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Ph.D. Course code 41064

CREATIVITY IN THEORY BUILDING

Creating Novel and Impactful Theories in Management Research

Period: a.y. 2026/27 – I sem.

Class times:

Monday: 12.00-13.30/14.45-16.15
Wednesday: 12.00-13.30/14.45-16.15

Instructor:

Pier Vittorio Mannucci
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Course Description

Creating and testing new, bold theories is at the heart of scholarship in general, and management scholarship in particular. Top journals in the field put a strong emphasis on the fact that they wish to publish articles that have novel and insightful theoretical contributions and that open new paths for management research and practice. Writing these articles, however, is no easy deed: developing new theories requires not only rigorous scientific thinking, but also creativity – the ability to generate novel and impactful ideas.

This course blends research on creativity with theoretical and methodological approaches to theory development with the objective to equip students with the tools needed to generate contributions that have a significant "value-added" to the field's understanding of an issue or topic – i.e., to develop theory that is rich, novel, testable and impactful.

Course Structure

We will meet twice a week for six weeks (four 90-minutes sessions per week). Each session will be devoted to a different topic on how to build good theories – theories that are novel, but also solid, grounded and well-developed. We will start with an introduction to the basics of theory building. We will then focus on different approaches to theory building, and will close with some best practices from creativity research on how to create impactful theories in science.

At the end of this course, you will be required to write a final paper which develops new and solid theory, applying the best practices we have seen in class.

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Schedule and List of Topics

Session 1 – What is Good Theory Building?

- What good theory is (and is not)
- Theorizing about theories

Session 2 – The Process of Good Theory Building

- Approaches to theory building
- Imagination, problematization, pruning

Session 3 – Fostering the Generation of Good Theories

- Skills needed for creative idea generation
- Managing the whole journey of a new idea/theory
- How audiences react to creative ideas/theories

Session 4 – Inductive Theory Building

- Best practices of inductive theory
- Transparency
- Trustworthiness

Session 5 – Building Theory from Cases

- Case selection
- Multiple cases vs. historical cases
- Differences and combination with grounded theory

Session 6 – Abductive Theory Building

- Abduction vs. Induction vs. Deduction
- Inference at the best explanation

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Assessment Methods

Students will be evaluated as follows:

Class participation:	30%
Assignments:	20%
Final paper:	50%

1. Participation

Class participation is vital to making the class interesting and engaging you in the issues that we will debate. Therefore, you are also expected to contribute to class discussion every session. You will be evaluated on the quality (not just quantity) of your contributions and insights. Quality comments should:

- offer a unique and relevant perspective,
- contribute to moving the analysis forward,
- build on the comments of others,
- identify links with past course discussions, other course work, or relevant real-world phenomena,
- go beyond the "I feel" comment to include some evidence or logic, and
- not go off on tangents

2. Readings

Students are expected to complete all of the required readings before each session. Sessions include four types of readings:

1) **Main readings**: these are mandatory readings we will discuss in class. Your "Reflection questions" (see point 3 below) should be mainly based on these readings. **Please read these articles in depth**. Please go through the readings in the order given as the readings are meant to build up upon each other.
2) **Exemplary papers**: these are mandatory readings aimed at illustrating a specific theory-building approach/methodology. We will discuss these readings in class, but **less in-depth than the main readings**, seeking to understand how they apply the best practices we will see in the Main readings. Your "Reflection questions" can be based on these readings as well, but that should not be the norm.

3) **Extra readings:** these are non-mandatory readings aimed at giving you further food for thought and information on the different approaches to theory building.
4) **Practical readings**: these are non-mandatory readings that provide practical tips for implementing the best practices we will see during the class. They will be greatly useful to you not only for this class, but for your academic career more broadly.

Questions to keep in mind as you go through the assigned readings include:

- What are the advantages of this approach to theory building?
- What are the disadvantages?
- What are the philosophical paradigms underlying these approaches?
- Could these approaches be combined? How?

3. Reflection questions

Each student is required to write about **two reflection questions** before each session. These questions are due two hours before the start of the class. These questions could be "how to" questions (e.g., how to apply different approaches to theorizing to a specific research question), review questions (e.g., critiques to the papers), state-of-the-art question (e.g., understanding where the field is heading) or problematization questions (i.e., attempts to reconcile apparent contradiction between papers, both within the week's assignment and across the course). You should substantiate each of your questions with a couple of sentences illustrating your reasoning.

4. Final paper

The final assignment in the class is a paper [approximately 7 pages (double-spaced, in 12-font) plus references] to be turned in at the end of the class. The paper should develop new and testable theory, applying the best practices we have seen in class. The paper should include an Introduction (about 3 pages) and a Literature Review/Theory section (about 3/4 pages). The paper should be the seed of either a theory-testing (thus including hypotheses) or theory-building (either inductive or abductive) full paper. You are welcome to build on theoretical frameworks from any domain in developing your theory.

Your paper should resemble a journal article as much as possible, and you should indicate at least 2 academic journals that could be a target.

Final assignments are due 10 days after the final session at 23.59pm.

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Faculty Bio

Pier Vittorio is an Associate Professor in the Department of Management and Technology. His research focuses on how creativity can be fostered in individuals and settings that are stereotypically depicted as less creative. His specific area of expertise centers on how individuals can be consistently creative over time, and on the effects of social networks, technology and culture on individual and team creativity. He holds a BA and MSc from Bocconi University and a PhD from HEC Paris. Prior to joining Bocconi as an Assistant Professor in 2022, he was Assistant Professor in the Department of Organizational Behavior at London Business School.

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Readings

Session 1 – What is Good Theory Building?

Main readings

Sutton, R. I., & Staw, B. M. (1995). What theory is not. Administrative Science Quarterly, 40(3), 371-384.

Bartunek, J. M., Rynes, S. L., & Ireland, R. D. (2006). What makes management research interesting, and why does it matter?. Academy of Management Journal, 49(1), 9-15.

Corley, K. G., & Gioia, D. A. (2011). Building theory about theory building: what constitutes a theoretical contribution?. Academy of Management Review, 36(1), 12-32.

Extra readings

DiMaggio, P. J. (1995). Comments on" What theory is not". Administrative Science Quarterly, 40(3), 391-397.

Weick, K. E. (1995). What theory is not, theorizing is. Administrative Science Quarterly, 40(3), 385-390.

Session 2 – The Process of Good Theory Building

Main readings

Weick, K. E. (2007). The generative properties of richness. Academy of Management Journal, 50(1), 14-19.

Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2011). Generating research questions through problematization. Academy of Management Review, 36(2), 247-271.

Leavitt, K., Mitchell, T. R., & Peterson, J. (2010). Theory pruning: Strategies to reduce our dense theoretical landscape. Organizational Research Methods, 13(4), 644-667.

Cronin, M. A., Stouten, J., & van Knippenberg, D. (2022). Why theory on “how theory fits together” benefits management scholarship. Academy of Management Review, 47(2), 333-337.

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Extra readings

Weick, K. E. (1989). Theory construction as disciplined imagination. Academy of Management Review, 14(4), 516-531.

Practical readings

Colquitt, J. A., & George, G. (2011). Publishing in AMJ—part 1: topic choice. Academy of Management Journal, 54(3), 432-435.

Grant, A. M., & Pollock, T. G. (2011). Publishing in AMJ—Part 3: Setting the hook. Academy of management journal, 54(5), 873-879.

Session 3 – Fostering the Generation of Good Theories

Main readings

Teodoridis, F., Bikard, M., & Vakili, K. (2019). Creativity at the knowledge frontier: The impact of specialization in fast-and slow-paced domains. Administrative Science Quarterly, 64(4), 894-927.

Campbell, D. T. (1960). Blind variation and selective retentions in creative thought as in other knowledge processes. Psychological Review, 67(6), 380-400.

Perry-Smith, J. E., & Mannucci, P. V. (2017). From creativity to innovation: The social network drivers of the four phases of the idea journey. Academy of Management Review, 42(1), 53-79.

Uzzi, B., Mukherjee, S., Stringer, M., & Jones, B. (2013). Atypical combinations and scientific impact. Science, 342(6157), 468-472.

Extra readings

Amabile, T. M., & Pratt, M. G. (2016). The dynamic componential model of creativity and innovation in organizations: Making progress, making meaning. Research in Organizational Behavior, 36, 157-183.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). Society, culture, and person: A systems view of creativity. In The systems model of creativity (pp. 47-61). Springer, Dordrecht.

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Session 4 – Inductive Theory Building

Main readings

Pratt, M. G. (2025). On the evolution of qualitative methods in organizational research. Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 12(1), 109-131.

Pratt Michael, G., Sarah, K., & Richard, W. (2020). The tumult over transparency: Decoupling transparency from replication in establishing trustworthy qualitative research. Administrative Science Quarterly, 65, 1-19.

Pratt, M. G., Sonenshein, S., & Feldman, M. S. (2022). Moving beyond templates: A bricolage approach to conducting trustworthy qualitative research. Organizational Research Methods, 25(2), 211-238.

Exemplary papers

Baker, T., & Nelson, R. E. (2005). Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage. Administrative Science Quarterly, 50(3), 329-366.

Dalpiaz, E., & Di Stefano, G. (2018). A universe of stories: Mobilizing narrative practices during transformative change. Strategic Management Journal, 39(3), 664-696.

Extra readings

Hällgren, M., Rouleau, L., & De Rond, M. (2018). A matter of life or death: How extreme context research matters for management and organization studies. Academy of Management Annals, 12(1), 111-153.

Locke, E. A. (2007). The case for inductive theory building. Journal of Management, 33(6), 867-890.

Practical readings

Bansal, P., & Corley, K. (2012). Publishing in AMJ—Part 7: What's different about qualitative research?. Academy of Management Journal, 55(3), 509-513.

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Session 5 – Building Theories From Cases

Eisenhardt, K. M., & Graebner, M. E. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. Academy of Management Journal, 50(1), 25-32.

Hargadon, A. B., & Wadhwani, R. D. (in press). Theorizing with microhistory. Academy of Management Review.

Exemplary papers

Brown, S. L., & Eisenhardt, K. M. (1997). The art of continuous change: Linking complexity theory and time-paced evolution in relentlessly shifting organizations. Administrative Science Quarterly, 42, 1-34.

Cattani, G., Ferriani, S., & Lanza, A. (2017). Deconstructing the outsider puzzle: The legitimation journey of novelty. Organization Science, 28(6), 965-992.

Extra readings

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. Academy of Management Review, 14(4), 532-550.

Session 6 – Abductive Theory Building

Sætre, A. S., & Van de Ven, A. (2021). Generating theory by abduction. Academy of Management Review, 46(4), 684-701.

Cohen, S. K., Caza, B. B., & Jones, C. (2025). From Puzzling to Plausible: The Role of Abduction in Organizational Research. Academy of Management Discoveries, 11(4), 469-478.

Campos, D. G. (2011). On the distinction between Peirce's abduction and Lipton's inference to the best explanation. Synthese, 180, 419-442.

Extra readings

Locke, K., Golden-Biddle, K., & Feldman, M. S. (2008). Perspective—Making doubt generative: Rethinking the role of doubt in the research process. Organization Science, 19(6), 907-918.