An Excerpt From

Theory Building in Applied Disciplines

by Richard A. Swanson & Thomas J. Chermack
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THEORY BUILDING IN APPLIED DISCIPLINES

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Dedicated to our Spouses

Barbara L. Swanson
"You and me babe!"

Danielle Michael
"Whatcha doin' later?"

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PREFACE

Theory Building in Applied Disciplines has no rival book. It is intended to fill a void. This book concisely presents a one-of-a-kind, five-phase theory-building process that is understandable to a wide audience. Let's clarify two key terms:

- A *theory* describes a specific realm of knowledge and explains how it works.
- *Applied disciplines* are realms of study and practice that are fully understood through their use in the functioning world. Management, organization development, public administration, marketing, highway engineering, leadership, and nursing are just a few of the many applied disciplines.

Applied disciplines address the grist of life—impacting us all on a daily basis. Most applied disciplines are stuck because they

- have not integrated scholarly descriptions and confirmation in practice,
- overinterpret partial theories that lack wholeness,
- celebrate rock star practitioners who are hollow role models, and
- tolerate opinion over inquiry.

Applied disciplines must meet the standards of both scholarship and practice. Applied disciplines are simply not advancing and maturing at a reasonable and acceptable rate given the lack of complete and

sound theory. Simultaneously, the presence of bad theories actually destroys good practices (Ghosal, 2005). Progress is much too slow.

The purpose of this book is to present a complete and detailed method for building sound theory in applied disciplines. Unfortunately, most theory-building methods are incomplete, inappropriate, or overwhelming:

Incomplete: Many authors discuss theory as only a hypothesis or something limited to conceptualizing. The full process of theory building and the development phases beyond theory conceptualization are simply ignored.

Inappropriate: Many authors present theory limited by an "ideology" framework such as quantitative, qualitative, or feminist perspectives. The nature of applied disciplines almost always precludes ideology biases. Yet, many individuals wanting to create rival theories choose a limited ideological approach to secure predetermined outcomes. The result is that they miss the opportunity to create sound theory.

Overwhelming: Many authors present exhaustive, tedious methods for developing theory within a specific discipline. These works almost always have scholars talking to a very limited group of other scholars within their discipline with little, if any, generalizability to other disciplines or practice.

This book—*Theory Building in Applied Disciplines*—is none of the above. Simply stated, there is no rival book. This book directly addresses what theory is, explores its full dimensions, and discusses examples. It presents a theory-building toolbox as a part of each chapter. The primary audiences for this book are scholars and practitioners in applied disciplines wanting to advance the theory of their field, graduate students enrolled in research and theory courses in applied disciplines, and those wanting a practical theory-building reference book.

We believe that theory building in applied disciplines is critically important because (1) so many people and organizations are affected, positively or negatively, and (2) *you,* the reader, can contribute to theory-building efforts in an applied realm of importance to you.

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We welcome your comments and contributions for future editions of this book.

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Note: See *textbookresources.com* for support materials for *Theory Building in Applied Disciplines*.

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PART ONE

Foundations of Theory Building

MOST APPLIED DISCIPLINES are stuck because they have not connected sound theory and practice. They need to be advanced. Keep the following points in mind when thinking about theory in applied disciplines:

- *Theory building* defines a specific realm of knowledge and explains how it works.
- *Applied disciplines* are realms of study and practice that are fully understood through their use in the functioning world—such as management, organization development, public administration, marketing, highway engineering, leadership, and nursing.

Practitioners typically throw anything and everything at practical problems, while scholars often slice problems into such small segments that practical understanding is severely limited. Another almost fruitless approach is to try to emulate successful practitioners (e.g., Steve Jobs and Jack Welch) in hopes of replicating their performance. These tactics do not yield useful outcomes, and applied disciplines do not grow or advance as a result.

Comprehensive and rigorous theory building demands that problems and realms of practice are examined from a comprehensive perspective. In other words, applied disciplines severely falter when either concepts or practice dominates. A framework is needed to bring balance to theory and practice in applied disciplines. The General Method of Theory Building in Applied Disciplines can integrate theory and practice when working in complex situations. Theory building can start with new ideas (on the theory side) or in practice (on the applied side). The unique contribution of the General Method of Theory Building in Applied Disciplines is precisely the ability to accommodate a variety of starting points for theory development work. Embracing and integrating the dynamic interplay between developing ideas and using them is the key to growing and advancing applied disciplines.

Part One of this book lays out the need for theory building, as well as definitions and the background required to engage in theory-building content. The three chapters to Part One provide a working knowledge of theory building in applied disciplines.

Chapter 1, "To Hell with Gravity," sets the stage for theory building. We describe the current state of theory building and make the case for developing better theorizing tools. The need for theory building is established, noting that we can do it better than the current efforts.

Chapter 2, "Foundations and Definitions of Theory Building," summarizes the major points in theory-building content, including definitions, philosophical orientations, research paradigms, types of theories, and other content necessary as background material.

This chapter establishes key ideas that are elaborated upon throughout the book.

Chapter 3, "General Method of Theory Building in Applied Disciplines" (contributed by Susan A. Lynham), presents a framework that is the basis for laying out the details of theory building. This chapter highlights the five major phases of theory building: Conceptualize, Operationalize, Confirm, Apply, and Refine.

The three chapters of Part One work together to provide the rationale, need, and concepts for engaging in the important work of theory building. A common language is developed for those interested in taking on theory-building projects as well as the five-phase framework for organizing the remaining chapters.

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To Hell with Gravity

A BUMPER STICKER reads, "To Hell with Gravity." While this message provokes a broad smile for a moment, it also quickly surfaces all the fears surrounding the anti-intellectuals and anti-science folks in our society. Hoards of individuals who are anti-theory, anti-science, and anti-intellectual are very comfortable with their rickety armchair theories and ideologies.

Searching for truth and sound theory is no easy task. Anti-intellectual positions that start with the answer—versus the question—avoid all that messy reading, thinking, and testing stuff. Blurting out uninformed opinions is easy—and almost always wrong. It is quite ironic that today we have more good information available to us than in any point in history and at the same time more misinformation. Outliers in the theory world were once less visible.

The Internet allows outliers a larger venue. It seems that if a piece of misinformation gets "tweeted" enough, it soon is perceived as fact by many people—a phenomenon particularly evident in recent political campaigns in the United States. The lament is that the real loser from cynical manipulations of fact and fantasy is truth (Kruse, 2012; Thomas, 1997).

The challenge put forth in this book is that theories in applied disciplines are extremely important and need to be advanced. Remember: When thinking about theory in applied disciplines, keep these definitions in mind:

- A *theory* describes a specific realm of knowledge and explains how it works.
- *Applied disciplines* are realms of study and practice that are fully understood through their use in the functioning world. Management, organization development, public administration, marketing, highway engineering, leadership, and nursing are just a few of the many applied disciplines.

Sound theory within applied disciplines has great utility. A rich understanding of a specific realm is implied. Because applied discipline theories require theories in use, their utility makes all the difference. It is easy to see that such realms as nursing, public administration, management, physical therapy, highway engineering, organizational communication, and school psychology are applied disciplines having both a body of knowledge and an application setting.

APPLIED DISCIPLINES ARE STUCK

While applied disciplines address the grist of life, dominate the number of academic majors in universities, and impact us all on a daily basis, most applied disciplines are stuck in terms of their theoretical foundation. This is because they

- have not integrated scholarly descriptions and confirmation in practice,
- overinterpret partial theories,
- celebrate rock star practitioners who are hollow role models, and
- tolerate opinion over inquiry.

Most attempts at theory building have fallen short. Existing work on theories in applied disciplines generally address only parts of what

is required for complete theory building. The resulting explanations end up being incomplete, noncomprehensive, and unfulfilling to those trying to solve problems. Indeed, the status of theory-building methods in applied disciplines hinders growth and development due to their methodological incompleteness.

APPLIED DISCIPLINE THEORY REALLY MATTERS

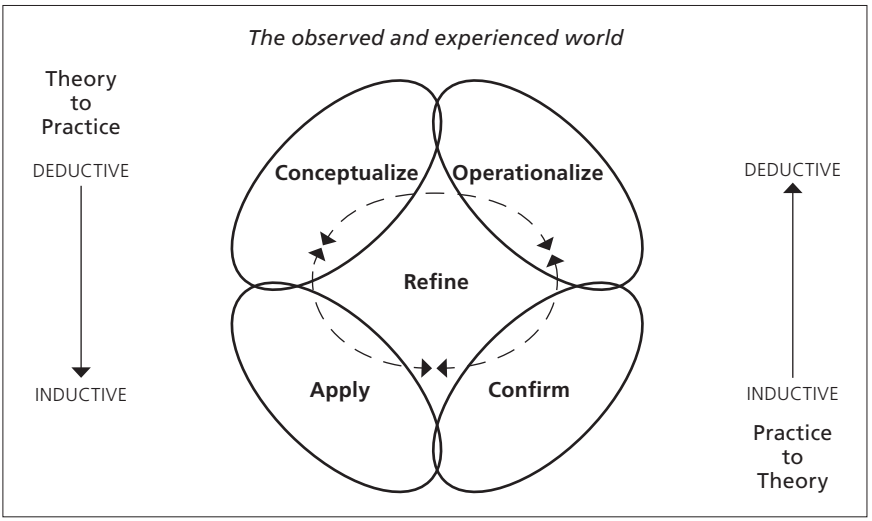
The impact of theories-in-use dominates our lives day in and day out. The problem is that practices can just as easily be rooted in inadequate and often destructive logic, instead of confirmed effective alternatives. Theory in the hard sciences can be characterized as "bench-top" theory. If it works in the laboratory or on paper—and the empirical test results support a theoretical explanation—the odds of wide acceptance and adoption are very high.

The messy world of applied disciplines—the varied application settings, cultures, resources pool, and individuals—is much more challenging than bench-top laboratories that can be controlled. Even so, some "pure" disciplines like philosophy and mathematics take the plunge into application. University degree programs that expand from philosophy to applied philosophy, or from mathematics to applied mathematics, bring on the challenges facing other applied disciplines. Their questions and explanations get rooted in and modified by the real world. They cannot be solved on "bench-tops."

THEORY BUILDING TO THE RESCUE

What a contrast we have between stereotypical practitioners and scholars. When facing important professional problems, practitioners regularly respond by force-fitting the latest gimmick, or by throwing everything and anything at the problem. In contrast, scholars regularly slice problems into small segments to study and explain them, without directly addressing the practical problem itself. Both approaches miss the target of sound theory *and* practice.

FIGURE 1.1 General Method of Theory Building In Applied Disciplines



Source: Adapted from Lynham (2002).

The General Method of Theory Building in Applied Disciplines presented in this book and portrayed in Figure 1.1 advances both theory and practice. This method for developing sound theory in applied disciplines is meant to fill voids. When it is followed, both scholars and practitioners have input into this successful approach. Fusing information from both perspectives can yield a complete and accurate understanding of the realm being investigated. This is accomplished by completing all five of the nonlinear phases: Conceptualize, Operationalize, Confirm, Apply, and Refine.

Applied disciplines must meet the standards of both scholarship and practice. This book describes a complete, detailed method for developing sound theory in applied disciplines. In contrast, most theory development methods are incomplete, inappropriate, or totally overwhelming.

Incomplete. Theory is often considered as only a hypothesis or is limited to conceptualization. The full process of theory development and phases beyond theory conceptualization are simply ignored, for

numerous reasons: (1) the practical rush to find answers, (2) the desire to gain recognition and possible wealth, and (3) a lack of knowledge about theory standards and methodology. The first and last are understandable. The premature and unworthy desire to gain recognition and wealth is despicable and all too present.

Inappropriate. Many authors present theory limited by an "ideology" framework such as empirical, critical science, or feminist perspectives. The nature of applied disciplines almost always precludes ideology biases. Yet, many individuals wanting to create rival theories choose a limited ideological approach to secure predetermined outcomes and thus miss the opportunity to create sound theory. Holding back on ideological biases is difficult. It is not always necessary as long as the theory builder acknowledges the bias and makes an adequate case for it.

Overwhelming. Several authors present exhaustive and tedious methodologies for developing theory within a specific discipline. These works are almost always intended for a very limited group of scholars within a specific discipline with little, if any, generalizability to other disciplines or practice.

We have some excellent examples of detailed theory-building methodology. Two such examples include Bernard Cohen's *Developing Sociological Knowledge: Theory and Method* (1989) and Robert Dubin's *Theory Building: A Practical Guide to the Construction and Testing of Theoretical Models* (1978). As good as they are, these books are both overwhelming to the neophyte and difficult for the expert. Our attempt in this book has been to displace these criticisms.

CHALLENGES FACING THE THEORY-BUILDING PROCESS

Clearly, the demands of practice can be a threat to sound theory. The motto of "ready, fire, aim" captures the pressure to respond to the immediacy of life situations. Real-world demands to respond quickly can provoke new answers to problems and at times demand whole

new strategies (Torraco, 2004). New strategies that do not work in practice can be rejected. New strategies that do work in practice can ultimately be rejected, explained, adopted, or improved at a later time.

Theory building almost always extends over a period of time. It can start from practice *or* from scholarship. Most would agree that rigorous theory building in any realm is hard work. The crush of ongoing practice in applied disciplines adds to the difficulty. The immediate demand to respond to problems raises the hopes of seemingly attractive and often atheoretical options. In addition, the changing conditions of practice are unsettling to ongoing theory-building commitments.

The work of theory building in applied disciplines is very important because of the positive impact that sound theory can make on people and systems. Sound theory has the potential to dislodge false theories that can actually harm people and systems. False theories abound within society and organizations and can easily persist when they are not challenged. Unfortunately, impatient executives, politicians, news reporters, publishers, and businesses are regular purveyors of false theories in applied disciplines.

First Things First

Getting things out of order and jumping to conclusions with inadequate knowledge, expertise, analysis, and synthesis have always been a part of our human existence. Furthermore, advanced communication technology makes it possible to spread false information and theories much faster and to more people than at any other time in history. In addition, slick communication tools can be used in sharing this information, for high-quality presentation of false information. A warning for all of us is to "Never express yourself more clearly than you are able to think" (Merchey, 2004, p. 63).

At the beginning of the reengineering movement in the 1990s, reengineering developers Hammer and Champy (1993) presented themselves as confident management consultants who were backed by the *Harvard Business Review,* Harvard Business Press, and *Wall Street Journal*. Reengineering, based on simple systems theory, gave

the promise of large economic gains and proved to be disastrous for the majority of businesses adopting the reengineering methodology. Hammer and Champy totally ignored the fact that business organizations are human-made systems and the psychological theory required to help understand them. Their mantra of "carry the wounded" (those who helped with the reengineering effort) and "leave the dead behind" (those who rebuffed the change and who were to be fired) was a cruel reminder of their flawed theory. Reengineering projects caused confusion, delays, resentment, and screw-ups that led to crises. Jobs were eliminated without much subtlety or consideration. (As an aside, a critique of Hammer and Champy's *Reengineering the Corporation* was sent to the *Wall Street Journal* following their early laudatory support of reengineering. The critique noted reengineering's simplistic and inadequate theoretical basis and predicted failure. It was never published.)

Only after years of personal lucrative consulting and client organization failures did Hammer and Champy come to realize the inadequacies of their failed theory in practice. In a retrospective, Kleiner (2000) reports that a series of studies in the early 1990s established that 70 percent or more of reengineering initiatives had actually made things worse. Years later, Hammer himself admitted errors in an interview in the *Wall Street Journal,* and Champy apologized in an article in *Across the Board*. Sadly, there was no need to wait for the reengineering bloodletting to figure out this theoretical and practical deficiency.

Beyond the sorrowful presence of atheoretical actions in the realm of practice, it is important to acknowledge that *bad theories* are known to destroy *good practices* (Ghosal, 2005, p. 75).

Taking a Closer Look

Rummler and Brache, well-educated and experienced consultant-practitioners, continued to refine their organization performance improvement thinking and methodology over several decades. Their classic books, *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space in Organizations* (Rummler & Brache, 1995, 2012) and *How*

Organizations Work: Taking a Holistic Approach to Enterprise Health (Brache, 2002), reflect their best thinking. Even so, neither Rummler nor Brache explicitly explained the theoretical foundation of their work. Theory scholars, impressed with their methodology and successful application in practice, spent time unearthing and reporting on the underlying theory of their performance improvement methodology (Torraco, 1999; Wimbiscus, 1995).

What impressed scholars most was the completeness of the Rummler and Brache view of the organization and its elements, the explicit connections of the parts based on their experience, and the case study examples they reported that describe the paths they took in their improvement efforts. No shortcuts and no inflammatory promises. When advocates promise quick solutions and amazing results, it is best to take a closer look.

CONCLUSION

The challenge for gaining high integrity and effectiveness in applied disciplines is to discover what works and how it works. As part of this challenge, it is also critical to purposefully reject the charlatans that feed off problems and issues facing practitioners of applied disciplines. Building sound theory in applied disciplines is important.

This book directly addresses the problems of the lack of clarity as to what theory is and its full dimensions. The following chapters describe the General Method of Theory Building in Applied Disciplines, detailing its five component phases. Throughout the book, we have included specific useful advice and examples that illustrate solutions to these real problems. We declared earlier that *Theory Building in Applied Disciplines* has no rival theory development methods book. We hope you both agree and have the personal motivation to continue learning about theory building as an important strategy for advancing your applied discipline.