CONTRIBUTING TO THEORY PROGRESS IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH
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Think of theories of management as conversations in the scholarly community. There are numerous conversations out there, and most of us participate in just one or a few of them during our careers. We may have a superficial understanding of a handful of other conversations, but in the case of most conversations, we probably have no clue what they are about; which is fine, we do not need to understand all of them. Each conversation has its more or less unique emphasis: what are the central research questions, what are the key concepts used, what kinds of data are used to investigate the questions? Et cetera. Sometimes we keep repeating the same arguments time and again in our conversations, but most of us want to see the conversation progress: we want to criticize existing arguments, explore new directions, and talk about what we currently do not understand but wish we would.

In this seminar, we examine what these theoretical conversations are, how they are structured, how they develop over time, and how contributions are positioned within them. We approach these topics from the point of view of the social organization of knowledge and the collective, evaluative aspects of research. In examining how contributions are made and evaluated, we also examine how our theories progress through collective efforts where authors build upon one another’s work.

What is the conversation that is of interest to me? How do I participate in it through my research? How do I convince my audience that I have made a contribution? What are the local and the more general rules and principles that are used to evaluate my work? What constitutes effective scientific rhetoric? How do I engage the reviewers in a peer-review process? This seminar is an in-depth examination of these questions. All students taking the seminar are invited on a journey of professional development through critical reflection.

To put it bluntly: your research isn’t about you. No matter how one defines science, it is always a social activity in that one of your central tasks as a researcher is to convince your immediate audience—the dissertation committee, journal editors, reviewers—that you have made a contribution to a scholarly conversation. A scientific contribution is most effective when it compels the audience to rethink their position on an issue, perhaps even change their minds about it. Yes, science is about conducting the actual research activities, but it is fundamentally also about participation in the activities of a collective.

In this seminar, we position ourselves at the intersection of theory development, theory appraisal, philosophy of science, sociology of science, and scientific rhetoric. The seminar is agnostic to epistemology and methodology in that we do not focus on any particular style or type of research, nor do we privilege any specific research design or approach. Our focus is on reasoning, argumentation, and convincing an audience through effective rhetoric. Accordingly, for the purposes of this class, doing good science is defined as “presenting an argument that (1) makes use of reasoning that is sufficiently tractable to be peer-reviewed and (2) convinces its immediate audience that the argument is worth their time and attention.” No -isms or -ologies are needed in this definition.

As prerequisite, students are expected to be familiar with the research literature in their own field of research, and ideally, more broadly as well. Students are also expected to have taken doctoral-level seminars both in qualitative and quantitative methods. Familiarity with the literature on philosophy of science, methodology and epistemology in particular, is also useful but not necessary.

The seminar is divided into five interdependent sessions of three hours each. These are described below. All sessions have a number of required (indicated by a ●) and supplementary readings. The material should be read in the order listed. Each session starts with a thesis, and our task is to critically examine and evaluate that thesis. The thesis is derived from one of the readings for the session. All participants are asked to take a reasoned position on the thesis and encouraged to voice it in the class discussion. If the thesis seems self-evident to you, think about it some more to find an angle that makes the thesis less self-evident. Can you think of any counter-arguments or an antithesis? Some of the theses are opinions, others empirical claims or even prescriptions. But they all are—and are meant to be—provocative.
SESSION 1
Monday, November 19, 9:00 – 12:00, Extranef 110

THESIS 1:
“A theorist is considered great, not because [his or her] theories are true, but because they are interesting.”
Davis (1971: 309)

Every management researcher seeks a contribution, but the very definition of what constitutes one remains elusive. In this introductory session, we examine different ways of thinking about establishing contributions.


SESSION 2
Tuesday, November 20, 9:00 – 12:00, Extranef 118

THESIS 2:
“As a descriptive claim about what scientists, qua scientists, actually do—let alone about what they believe about what they do—Popper’s view strikes us as absurd. But even as a [prescriptive] claim it fares little better.”

Every management scholar knows that the rationality of managers and decision makers is severely limited. Very few scholars, however, consider this basic fact when they examine their own reasoning faculties. In this session, we take a look at scholarly reasoning and argument from the point of view of research practice. We also examine what role, if any, prescriptive and normative methodology has in the process.


SESSION 3
Wednesday, November 21, 14:00 – 17:00, Extranef 118

THESIS 3:
“There are many ways of theorizing, yet we seem to observe comparatively few of these forms in management scholarship.”
Delbridge & Fiss (2013: 325)

Theory development is ultimately a collective endeavor where arguments are critically evaluated for plausibility and credibility. In the previous session, we focused on the individual and the cognitive, in this session, we switch the level of analysis to the collective and examine how knowledge claims are evaluated within scholarly discourses.


SESSION 4
Thursday, November 22, 9:00 – 12:00, Extranef 118

THESIS 4a:
“Most novel ideas are bad ones.”

THESIS 4b:
“[A]ny direction you proceed in has a very high a priori probability of being wrong.”
Simon (1992: 21)
In this session, we shift focus from evaluating an individual argument to the evaluation of entire theoretical conversations, or research programs. What are the main research programs in management research and how are their boundaries defined? Which of the rules and principles applied within research programs are paradigmatic (i.e. local) and which are more general, applied across research programs? In what sense do theories progress? What are some examples of progressive research programs in management?


SESSION 5
Friday, November 22, 9:00 – 12:00, Extranef 110

THESIS 5:
“[A]uthors should remember that editors and reviewers are not superior and that the ultimate decisions about what is right must come from inside themselves.”

Starbuck (2003: 344)

A claim to knowledge is deemed scientific only after it has cleared the hurdle of peer review. In this sense, the peer review is perhaps the most important institution in science. In this session, we look at this institution from different points of view, again focusing on the practice of science (as opposed to abstract, general principles). What are the roles of the authors, referees, and the editors? How do you prepare a manuscript for publication? How do you respond to reviews? How do you write a review yourself?


GRADING

Grades are based on student performance both in the seminars (participation and contributions to the discussions) and a written component. The weights of the two components are 30% class participation and 70% written component.

As part of class participation, students (either individually or in pairs) will be assigned one the optional readings, and their task is to lead a discussion on the key ideas in these readings. In the written component, each student will be asked to examine the seminar topics further in the context of their own dissertation. In a term paper of 15-20 pages (double spaced), students are expected to address questions such as

1. What is the theoretical foundation of my dissertation? What are other possible theoretical foundations (aside from the one I chose) that have been used, or could be used, to approach my research questions?
2. What do I envision as the key contribution(s) of my thesis? To what literature or discourse will my contribution be made? What will I tell my audience that they have not heard before? Whose past contributions will I be challenging and how?
3. How do I make my research and my findings interesting?
4. What are the potential journal outlets for my dissertation work?
5. What are some potential concerns and critique my immediate audience (adviser, editors, reviewers) might raise in reviewing my work? How would I respond to this critique?
6. What do I see as the most important limitations of my research, and how could they be overcome in subsequent research on the topic?