



Theory Building in IS Innovation Research

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•Karl Weick

- “Theory construction as disciplined imagination,” AMR 1989
- “What theory is not, theorizing is,” ASQ 1995

•Kathy Eisenhardt

- “Building theories from case study research,” AMR 1989.
- “Developing theories through simulation methods,” AMR 2007 (w/ Davis & Bingham)

•Scott Poole&Van De Ven

- “Using paradox to build management and organization theories,” AMR 1989

•Sutton&Staw

- “What theory is not,” ASQ 1995

•David Whetten

- “What constitutes a theoretical contribution?” AMR 1989

•Shirley Gregor

- “The nature of theory in information systems research,” MISQ 2006

Agenda

- Friendly reminder: Why do we need theory?
- Getting the spark
- How not to mess up a good idea



Why do we need theory?

Theories tell us *what* matters in
some domain of inquiry, *how*, and
why

But, what if we don't need a theory to tell us
this?



Getting the theoretical spark

- From the classics
 - Theoretical paradoxes, surprising empirical findings, a “disciplined imagination”
- From my own experience
 - Taking an existing great idea to the next logical step
 - Giving a name to a sort-of already known phenomenon that didn’t have a name before
 - Trying to resolve a genuinely tricky managerial dilemma



How to not mess up a good theoretical idea

1. Remember: “Theories of Everything” are exceeding rare
 - Have a clear focal technology/context related to IS innovation– let’s call it “X” – and tell us what it is
2. Tell us how “X” is distinctive/different
 - If X not that distinctive/different, does it really provide a good occasion for theorizing?
3. Don’t forget the “IS” part of IS innovation theorizing
 - Tell us what “X” has to do with IS, and why it matters theoretically (or practically) that it has to do with IS
4. “‘X’ has not been studied before!” is not a good motivation
 - But it can magnify some other motivation that serves as your primary focus



How to not mess up a good idea (cont.)

5. Use a strong reference theory or perspective to say which kinds of causal mechanisms matter
 - And to justify why variables are included/excluded
 - And to explain when your theory is most salient – hopefully, this takes us back to “X”!
6. Concatenation is not theorizing ...
 - Putting two theories together has to generate unique insights, that (ideally) challenge existing understandings for one (or both) theories
7. ... And neither are citations to prior work, summaries of empirical results, allusions what some authority thinks...
 - Keep your presumed causal mechanisms front and center



How to not mess up a good idea (cont.)

8. Don't beat around the bush. And give us a roadmap
 - Get us to your core theoretical arguments quickly!
 - Then you can back-and-fill on related work, tangential issues
9. Don't hide from your weaknesses
 - Use limitations as an opportunity for drawing boundary conditions on your theorizing
 - ... and to provide evidence there is a lot more interesting work still to be done!
10. Finally, remember that tearing other work down does not build yours up!
 - Prior work is situated in a place and time, as yours will be some day
 - Also, think about the reviewers you might get...

