

Developing Theory and Theoretical Contributions

Session 1 -- Introduction

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“there is no guarantee that scientists will solve every problem and replace every theory that has been refuted with a successor satisfying the formal conditions. The invention of theories depends on our talents and other fortuitous circumstances such as a satisfactory sex life”(Feyerabend, 1975: 155)

Workshop structure

- Overview of the course – mastering theory
- Practical application

Soapbox!

Exercises in class

Assignment (at end of the course)

Topics for today

1. Getting started: what is theory and what makes a theory contribution?
2. How can we frame and claim a contribution (in the design of our studies and in our writing)?

...next session: focus on the inter-disciplinary field of business and management studies...

1. Theoretical Contribution

- Theoretical contribution
 - Clear audience and important gap
 - Interesting and compelling story
 - Novel falsifiable hypotheses or constructive propositions
- Theoretical development is (often) the key criterion for publication
 - Building new theory – new constructs and relationships
 - Extending existing theory – new antecedents, outcomes and contexts (not simply testing or application)

JMS Reasons for Reject After Review (typical year)

Reason	#	%
Lack of contribution	248	92
Failure to develop theoretical contribution	205	76
Fatal flaws in methods	189	70
Deficiencies in analysis	156	58

Great theory, but no contribution

- Manuscript uses theory
 - Design and arguments consistent with theory
- But does it extend theory
 - Is it interesting, does it have a contribution?

Typical reason for rejection for manuscripts that enter the review process, but are rejected at the end of the day.

- Points to ponder
 - Have you discussed the implications of your research?
 - Are your hypotheses novel?
 - Does your conceptual analysis provoke a reconsideration of conclusions from previous research?
 - Is there an agenda for future research based on your study?
 - Can you clearly identify the contributions?

Great contribution, but no framing

- Manuscript extends theory
 - Nice conceptual and empirical design
- But you don't communicate how
 - Contribution is left to the imagination of the reader (reviewers and editors).
- Points to ponder
 - What is the motivation (theoretical and empirical)
 - Clearly state contributions
 - Not just what you did different (novel sample or novel methods) but implications
 - Don't oversell, but clearly identify 2-4 contributions.
 - Write contributions before you write the body of the manuscript.
 - Think of contributions at the design stage of the research.

Soapbox!

Corley and Gioia (2011)

**What makes a theoretical
contribution?**

2. What is Theory?

- Debates on theory in business and management
 - ASQ 1995: Sutton and Staw
 - What theory is – lack of agreement
 - 1. Is a model theory?
 - 2. Is a typology theory?
 - 3. Does the strength of a theory depend on how interesting it is?
 - 4. Is falsifiability required for the existence of a theory?

What theory is **not** – there is consensus.

1. *References are not theory.* Citing past theoretical work should not replace logical argument.
2. *Data are not theory.* Data describe which empirical patterns were observed, and theory explains why empirical patterns were observed.
3. *List of variables or constructs are not theory.* A predicted relationship must be explained to provide theory.
4. *Diagrams are not theory.* Diagrams can aid in theory development by either providing structure or preventing obfuscation of specious or inconsistent arguments. E.g., diagrams are stage props to the performance.
5. *Hypotheses (or predictions) are not theory.* Hypothesis are concise statements about what is expected to occur (i.e., prediction), not why is it expected to occur (i.e., explanation).

→ **Strong theory characterised by:**

- a. *Simplicity.* It usually stems from a single or small set of research ideas.
- b. *Interconnectedness.* It **explains** connections among phenomena, a logical story of why acts, events, structure and thoughts occur.

Philosophical paradigms matter!

Positivist research focuses on codification of qualitative information and testing towards *predictions* (how do people's experiences and interpretations collectively influence X?) – hence theory as a logic that explains variance relationships (*law-like relationships*) between variables

Interpretive research focuses on *verstehen* (how do people subjectively experience the world?) – hence, theory as an convincing account (*narrative*) of people's sensemaking

Critical theory focuses on a structuralist phenomenology (how do people subjectively experience the world and how can they free themselves from domination?) – hence, theory as a critique (*reflection*) of organizations or management and their impact on people

Post-modernist research aims to deconstruct why certain discourses are present whilst others are absent – hence, theory as a critical reading (*reading*) of people's language use

Methods matter!

Style of theorizing	Typical Methods
Thick description	Ethnographic methods
Pattern description	Case study and process methods
Narration	Content and discourse based analyses
Formalization	Simulation and modeling methods
Experimentation	Archival data analysis
Hypothesizing	Experiments and surveys

3. Framing a Contribution

What's the research gap and why important to fill?

- The gap is that specific piece of missing knowledge
- The question determines the contribution—so asking the right question is a critical first step
→ Answering the question becomes the purpose of the study.

- Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997): framing and positioning theoretical contribution -- **synthesize prior research and show how existing research is wanting in some respects → sets up opportunity for advancing knowledge (contribution)**
- Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997)
 - Synthesize prior research as incomplete (need for further development/specification)
 - Synthesize prior research as inadequate (extant literature does not sufficiently incorporate different perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation)
 - Synthesize prior research as incommensurable (extant literature not only overlooks relevant perspectives but is also simply wrong)

'Incremental' Alternatives

- What part(s) of the picture are missing?
 - E.g., Ignored fundamental concepts or variables
- What part(s) of the picture are incomplete?
 - E.g., Ignored Moderators, mediators or context
- What part(s) of the picture are wrong?
 - E.g., Correcting over-simplifications, constructively complicating

'Radical' or 'Revelatory' alternatives

- How have conditions changed to make prior theory 'obsolete'?
 - E.g., High-velocity environments and strategic decision making
- How does this new lens shed new light on a well-known phenomenon or theory
 - E.g., thinking-for-speaking and entrepreneurship/new venture creation
- How can we explain a new or under-researched phenomenon?
 - E.g., Development of sustainable strategies

Soapbox!
Locke and Golden-
Biddle (1997)
How to frame and
write up a theory
contribution

Basics of Framing

- What is the problem?
- What does current theory tells us that may help us to solve this problem? (What do we know?)
- What does current theory not tell us? (What don't we know?)
- How will the current study attempt to fill this theory gap?

Theoretical Framing Based on Research Goals: Examples

- **Theory Generation**
 - What's the practical problem? **We lack basic understanding of process**
 - What do we know? **We know some variables**
 - What don't we know? **We don't know process**
 - How is current study going to help fill this gap? **New process theory**
- **Theory Elaboration**
 - What's the practical problem? **We lack complete understanding of process**
 - What do we know? **We have some related theories that might explain process**
 - What don't we know? **We don't know which theories best fit**
 - How is current study going to help fill this gap? **Elaborated theory**
- **Theory Testing**
 - What's the practical problem? **We don't understand variance in process**
 - What do we know? **We can predict relationships**
 - What don't we know? **We don't know strength of relationships**
 - How is current study going to help fill this gap? **Variance theory**

Let's try it now

- Determine your research goal
- Answer the 4 questions
- Present to group