitely I think would be a big one.” (Student 1, BSc Sociology with Anthropology, 2017-2018)

“When you’re digging into a theorist, you tend to look at what they say and what people agree with them say, and what people who doesn’t agree with them say. So, **you’re looking at kind of two binaries rather than kind of a full circle picture**, which I would expect we’d be getting with when you’re looking at a theme rather than a theorist.” (Student 9, BSc Sociology, 2018-2019)

Applicability- connections with the dissertation

In year three, students have to complete a dissertation which should have connections with theory. However, this is not something we have conveyed effectively, since interviewees narrate that they will forget the content after the exam and “*I will never need it again*” (Student 6, BSc Sociology, 2018-2019), since “*I don’t think I’ll use theory in the future, unless I do a PhD*” (Student 7, BSc Sociology and Criminology, 2018-2019). Interestingly, those in year 3 explain that it was later on when they saw the value of social theory for empirical work:

“When I came up with the idea [for the dissertation topic] and I was exploring the idea, I don’t think I really even gave social theory a second thought, but it was only when I came to write it and **it clicked ‘it is largely relevant to social theory’**.” (Student 1, BSc Sociology with Anthropology, 2017-2018)

Therefore, there is room for improvement in relation to how students perceive the applicability of the topic. Staff’s perceptions are concurrent with the above, since they agree on the usefulness of theory for the final dissertation:

“I’ve always thought that for most of the students **its greatest relevance lies in preparation for their dissertation** and therefore first semester, second year makes sense. Then they do SOCI2020 [methods course where they prepare the dissertation proposal] in the second semester and they can

start thinking about a theoretical approach [...] I think that it makes sense to give a sort of framework" (Lecturer 3).

Complementarity with other modules

Students were also inquired about how the module complements past offer. They explain that "some topics are a repetition, but others are actually new, or give you more in depth information about authors, so I am happy with that" (Student 6, BSc Sociology, 2017-2018). Although they acknowledged the difference in depth, the repetitions can be avoided: "we look at authors in more depth here, but there are still **some repetitions**" (Student 4, BSc Sociology and Criminology, 2017-2018).

Seminar: in-class focused activities as summative assessment

The structure and content of the seminars is generally welcome by students, where assessment of attendance and completion of activities is perceived as a positive aspect for engagement and rewarding the ongoing work throughout the semester. They explain how assessing seminar work and attendance "definitely **encourages people to go to seminars** when there is a percentage attached to it." (Student 4, BSc Sociology and Criminology, 2017-2018).

However, completing a worksheet at the end of the session is not seen as actually measuring knowledge. They explain how:

"[Providing feedback to seminar work] would be good actually that when we did give that [seminar worksheet] that it was looked at and given back, and that could be what constitutes the 1%, because a lot of times people look at that sheet and they just write, quickly fill it out and then just shove it in, because it is never going to be looked at. But, **if actually what we had to write down was genuinely what we had learnt**, what we had got out of it, then I think that better constitutes earning a percentage for just turning up" (Student 1, BSc Sociology with Anthropology, 2017-2018)

Assessment- essays vs exams

Students and staff agree on the lack of purpose to write exams in a social theory module. Essays with different levels of complexity seem to be the preferred option, together with a small percentage of seminar participation. The main issues regarding the unsuitability of exams relate to: the perceived lack of substantial feedback, the difficulties in explaining very complex concepts in a short period of time, the lack of connection with the applicability of the subject. Students convey strongly the points about feedback and the added stress to write exams in a complex topic:

"My preference is '**avoid exams at all costs**', I get very stressed about exams, so my preference would be two essays. [Re exams] **there is no feedback**" (Student 1, BSc Sociology with Anthropology, 2017-2018)

"I don't get what you get out of exams- **there is no feedback to them**. You write an essay, you get feedback and then you don't use it in the exam" (Student 11, BSc Sociology and Social Policy, 2018-2019)

"Again, I'm very, **very biased against them**. So, actually, you know, my response would be you absolutely don't need exams for things that are conceptual rather than factual, but, again, that is

totally my personal view and I acknowledge it as such, but I, you know, it would depress me to think that, you know, people are asked in an exam setting, you know, to describe something that needs time and takes time for reflection, and all that. So, personally, **I would never make use of exams at all unless it's something very, very straightforward and instrumental** rather than something that requires thinking." (Lecturer 1)

"Personally, I wouldn't do exams, no, no. I **would definitely have an essay, and I would have quite a difficult essay I think that got them to use more than one theory**, or did something a bit more difficult. [...] And that's what people exams for, they want to be able to force the students to cover everything [but] I think it's a disaster because I think what you end up with is very superficial knowledge, that they're just going, 'I need to know a bit about that, a bit about that, a bit about that, a bit about that' and they don't have any sense of the real depth of it. So, I think we have to make a call on some modules and say actually they're not going to learn all of this, they are going to be selective, and that's fine, but they'll have some depth. And you get the depth from writing a proper essay". (Lecturer 2).

"I am questioning the exams more and more. I don't know. I've thought about this before and **my preferred solution would be an open exam, open book exam**, is that right? I think that there would be a certain benefit to having a different format than is necessarily replicated, but I think that if they knew the questions in advance, they were able to prepare. I think it's an amalgamation of those two (essay and exam), the skillsets that are involved in both. I think it's slightly different, but it would perhaps allow them to prepare in slightly different ways and that's... and adapt to those differently. I just think it's... I sometimes think that, well, it would be a midway point between two different assessments that would utilise the skills that we're asking them to, and from both, but just in a slightly different way." (Lecturer 3)

7.2.1. Enhancements to be implemented 2019-2020 onwards

The enhancements proposed for the 2019-2020 edition aim at improving stronger alignment and I do so adapting the classification on critical factors for alignment by Reeves (2006) to explore the aims, the content, design, tasks, staff and students' roles and the assessment methods (Reeves 2006:302).

- **Aims and learning outcomes.** The Learning Outcomes have been revisited of the module to make sure these are aligned with the TLAs and assessments, as well as specify the marking criteria/grade descriptors. LOs provide information about what the learner knows or has the ability to do as the result of TLAs (Allan 1996), and are crucial for an aligned delivery of teaching in higher education (Biggs 1999).
- **Content and structure: multiple perspectives**
 - Increase share of sessions on 'applied social theory', which will be thematic (post-colonial assessment of power; work, employment and consumption, etc.).
 - Streamlining content of part 2, micro sociology.
 - Complementarity with social theory offer in SOCI1014 –different theories within similar authors studied (i.e. Goffman focus on total institutions in year 2)

- **Seminar activities, participation and assessment:**
 - o Grade share increase from **4 per cent to 10 per cent**
 - o Goal of improving attendance and engagement (aligned with the work-in-progress SSPC teaching strategy, 2019)
 - o Maintain focused activities.
 - o Students exposed to all themes/topics and learning assessed.
 - o There is no feedback given on the seminar reflective log. This might challenge constructive (Biggs 1999, 2003), since students tend to see these logs as a way to simply track attendance more than a substantial assessment. This will change with more structured seminars where students will self-assess how they have done by giving themselves or each other scores based on their answers to quizzes or short answer activities.
- **Assessment and feedback**
 - Substitution of one exam for an applied essay. Since making the connections between social theory and research is one of the ways forward into bridging this disconnect (Hand 2007), by selecting an academic article and critically unpack the theoretical component and its connection with the research questions and empirical approach. This will enable achieving other order thinking skills, which are aligned with more independent critical thinking, and application of knowledge (Bloom's taxonomy). In addition, we expect an improvement of the most commonly misaligned factor, which is assessment (Reeves 2006) with learning outcomes and overall SSPC teaching strategy (2019); and we will enable students to think of a theoretical framework when writing their dissertations in year 3.
 - Maintain essay surgery week. This will be maintained given the success in re-assuring students the structure of the essay and an extra essay surgery week for assessment 2 will be introduced too, which can be used either to assess the feedback they have got for essay 1 or to plan for essay 2. This strategy follows findings from research on how feedback is valued alongside tutor comments, whenever students understand what to do with the information received (Weaver 2006).

8. Conclusion

This paper illustrates the challenges in teaching social theory and the opportunities to improve constructive alignment and connections between theory and empirical work, by investigating the current offer of contemporary social theory in sociology programmes at the University of Southampton. Drawing on module evaluation feedback (3 academic years), group interviews with students (n=12) and interviews with staff (n=3), this research sheds light onto the expectations of studying social theory, evaluations of teaching and learning activities, and avenues for higher alignment. The data analysed suggests that students' experience a lack of connection between studying social theory and its applicability, and unawareness of the need for theoretically informed

empirical skills. Interviewed members of staff highlight the need for a stronger alignment of assessment methods in the module.

The report shows how the minor changes implemented so far in relation to seminar activities and optional formative assessments (i.e. surgery week to discuss essay outline) enabled for a higher engagement of students with the content and better access to feedback. The proposed changes for 2019-2020 onwards should enable a (i) better alignment between LOs, TLAs and assessment; (ii) better complementarity in the social theory offer within the programme; (iii) higher perceptions amongst the student body of applicability of social theory to empirical world, and (iv) more rigour when writing their dissertations in year 3. This paper has not explored alternative forms of applied social theory which have been rehearsed elsewhere, where lecturers and tutors offer 'real-life' problems to be solved under different theoretical paradigms (as illustrated by Holtzman 2005).

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