

## Theory Building

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**Where?** BA 460

**When?** Monday 1:00-3:45, Feb. 16/2015 – March 23/2015

What is good theory and how do we develop it? While theory building remains more art than science, we will strive to demystify the nature of theory and theorizing. This seminar examines both content issues (what) and process issues (how) surrounding theory in organizational science. We will also examine some great exemplars of good theorizing and consider how the multiple levels inherent in organizations may affect our theorizing.

Each week will consist of readings-based discussion. The readings for each week are listed chronologically, since later readings often build on earlier ones. Coming to class ready to offer your opinions and reflections on every article is essential. Class contribution will play a big role in your grade (worth 40%).

Evaluating theory also takes practice. We'll walk through the review process of a paper currently under consideration at the *Academy of Management Review*. Because I'm a coauthor of that paper, I want to minimize any discomfort on your part; this will not be a graded assignment. For Week 2, you'll provide a brief, 1-page "peer review" (single-spaced), highlighting the 2 most important issues that you see, along with your recommendations for how to address them. Do NOT put your name on the page. We'll put all the reviews in the center of the table and have you draw one at random. You'll be responsible for articulating those issues, and we'll come up with a "wish-list" for the authors. For Week 3, you'll read the actual reviews from *AMR*, and we'll jointly "decode" what they mean. For Week 4, you'll read the revised paper that was submitted to *AMR*, and we'll discuss in class why the authors so obviously missed the mark!

For the remaining assignment (worth 60%), you have a choice of either #1 or #2:

1. Identify two theory papers published in your research area of interest. They need not be in top journals. Please provide a thoughtful critique of each paper. Using tips from the seminar readings and discussions, deconstruct how – and how well – the authors built their theory (e.g., how did they whet your appetite?, did they address Whetten's [1989] what-how-why-where-when-who questions?, how would you rate them on Corley and Gioia's [2011] 2x2 matrix of utility?, did they capture the arguments well in a figure or table?). In short, focus more on the quality of the theory *building* and presentation rather than the quality of the theory *content*. Further, if you were a reviewer, what would you recommend they do differently regarding the theory building itself or the presentation of the theory? Each critique should be no more than 8 pages (double-

spaced), and each is worth 30% of your course grade. The first critique is due Week 3, and the second, Week 5.

2. This option is for those who believe they have identified a unique theoretical contribution. As you'll soon understand, you can't just sit down one day and force yourself to write a new theory, so this option may be more appealing to advanced students. Please complete a detailed outline of a theory paper (or the initial theory ideas for your dissertation). This will include: a title page; an abstract; your research question(s) and why it's important (include at least two ways you seek to advance theory); detailed bullets that outline your key arguments; formal propositions and/or a summary figure; and up to 20 citations of work that you would incorporate in your theory building. Do not write a full paper: this is to be a disciplined, well-structured outline only. The assignment is due Week 5.

### Weekly Topics and Readings

#### Week 1: What *is* good theory?

Davis, M. S. 1971. That's interesting! Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1: 309-344.

Whetten, D. A. 1989. What constitutes a theoretical contribution? *Academy of Management Review*, 4: 490-495.

Bacharach, S. B. 1989. Organizational theories: Some criteria for evaluation. *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 496-515.

Sutton, R. I., & Staw, B. M. 1995. ASQ forum: What theory is *not*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40: 371-384.

DiMaggio, P. J. 1995. Comments on "what theory is *not*." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40: 391-397.

Weick, K. E. 1995. What theory is *not*, theorizing *is*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40: 385-390.

Bartunek, J. M., Rynes, S. L., & Ireland, R. D. 2006. *Academy of Management Journal* editors' forum: What makes management research interesting, and why does it matter? *Academy of Management Journal*, 49: 9-15.

Edwards, J. R., & Berry, J. W. 2010. The presence of something or the absence of nothing: Increasing theoretical precision in management research. *Organizational Research Methods*, 13: 668-689.

Corley, K. G., & Gioia, D. A. 2011. Building theory about theory building: What constitutes a theoretical contribution? *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 12-32.

## **Week 2: Why does theory matter?**

Reviewing assignment: provide a brief, 1-page “peer review” (single-spaced) of the following article, highlighting the 2 most important issues that you see, along with your recommendations for how to address them. Do NOT put your name on the page.

Ashforth, B. E., Schinoff, B. S., & Rogers, K. S. 2014. Personal identification in organizations: Protecting oneself or extending oneself? Submitted to *Academy of Management Review*.

### Articles:

Van de Ven, A. H. 1989. Nothing is quite so practical as a good theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 486-489.

Ferraro, F., Pfeffer, J., & Sutton, R. I. 2005. Economics language and assumptions: How theories can become self-fulfilling. *Academy of Management Review*, 30: 8-24.

Hambrick, D. C. 2007. The field of management’s devotion to theory: Too much of a good thing? *Academy of Management Journal*, 50: 1346-1352.

Helfat, C. E. 2007. Stylized facts, empirical research and theory development in management. *Strategic Organization*, 5: 185-192.

Hillman, A. 2011. Editor’s comments: What is the future of theory? *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 606-608.

Devers, C. E., Misangyi, V. F., & Gamache, D. L. 2014. Editors’ comments: On the future of publishing management theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 39: 245-249.

Suddaby, R. 2014. Editor’s comments: Why theory? *Academy of Management Review*, 39: 407-411.

### The great debate:

Pfeffer, J. 1993. Barriers to the advance of organizational science: Paradigm development as a dependent variable. *Academy of Management Review*, 18: 599-620.

Van Maanen, J. 1995. Styles as theory. *Organization Science*, 6: 133-143.

Optional readings (it’s not often we get juicy debates in our staid journals, so I thought you might enjoy these rejoinders as a bonus):

Pfeffer, J. 1995. Mortality, reproducibility, and the persistence of styles of theory. *Organization Science*, 6: 681-686.

Van Maanen, J. 1995. Fear and loathing in organization studies. *Organization Science*, 6: 687-692.

**Week 3: How do we build compelling theory? Part A: Where might new theories come from?**  
Reviewing assignment continued: read the decision letter and reviews of the article from Week 2 that was submitted to *AMR*. (I'll email them to you after Week 2.)

Articles:

Weick, K. E. 1989. Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 516-531.

Eisenhardt, K. M. 1989. Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 532-550.

Lewis, M. W., & Grimes, A. J. 1999. Metatriangulation: Building theory from multiple paradigms. *Academy of Management Review*, 24: 672-690.

Whetten, D. A., Felin, T., & King, B. G. 2009. The practice of theory borrowing in organizational studies: Current issues and future directions. *Journal of Management*, 35: 537-563.

Zundel, M., & Kokkalis, P. 2010. Theorizing as engaged practice. *Organization Studies*, 31: 1209-1227.

Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. 2011. Generating research questions through problematization. *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 247-271.

Boxenbaum, E., & Rouleau, L. 2011. New knowledge products as bricolage: Metaphors and scripts in organizational theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 272-296.

#### **Week 4: How do we build compelling theory? Part B: Incorporating multiple levels**

Reviewing assignment continued: read the following article, revised and resubmitted to *AMR*, along with the response letter (I'll email them to you after Week 3).

Ashforth, B. E., Schinoff, B. S., & Rogers, K. S. 2014. "I identify with her," "I identify with him": Unpacking the dynamics of personal identification in organizations. Revision submitted to *Academy of Management Review*.

#### Articles:

Dansereau, F., Yammarino, F. J., & Kohles, J. C. 1999. Multiple levels of analysis from a longitudinal perspective: Some implications for theory building. *Academy of Management Review*, 24: 346-357.

Kozlowski, S. W. J., & Klein, K. J. 2000. A multilevel approach to theory and research in organizations: Contextual, temporal, and emergent processes. In K. J. Klein & S. W. J. Kozlowski (Eds.), *Multilevel theory, research, and methods in organizations: Foundations, extensions, and new directions*: 3-90. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hackman, J. R. 2003. Learning more by crossing levels: Evidence from airplanes, hospitals, and orchestras. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 24: 905-922.

Johns, G. 2006. The essential impact of context on organizational behavior. *Academy of Management Review*, 31: 386-408.

#### Examples of multilevel theory building:

Ashforth, B. E., Rogers, K. M., Pratt, M. G., & Pradies, C. 2014. Ambivalence in organizations: A multilevel approach. *Organization Science*, 25: 1453-1478.

Fehr, R., & Gelfand, M. J. 2012. The forgiving organization: A multilevel model of forgiveness at work. *Academy of Management Review*, 37: 664-688.

Mumford, M. D., Antes, A. L., Caughron, J. J., & Friedrich, T. L. 2008. Charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leadership: Multi-level influences on emergence and performance. *Leadership Quarterly*, 19: 144-160.

**Week 5: How do we build compelling theory? Part C: The craft of forging theory.**

Kilduff, M. 2006. Editor's comments: Publishing theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 31: 252-255.

Rindova, V. 2008. Editor's comments: Publishing theory when you are new to the game. *Academy of Management Review*, 33: 300-303.

Fulmer, I. S. 2012. Editor's comments: The craft of writing theory articles - variety and similarity in AMR. *Academy of Management Review*, 37: 327-331.

Ragins, B. R. 2012. Editor's comments: Reflections on the craft of clear writing. *Academy of Management Review*, 37: 493-501.

Delbridge, R., & Fiss, P. C. 2013. Editors' comments: Styles of theorizing and the social organization of knowledge. *Academy of Management Review*, 38: 325-331.

Cornelissen, J. P., & Durand, R. 2014. Moving forward: Developing theoretical contributions in management studies. *Journal of Management Studies*, 51: 995-1022.

Great minds in management:

Smith, K. G., & Hitt, M. A. (Eds.) 2005. *Great minds in management: The process of theory development*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Read the introduction (pp. 1-8) to get a sense of what the editors were trying to surface regarding the art of theory building, and read the epilogue (pp. 572-589) for the editors' takeaways from the authors' diverse perspectives.

Read at least three of the following chapters:

- Hambrick, D. C. Upper echelons theory: Origins, twists and turns, and lessons learned, pp. 109-127.
- Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. Goal setting theory: Theory building by induction, pp. 128-150.
- Oldham, G. R., & Hackman, J. R. How job characteristics theory happened, pp. 151-170.
- Rousseau, D. M. Developing psychological contract theory, pp. 190-214.
- Staw, B. M. The escalation of commitment: Steps toward an organizational theory, pp. 215-238.
- Barney, J. B. Where does inequality come from? The personal and intellectual roots of resource-based theory, pp. 280-303.
- Mintzberg, H. Developing theory about the development of theory, pp. 355-372.
- Weick, K. E. The experience of theorizing: Sensemaking as topic and resource, pp. 394-413.
- Scott, W. R. Institutional theory: Contributing to a theoretical research program, pp. 460-484.