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-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-
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?**


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.


Articles:


The great debate:


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):

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:**


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).


*Articles:*


*Examples of multilevel theory building:*


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


Great minds in management:

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:
• 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.