

**2012 PhD Seminar: Theory Building**  
**W. P. Carey School of Business**  
**Department of Management**  
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This seminar is designed to acquaint students with current ideas relevant to theory building in organizational science. We will read and discuss topics such as “what is good theory” and importantly how to build theory. Theory building is more art than science, though, so students should not expect to finish this module with perfect theory in hand. Rather, these ideas will allow you to better understand where theories come from, how to evaluate theory, and hopefully how to build novel theory with your own work.

Each week will consist of reading and discussion. Coming to class ready to offer your opinions and reflections on each and every article is essential. Class contribution will play a role in your grade (15%).

Evaluating theory also takes practice. As such, each student will provide a detailed, developmental peer review of one theory paper (25%).

For the remaining assignments (60%), each student will have a choice:

- Choice one is to identify two theory papers published in top journal in your research area of interest. A good place to look is at the Best Paper awards or Decade Awards. Then provide thoughtful critique of the each paper addressing such issues as: how did the authors develop their arguments? What was most effective? How do you assess the magnitude of their theoretical contribution? What questions are left unanswered? These critiques will account for 30% each of your course grade (total 60%).
- Choice two is only for those students 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. For this assignment, you’ll turn in a detailed outline of a theory paper (or the initial theory ideas for your dissertation). This will include: Formal statement of your research question; No fewer than three ways you seek to advance theory with this effort; 8-10 major citations of the body of literature/theories you seek to contribute to; and Formal propositions and/or model with bullets supporting each of literature to draw on, key arguments. I will not read/grade a full paper. This is to be a disciplined, well structured outline only. This will account for 60% of your grade.

### **Weekly topics and readings**

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

Davis, M. 1971. That’s interesting! *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1: 309-344.

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

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

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

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

- DiMaggio, P. 1995. Comments on "what theory is not." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40: 391-397.
- Bartunek, J., Rynes, S. & Ireland, D. 2006. What makes management research interesting and why does it matter? *Academy of Management Journal*, 49: 9-15.
- Corley, K. & Gioia, D. 2011. Building theory about theory building: What constitutes a theoretical contribution? *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 12-32.

### **Week Two: The theory building process**

- Rindova, V. 2008. Publishing theory when you are new to the game. *Academy of Management Review*, 33: 300-303.
- Smith, K. & Hitt, M. 2005. Introduction: The process of developing management theory, *Great Minds in Management: The Process of Theory Development*, Oxford University Press, pp. 1-8.
- Smith, K. & Hitt, M. 2005. Epilogue: Learning to develop theory from the masters, *Great Minds in Management: The Process of Theory Development*, Oxford University Press, pp. 572-589.

Plus at least three of the following from *Great Minds in Management*:

- Folger, R. The road to fairness and beyond, pp. 55-83.
- Hambrick, D. Upper echelons theory: Origins, twists and turns and lessons learned, pp. 109-127.
- Rousseau, D. Developing psychological contract theory, pp. 190-214.
- Staw, B. The escalation of commitment: Steps toward an organizational theory, pp. 215-237.
- Barney, J. 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.
- Scott, R. Institutional theory: Contributing to a theoretical research program, pp. 460-484.
- Williamson, O. Transaction cost economics: The process of theory development, pp. 485-508.

### **Week Three: Where can new theories come from?**

- Weick, K. 1989. Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 516-531.
- Eisenhardt, K. 1989. Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 532-550.
- Poole, M. & Van de Ven, A. 1989. Using paradox to build management and organization theories. *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 562-578.
- Lewis, M. & Grimes, A. 1999. Metatriangulation: Building theory from multiple paradigms. *Academy of Management Review*, 24: 672-690.
- Whetten, D., Felin, T. & King, B. 2009. The practice of theory borrowing in organizational studies: Current issues and future directions. *Journal of Management*, 35: 537-563.

### **Week Four: Where can new theories come from: Part 2**

- Suddaby, R., Hardy, C. & Huy, Q. 2011. Where are the new theories of organizations? *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 236-246.
- 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.
- Oswick, C., Fleming, P., & Hanlon, G. 2011. From borrowing to blending: Rethinking the processes of organizational theory building. *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 318-337.

Shepherd, D. & Sutcliffe, K. 2011. Inductive top-down theorizing: A source of new theories of organization. *Academy of Management Review*, 36: 361-380.

**Week Five: Should we care about theory?**

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

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

Cannella, A. & Paetzold, R. 1994. Pfeffer's barriers to the advancement of organizational science: A rejoinder. *Academy of Management Review*, 19: 331-341.

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

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

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

Miller, D. 2005. Paradigm prison, or in praise of atheoretic research. *Strategic Organization*, 5: 177-184.

**Additional Reading (Helpful to writing good theory papers):**

Fulmer, I. 2012. The craft of writing theory articles- Variety and similarity in AMR. *Academy of Management Review*, 37: 327-331.

Ragins, B.R. 2012. Reflections on the craft of clear writing. *Academy of Management review*, 37, forthcoming.