



MGMT 733/SOCY 622: Theory Construction

Professor Olav Sorenson - Fall 2014

Tuesdays 1:00pm to 3:00pm (165 Whitney Ave, Room 1410)

Course overview

Mathematical models, sometimes involving simulation, and formal logic have been gaining ground as tools for theory construction in the social sciences (and have arguably become dominant in economics). The vast majority of papers in psychology, management and sociology nevertheless continue to build their arguments verbally. This course has been designed to train students how to analyze these verbal theories and how to construct coherent theoretical arguments without the use of a formal language. Though the course will draw on examples from psychology, organization theory and sociology, it will not attempt to survey comprehensively any particular substantive topic in those literatures. Students should therefore view the course as a complement to, rather than as a substitute for, subject-based courses.

Assessment

Evaluation for this course consists of five components: class discussion, the analysis of published papers, an intellectual biography, the construction of the front end of a paper, and written critiques of colleagues' work.

Component	Weight
Class participation	10%
Assignments 1-4	30%
Biography	10%
Final paper	40%
Critiques	10%

Class participation: Each week will consist mostly of discussion. We expect that students will have read the assigned readings prior to the lecture and come prepared to discuss them. During the small discussion groups, we will focus on critiquing student assignments. The light reading load presumes that students will read carefully and think about each paper prior to class.

Assignments: Much of the course involves learning-by-doing. Almost every week therefore has an assignment to put the ideas covered and discussed during the lecture

into practice. Because both we and another student will critique the assignments that leading up to your final paper, you should e-mail the assignments on their due dates to both me (olav.sorenson@yale.edu) and to your assigned critic. The assignments are as follows:

1. **SEPTEMBER 9:** For the first assignment, choose ONE of the two research papers. Identify the following elements of the theory: (i) the definitions of constructs critical to the theory, (ii) the underlying assumptions made, and (iii) the explananda (deductions from those assumptions).
2. **SEPTEMBER 16:** For the second assignment, for EACH of the two research papers, you should analyze the theory proposed. In particular, you should identify the domain of the theory, its defined terms, important but undefined terms, assumptions (law-like sentences, instantiations and initial conditions), any intermediate deductions (which one might also call lemmas), scope conditions and explananda in the argument. Note also whether the argument requires unstated assumptions or involves inappropriate deductions.
3. **SEPTEMBER 30:** For the third assignment, for EACH of the two research papers, you should analyze the theory proposed. In particular, you should identify the domain of the theory, its defined terms, important but undefined terms, assumptions (law-like sentences, instantiations and initial conditions), any intermediate deductions (which one might also call lemmas), scope conditions and explananda in the argument. Note also whether the argument requires unstated assumptions or involves inappropriate deductions.
4. **OCTOBER 7:** For the fourth assignment, choose ONE of the two research papers, you should analyze the theory proposed. In particular, you should identify the domain of the theory, its defined terms, important but undefined terms, assumptions (law-like sentences, instantiations and initial conditions), any intermediate deductions (which one might also call lemmas), scope conditions and explananda in the argument. Note also whether the argument requires unstated assumptions or involves inappropriate deductions.
5. **OCTOBER 15:** The fifth assignment begins a sequence that will culminate in the final paper for the course. As such, I will not grade assignments 5, 6, 7 and 9 individually but only as a component of the final paper, once you have had a chance to refine your work. For the first of these assignments, you should suggest a problem worthy of study and justify it based on a review of the most relevant literature. Aim for four to eight paragraphs in total.
6. **OCTOBER 28:** For the sixth assignment, you should outline an explanatory argument that could solve the problem outlined in the previous assignment.

7. NOVEMBER 4: For the seventh assignment, you should define the key terms in your argument, suggest empirical operationalizations of those concepts and deduce a set of empirical implications from your argument.
8. NOVEMBER 18 (BIOGRAPHY): For the eighth assignment, you should write an intellectual biography for someone whose career you might wish to emulate. Who did they (probably) study with and interact with? What perspectives seemed influential to their early thinking? How did their research evolve? Do you perceive an underlying research program?
9. DECEMBER 2: The final assignment involves outlining the design of a study that could test these observable implications. What kind of study do you propose? What would the unit of analysis be? What variables would you need to collect? Will the results be generalizable?

Final paper: Assignments 5, 6, 7 and 9 should provide all of the pieces necessary to assemble the “front end” of a research paper. The final assignment for the class is therefore to put these pieces together in prose. This paper could serve either as the basis for a stand-alone research paper or as the core of a thesis proposal. In addition to the written document, you will also need to present the paper in a typical large-conference format (roughly 12 minutes to situate and explain the idea and the proposed empirical test).

Critiques: In general, a discussant, friendly reader or reviewer should appreciate, question, critique and suggest improvements to the assignment or paper being considered. Appreciation means highlighting the strengths of the analysis and/or idea. Questioning involves identifying areas where the work requires clarification. Criticism focuses on its weaknesses, perhaps assumptions that seem implausible or gaps in the chain of logic proposed. Good critics, however, go beyond simply identifying problems with a paper; they also propose potential solutions to those problems.

I will assign each of you as a critic to one of the other students (authors) in the class. For each assignment in theory construction (i.e. 5, 6, 7 and 9), when you receive the author’s assignment, you should read it and prepare a written critique of the assignment in advance of the discussion group meeting. Please e-mail your critiques to both of us and to the author and bring sufficient hard copies of your critique to the discussion group for all involved.

Instructors

Feel free to contact me by e-mail:
olav.sorenson@yale.edu

Schedule

1. SEPTEMBER 2: WHAT IS THEORY (IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES)?

- **Required:** Hempel, Carl, and Paul Oppenheim (1948). “Studies in the logic of explanation.” *Philosophy of Science*, 15: 135-175
- **Required:** Lakatos, Imre (1987). “Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes.” Pp. 170-196 in Janet A. Kourany (Ed.), *SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company
- *Recommended:* Lieberson, Stanley, and Freda B. Lynn (2002). “Barking up the wrong branch: Scientific alternatives to the current model of sociological science.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28: 1-19
- *Recommended:* Sutton, Robert I., and Barry M. Staw (1995). “What theory is not.” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40: 371-384

2. SEPTEMBER 9: COMPONENTS OF (FORMAL) THEORY

ASSIGNMENT 1 DUE

- **Required:** March, James G. (1991). “Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning.” *Organization Science*, 2: 71-87
- **Required:** Gould, Roger V. (2002). “The origins of status hierarchies: A formal theory and empirical evidence.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 107: 1143-1178
- **Required:** Adner, Ron, László Pólos, Michael D. Ryall, and Olav Sorenson (2009). “The case for formal theory.” *Academy of Management Review*, 34: 201-208

3. SEPTEMBER 16: DECONSTRUCTING THEORIES I

ASSIGNMENT 2 DUE

- **Required:** Zuckerman, Ezra W. (1999). “The categorial imperative: Securities analysts and the illegitimacy discount.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 104: 1398-1438
- **Required:** Kovacs, Balazs, and Amanda Sharkey (2014). “The paradox of publicity: How status can negatively impact perceived quality.” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 59: 1-33

4. SEPTEMBER 23: WHEN IS THEORY INTERESTING?

- **Required:** Hedström, Peter, and Richard Swedberg (1998). “Social mechanisms: An introductory essay.” Pp. 1-31 in Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg (Eds.), *SOCIAL MECHANISMS: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL THEORY* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- **Required:** Lave, Charles A., and James G. March (1993). “The evaluation of speculation.” (Chapter 3) in *AN INTRODUCTION TO MODELS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America
- **Required:** Van Mannen, John (1995). “Style as theory.” *Organization Science*, 6: 133-143
- *Recommended:* Barley, Stephan R. (2006). “When I write my masterpiece: Thoughts on what makes a paper interesting.” *Academy of Management Journal*, 49: 16-20

5. SEPTEMBER 30: DECONSTRUCTING THEORIES II

ASSIGNMENT 3 DUE

- **Required:** Willer, Robb, Francis J. Flynn and Sonya Zak (2012). “Structure, identity, and solidarity: A comparative field study of generalized and direct exchange.” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 57: 119-155
- **Required:** Trapido, Denis (2013). “Counterbalances to economic homophily: Microlevel mechanisms in a historical setting.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 119: 444-485

6. OCTOBER 7: DECONSTRUCTING THEORIES III

ASSIGNMENT 4 DUE

- **Required:** Kwon, Seok-Woo, Colleen Heflin, and Martin Ruef (2013). “Community social capital and entrepreneurship.” *American Sociological Review*, 78: 980-1008
- **Required:** Cattani, Gino, Simone Ferriani, and Paul Allison (2014). “Insiders, outsiders and the struggle for consecration in cultural fields: A core-periphery perspective.” *American Sociological Review*, 78: 417-447

7. OCTOBER 14: CONSTRUCTING EXPLANATORY ARGUMENTS

ASSIGNMENT 5 DUE

- **Required:** Blalock, Hubert M., Jr. (1961). "Theory, measurement, and replication in the social sciences." *American Journal of Sociology*, 66: 342-347
- **Required:** Carroll, Glenn R. (1985). "Concentration and specialization: Dynamics of niche width in populations of organizations." *American Journal of Sociology*, 90: 1262-1283
- **Required:** Carroll, Glenn R., and Anand Swaminathan (2000). "Why the microbrewery movement? Organizational dynamics of resource partitioning in the U.S. brewing industry." *American Journal of Sociology*, 106: 715-762
- **Required:** Reis, Samira, Giacomo Negro, Olav Sorenson, Fabrizio Perretti and Alessandro Lomi (2013). "Resource partitioning revisited: Evidence from Italian television broadcasting." *Industrial and Corporate Change*, forthcoming

8. OCTOBER 21: NO MEETING (FALL BREAK)

9. OCTOBER 28: CONNECTING THEORY TO EVIDENCE

ASSIGNMENT 6 DUE

- **Required:** Cohen, Bernard P. (1989). "Tying concepts to observations." (Chapter 8) in *DEVELOPING SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE: THEORY AND METHOD*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall
- **Required:** Meehl, Paul E. (1990). "Why summaries of research on psychological theories are often uninterpretable." *Psychological Reports*, 66: 195-244
- **Required:** Goldthorpe, John H. (2001). "Causation, statistics, and sociology." *European Sociological Review*, 17: 1-20

10. NOVEMBER 4: WRITING A PAPER

ASSIGNMENT 7 DUE

- **Required:** Rao, Hayagreeva, Philippe Monin and Rodophe Durand (2003). “Institutional change in toque ville: Nouvelle cuisine as an identity movement in French gastronomy.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 108: 795-843
- **Required:** Stuart, Toby E., and Waverly W. Ding (2006). “When do scientists become entrepreneurs? The social structural antecedents of commercial activity in the academic life sciences.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 112: 97-144
- **Review:** Kovacs, Balazs, and Amanda Sharkey (2014). “The paradox of publicity: How status can negatively impact perceived quality.” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 59: 1-33
- **Reference:** Zinnser, William Knowlton (2006). *ON WRITING WELL*. New York: Harper

11. NOVEMBER 11: PRESENTING RESEARCH

- **Required:** Review slide decks (TBD).
- **Reference:** Heath, Chip, and Dan Heath (2007). *MADE TO STICK: WHY SOME IDEAS SURVIVE AND OTHER DIE OUT*. New York: Random House

12. NOVEMBER 18: THEORETICAL PROGRAMS AND THEORETICAL STRATEGIES

ASSIGNMENT 8 DUE

- **Required:** Wagner, David G., and Joseph Berger (1985). “Do sociological theories grow?.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 90: 697-728
- **Required:** Walker, Henry A., and Bernard P. Cohen (1985). “Scope statements: Imperatives for evaluating theory.” *American Sociological Review*, 50: 288-301
- **Required:** Pólos, László, and Michael T. Hannan (2002). “Reasoning with partial knowledge.” *Sociological Methodology*, 32: 133-181
- **Reference:** Stinchcombe, Arther L. (1968). *CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL THEORIES*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

13. NOVEMBER 25: NO MEETING (THANKSGIVING)

14. DECEMBER 2: PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

ASSIGNMENT 9 DUE

- **Required:** Kifner, John. (September 8, 2001). “Scholar sets off gastro-nomic false alarm” *New York Times*
- **Required:** Cottingham, Katie. (March 30, 2001 “The ethics of authorship: Feature overview—How should authorship be decided?” *Science*
- **Required:** Enserink, Martin (June 25, 2012). “Rotterdam marketing psy-chologist resigns after university investigates his data.” *ScienceInsider*
- **Required:** Rekdal, Ole Bjørn (2014). “Academic urban legends.” *Social Studies of Science*, 44: 638-654
- *Recommended:* Necker, Sarah (forthcoming). “Scientific misbehavior in eco-nomics” *Research Policy*

15. DECEMBER 9: MINI-CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORIES

FINAL PAPER DUE