SOCIAL ECOLOGY 261
STRATEGIES OF THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Overview

One of the major purposes of this course is to encourage you to develop your own theoretical ideas. Typically, graduate curricula in the behavioral and natural sciences emphasize the mastery of hypothesis-testing procedures. The development of methodological skills for testing hypotheses is a crucial goal of graduate education. All too often, however, graduate training gives short shrift to the hypothesis-formation phase of research. A fundamental assumption of this course is that social ecological theory can be enhanced to the extent that students are encouraged to develop their skills as creative theoreticians. Accordingly, this course explicitly emphasizes various strategies for promoting the development of original research ideas. We will approach the development of theory as a process that can be cultivated and enhanced through self-reflection, collegial support, and sustained effort. In effect, we will develop a social ecological model of theorizing that highlights the interplay among psychological, sociocultural, and environmental factors in the formation and refinement of creative research ideas.

The second major objective of this course is to examine key issues and controversies facing the development of social ecological theory. In relation to this goal, we will consider some of the unique challenges that arise when researchers attempt to develop hypotheses and theories spanning multiple disciplines and levels of analysis. We will consider alternative scientific “world views” and contrasting perspectives on the nature and uses of theory. We will discuss several issues relating to the scope of social ecological theories (grand vs. middle-range theorizing; conceptual and methodological reductionism). Also, we will examine some different strategies of theorizing that are suggested by alternative metatheoretical perspectives (e.g., grounded vs. deductive approaches; deviation-countering vs. deviation-amplifying versions of systems theory; and transformational theorizing).

Course Requirements

1. Compile a diary/journal relating to the development of your research ideas and your reactions to the readings assigned for each week of the quarter. Each week, you are asked to make a two-paragraph entry in your journal. One paragraph should be devoted to your thoughts about one or more of the required readings for that week.
Your entry should be in response to one or more of the discussion questions that are listed for each week in the attached course calendar, but you are encouraged to address other issues not covered by the discussion questions as well. Your comments on the readings should be no more than one typed (double-spaced) page per week. The second paragraph of your weekly entry should relate to the formation and refinement of your own theoretical ideas during that week. Your comments might focus on any number of issues relating to the development of your research ideas, including the sequence of mental associations by which you arrived at a particular idea; problems you are having in generating and/or refining new ideas; and reflections about the environmental settings and social circumstances in which your ideas first arose. This second portion of your weekly journal entry should be no more than one typed page in length. Thus, by the end of the quarter, you will have developed a journal of approximately 20 typed pages in length. The typed version of your journal is due on Friday, June 4. Prior to that date, you should bring your journals to each class session, to refer to during class discussions.

2. You are expected to prepare two brief (2-3 typed pages) "idea papers" for distribution to seminar participants on the dates listed in the course calendar. The nature of these papers will be described more fully at the first class session. Ideally, the idea papers should be an extension of the thoughts and ideas that you record each week in your journal. Please distribute copies of your idea papers to all class members on the dates noted in the attached course calendar. The first idea paper is due on Friday, April 16, and the second idea paper is due on Friday, May 7.

3. You are expected to prepare a third, longer (5-7 typed pages) idea paper along one of the following lines: (a) develop your own statement of a new theory; (b) develop a novel system or set of dimensions for classifying person-environment or group-environment transactions; (c) discuss a current area of research within social ecology in terms of its theoretical gaps and its potential extensions. Let me know if there are alternative options that you would like to pursue for your third idea paper. Your third idea paper can be developed as an extension of your earlier papers and journal entries, but it does not have to be explicitly related to your earlier projects if you wish to pursue different topics within each of the three papers. The third paper is due on Friday, May 28.

4. Attendance and active participation in each seminar session are expected. Since this is a small seminar, the success of the course depends on participation from each person. The basic categories of participation for each week of the seminar are "positive class participation (+), "no class participation" (0), or "not present for more than half of the class period" (-). There will be ample opportunities for individual and collective participation through a series of class exercises relating to hypothesis formation, and discussions pertaining to your journal entries on the assigned readings for each week.

Evaluation

Performance of the course requirements will contribute to your grade in the following proportions:
25% journals
15% first idea paper
15% second idea paper
20% third idea paper
25% class participation

Texts

There are three recommended texts for the course. All can be purchased at the UCI Bookstore. Also, all texts will be on reserve in Room 202 SE-I (URP Dept. Office).


Also, the following texts are excellent resources for this course:


COURSE CALENDAR

Graduate Seminar on Strategies of Theory Development

Section 1. Introduction and Overview

Week 1

Friday
April 2

Why this course? Can Strategies of Theory Development be Taught?

Assignment:

The Atlantic Online (July/August)


Optional:

Marx, M.H. Theorizing. In M.H. & F.E. Goodson (Eds.), Theories in contemporary psychology.
Discussion Questions:

What factors influence scientists' selection of research topics? Do these factors enhance or distort the scientific process? According to the authors discussed this week, what strategies might be useful for improving the quality of research in the behavioral and natural sciences?

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**Week 2**

**Friday April 9**

**Strategies for Enhancing Creative Theorizing**

**Assignment:**

Adams, CB. 1-81, 103-129.


**Optional:**


Discussion Questions: What alternative conceptions of creativity and creative thinking are reflected in this week's readings? Are the emphases of Maddi and Mills on strenuousness and discipline complementary with those of Adams, Leff, and Gordon on perceptual flexibility? Why or why not?

Section II. Guidelines, Choicepoints, and Dilemmas in the Development of Social Ecological Theories

Idea Paper:  
**First Idea Paper Due: Friday April 16**

Week 3

Friday April 16  Disciplines, Paradigms, and Theories

Assignment:  


Optional:


Discussion Questions:

By what criteria do Durkheim and Lewin differentiate between the disciplines of psychology and sociology? Are the notions of "distinct scientific disciplines" and "disciplinary boundaries" relevant to the process of theorizing? Why or why not? What factors may facilitate or impair transdisciplinary theorizing and research?

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**Week 4**

Friday

April 23

First Group Tutorial Sessions (11:00AM-2:00 PM) to Discuss Idea Paper 1

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**Week 5**

Friday

April 30

On the Nature and Uses of Theory: Positivist and Relativist Perspectives; Unidisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Theorizing

Assignment:


Discussion Questions:  The articles by Gergen, Marx, and Platt suggest rather different criteria for measuring the progress of scientific inquiry.  Are the perspectives of these authors compatible or mutually exclusive?  What are the key functions of theory according to these authors?  What are the major differences in the theoretical accounts of capitalism presented by Engels and Weber?

Idea Paper:  **Second Idea Paper Due: Friday May 7**

**Week 6**

**Friday May 7**  Grand vs. Middle-Range Theories in the Behavioral and Social Sciences; Conceptual and Methodological Reductionism


Discussion Questions: What are some of the alternative functions of grand and middle-range theories? How are the theoretical perspectives of radical behaviorism, historical materialism, and cognitive psychology similar, despite their obvious differences of emphasis on either overt behavior or mental processes?

Week 7

Friday
May 14

Strategies of Theorizing: Grounded Theory vs. Deductive Approaches


Optional:


Discussion Questions:

How might Spence or Merton reply to the grounded-theory approach advocated by Glaser and Strauss? Do the theoretical statements of Maslow, Merton, and Tolman reflect a grounded theory perspective? Why or why not? Is Spence’s emphasis on hypothetical constructs compatible with Glaser & Strauss’ grounded-theory approach? Why or why not? Consider a particular substantive problem in which you are currently interested. In developing a theoretical analysis of that problem, would you be more likely to adopt a grounded theory approach, a deductive approach, or both? Why?
Week 8

Friday
May 21

Strategies of Theorizing: The Utility and Limits of Systems Theory as a Basis for Social Ecological Research; Contextual Theorizing

Assignment:


Optional:


**Discussion Questions:**

What are some of the limitations of general systems theory as a framework for social ecological research? Do the basic assumptions of systems theory offer useful guidelines for contextual theorizing? Why or why not? What are some of the distinguishing features of contextual theorizing? For what types of substantive problems would contextual analysis not serve as a useful theoretical approach?

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**Section III. Creativity and Theory Development: A Contextual View**

**Idea Paper:**

**Third Idea Paper Due: Friday May 28**

**Week 9**

**Friday May 28**

**Psychological Perspectives on Creativity:**

**Developing Transformational Theories**

**Assignment:**


Nicholls, J.G. Creativity in the person who will never produce anything original or useful. In Albert, GE, 265-279.


Discussion Questions:
In what respects do transformational theories go beyond the basic assumptions of systems theory, the development of grounded theory, and contextual theorizing? What are some of the key features of a contextual analysis of creativity? How might the topic of creativity be approached from a transformational perspective?

Week 10

Friday
June 4

Some Intellectual Benefits of Adversity and Stress; Physical and Social Contexts of Creativity

Journal: **Journal Due, Friday, June 4**

Assignment:


The social context of theory development. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 8, 164-172.


Optional:


Discussion Questions:

What are the implications of the articles by Eisenstadt and Pickering for research on stress and coping? What situational influences might foster the development of the "creative attitude" or personality? In what ways do physical and social environments encourage or inhibit creativity? How might environments be physically designed and/or socially structured to promote creativity?

Assignment: The Sociocultural Context of Creativity and Theory Development; Course Summary


Discussion Questions: Considering the literature covered in this course, what important aspects of creativity and theory development have been neglected in prior research? What do you regard as the most crucial "next steps" in the development of your own theoretical ideas?

TBA Third Group Tutorial Session to Discuss Idea Paper 3