THE PROBLEM WITH PROPOSITIONS (ONLY): THEORETICAL TRIANGULATION FOR BETTER EXPLANATIONS AND UNDERSTANDING IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

Joep Cornelissen CARMAWebinar, 2024

"What do you mean, 'theoretically'? Everything we do is theoretical."

Cornelissen, Höllerer, and Seidl (2021), What theory is and can be: Forms of theorising in organizational scholarship, *Organization Theory*

Today's talk

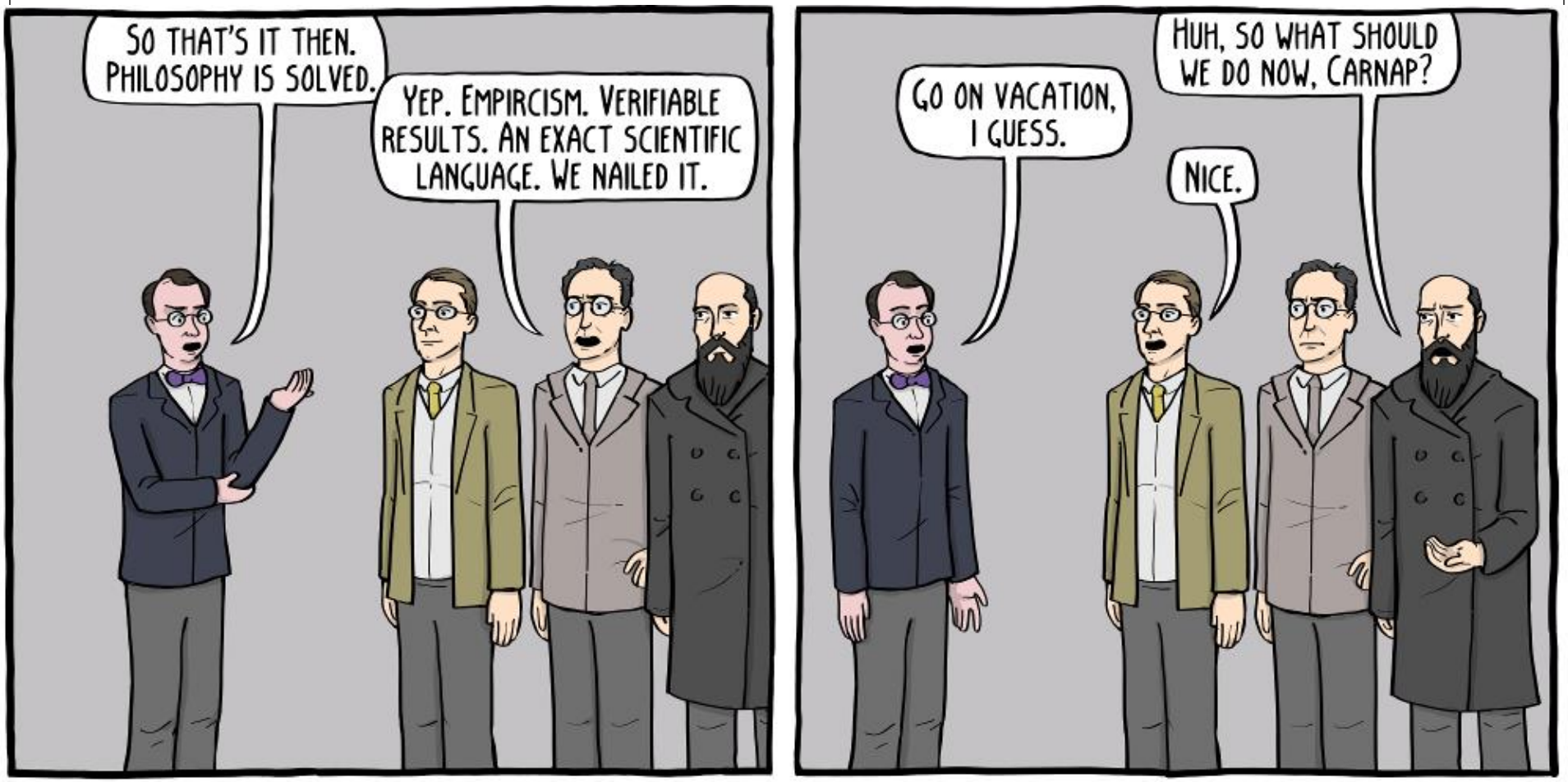
- 1. The state of our field
- 2. The 'received' view of theory
- 3. Problems with the received view
- 4. An alternative view of theoriz*ing* and explanation
- 5. Theoretical triangulation: A model and example
- 6. Implications and reflections

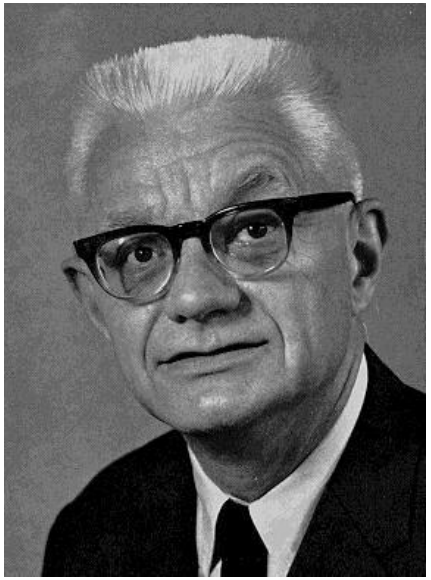
1. The state of the field

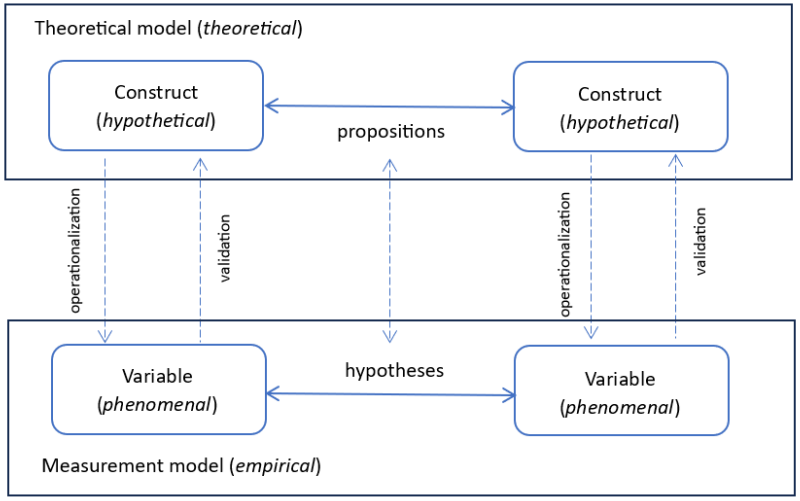
- A general lack of reliable, tried-and-tested knowledge; isolated (theoretical) claims, many false positives (false hypotheses that are accepted as true), and no strong 'inference tests' between theories and (competing) claims;
- Theory-centred knowledge claims as opposed to efforts geared towards richly conceptualizing and maximally explaining phenomena. We "stay isolated in our own abstract dreams", developing theoretical claims that are "yoked to a particular [theoretical] syntax" (van Fraassen 1989: 366)
- Management research may, similar to other social science fields, have "unchallenged fallacies clogging up the research literature" (Szucs & Ioannidis, 2017: 11).
- …and may be insufficiently relevant and useful to practice and society.

2. The ‘Received’ View

- Bacharach (1989: 498) the core of any theory involves a claim of a relationship between ‘units’ observed or approximated in the real world; whereby “propositions state the relations among constructs, and on the more concrete level, hypotheses (derived from the propositions) specify the relations among variables”.
- Propositional claims backed up by theoretical assumptions are the “constituent elements” of theory (Whetten, 1989: 490); effectively offering a “common language” (Bacharach, 1989: 512) for management research across conceptual and empirical studies.


SO THAT'S IT THEN. PHILOSOPHY IS SOLVED.
YEP. EMPIRCISM. VERIFIABLE RESULTS. AN EXACT SCIENTIFIC LANGUAGE. WE NAILED IT.
GO ON VACATION, I GUESS.
NICE.
HUH, SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW, CARNAP?





"Guided by his knowledge of observable data, the scientist has to invent a set of concepts – theoretical constructs, which lack immediate experiential significance, a system of hypotheses couched in terms of them, and an interpretation of the resulting theoretical network" (Hempel, 1952, p. 37).

Building New Theory

5 Introduces a New Construct (or Significantly Reconceptualizes an Existing One)

4 Examines a Previously Unexplored Relationship or Process

3 Introduces a New Mediator or Moderator of an Existing Relationship or Process

2 Examines Effects That Have Been the Subject of Prior Theorizing

1 Attempts to Replicate Previously Demonstrated Effects

Builders

Expanders

Qualifiers

Reporters

Testers

High theoretical contribution

Low theoretical contribution

1 Is Inductive or Grounds Predictions with Logical Speculation

2 Grounds Predictions with References to Past Findings

3 Grounds Predictions with Existing Conceptual Arguments

4 Grounds Predictions with Existing Models, Diagrams, or Figures

5 Grounds Predictions with Existing Theory

Testing Existing Theory

Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007, AMJ

3. Problems with the received view

- Theoretical warrant + propositional logic
- Theoretical warrant: each theory ‘self-absorbed’ by design (Suddaby, 2014: 408)
  - Little confrontation between theories
  - Phenomena that do not ‘fit’ remain out of sight
  - Confirmation exercise, rather than maximally explaining a phenomenon
  - Minimal requirements / easily accepting of warrant

Cornelissen (2024), The problem with propositions, *Academy of Management Review*

- Propositional logic ('if, then' operator)
  - Presumes that the prior ('if') bears most if not all of the weight of the consequent; leading to a view of conditions or causes as sufficient for their effects
  - A 'forward-looking' focus on estimating effects to confirm the consequent as opposed to 'reversely' looking at what else may matter (affirming the consequent fallacy).
  - Modelling of conditions or causes as producing 'fixed effects', rather than as random factors. The base assumption is that, rather than allowing for variability in the antecedent, the modelled condition or conditions will have the same general propensity to bring about the effect in line with its hypothesized prediction (fixed effects fallacy)
  - Base-rate fallacy: focusing solely on some salient piece of evidence consistent with the propositional logic whilst neglecting the rate at which occurrences of that same phenomenon would occur independently of that evidence (the base rate fallacies)

Replication crisis

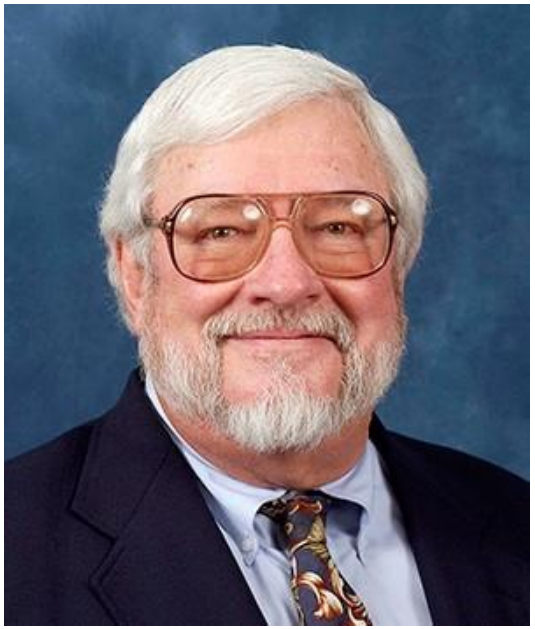
↓

Method crisis

⇣

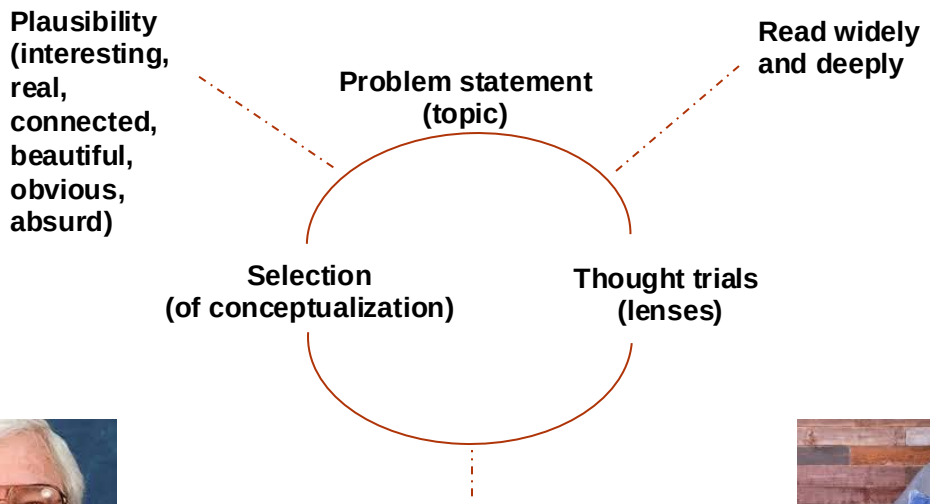
Theory crisis

4. An alternative view



"Theory cannot be improved until we improve the theorizing process, and we cannot improve the theorizing process until we describe it more explicitly, operate it more self-consciously, and decouple it from validation more deliberately"
Weick (1989). Theory construction as disciplined imagination, AMR, 1989, p.516.

"Perhaps the ultimate tradeoff is the one between process and product, between theorizing and theory, between doing it and freezing it"
Weick (1995). What Theory is *not*, Theorising *Is*, ASQ, p.390.



Weick, K.E. (1989), theory construction as disciplined imagination, Academy of Management Review

5. Theoretical triangulation

"The momer enomenon
which seems ectual child
springs into finite theory
his parental more and
more dear tc ressing of
the theory tc make them
fit the theor

Article

Megastudies improve the impact of applied behavioural science

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"To avoid this grave danger, the method of multiple working hypotheses is urged. It diffe istributes
the effort and ts its own
criteria, its ov the truth,
and if a grou es, the total
outcome of n in, in Platt,
1964, Strong

aps ASSOCIATION FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

Perspectives on Psychological Science
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Increasing Transparency Through a Multiverse Analysis

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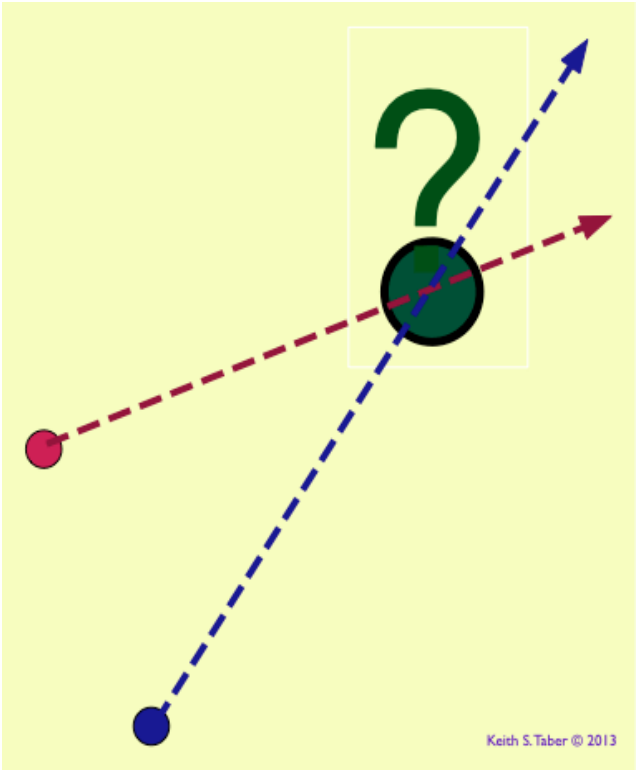
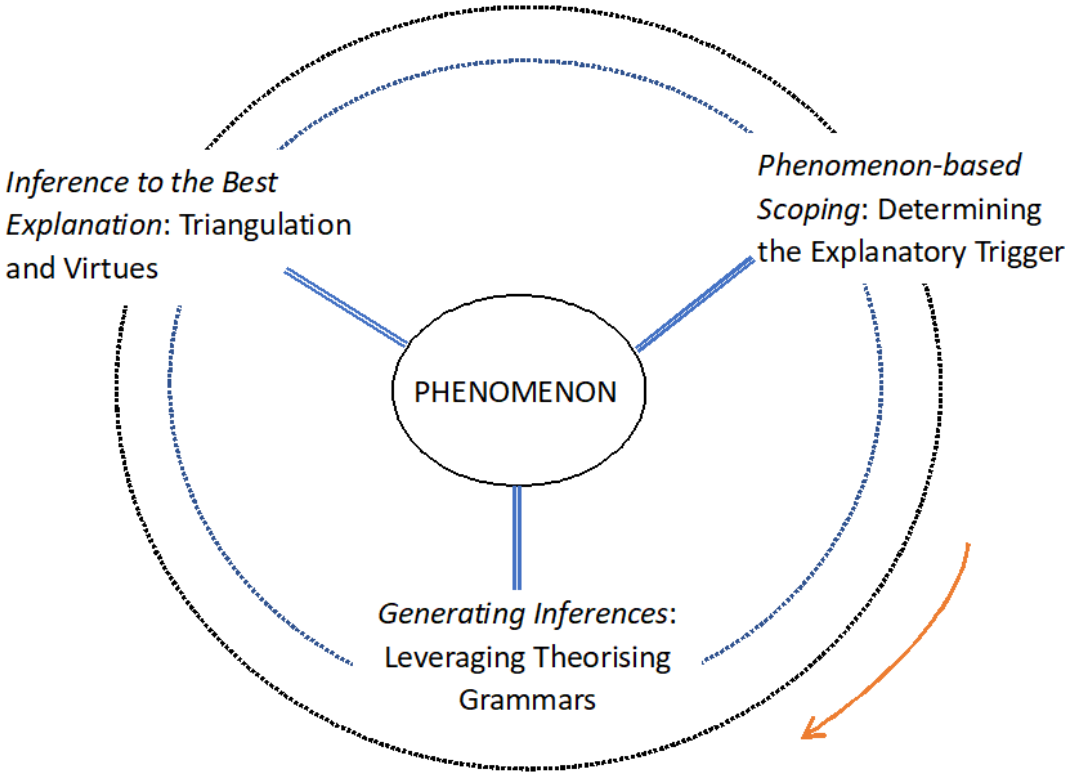


Theoretical triangulation: intentionally using alternative styles of theorizing (e.g., process, configurational, critical…) and corresponding methods to look at a phenomenon from multiple sides to (1) offer an enhanced and enlightened understanding and to (2) offset the inferential biases and threats to validity of any singular style

TABLE 1
Overview of Three Theorizing Grammars

	Propositional Theorizing	Configurational Theorizing	Process Theorizing
Definition	A form of theorizing that is centered on stating and verifying theoretical propositions that are assumed to capture cause–effect relationships.	A form of theorizing that is focused on conceptually schematizing interdependent relations that systematically covary with certain effects or outcomes.	A form of theorizing that focuses on conceptualizing the complex and probabilistic sequencing of events over time that lead to, and thus explain, an effect or outcome.
Core grammar	Using propositional (subject–predicate) language to interrelate a limited set of events into a set of specific contingent statements ("if, then" arguments) suggestive of a causal mechanism.	Using conditional language (including modal logic) to connect different sets of interrelated event conditions, which as an integrative mechanism connect to an outcome.	Using probabilistic language to map the sequence of events and their interaction to identify the probability of a generative mechanism occurring and bringing about a certain outcome or effect.
Form of explanation	Propositional claim	Explanatory scheme	Process model
Primary authors	Bacharach (1989), Whetten (1989), Makadok et al. (2018)	Meyer et al. (1993), Fiss (2011), Furnari et al. (2021)	Van de Ven & Poole (1995), Langley (1999), Langley et al. (2013)

Triangulation for Better Explanations



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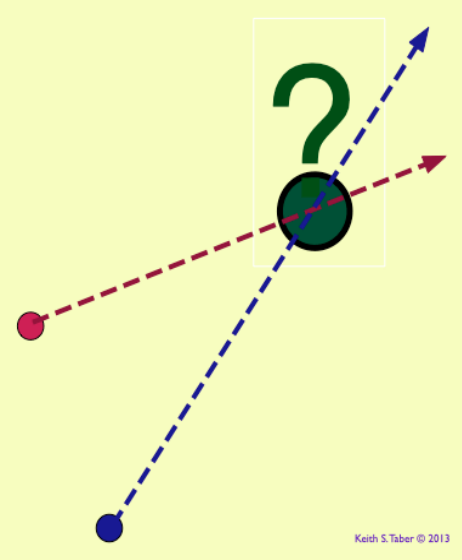
Triangulation for Better Understanding

	Propositional theorizing	**Configurational theorizing**	**Process theorizing**	**Perspectival theorizing**	**Meta-theorizing**	**Theoretical provocation**	**Critical meta-theorizing**
Definition	A style of theorizing that identifies and elaborates basic contingencies (as propositions) that explain a topic	A style of theorizing that interrelates interdependencies between concepts (as configurations) that explain a topic	A style of theorizing that plots the sequencing of events and outcomes (as processes) that explain a topic	An interpretive style of theorizing that re-frames our conceptualizations of a topic through an alternative and deeper reading	An interpretive style of theorizing that interrogates the theoretical categories, biases, and assumptions in organizational theorizing as a practice	An emancipatory style of theorizing that aims to provoke interest in topics of social concern and by questioning taken-for-granted assumptions	An emancipatory style of theorizing that critiques the theoretical categories, biases, and assumptions in organizational theorizing as a practice
Knowledge interest	Explanation – the formulated propositions conceptualize relationships of cause and effect and theorize underlying processes and structures as mechanisms	Explanation – the formulated configurations conceptualize alternate causal paths and theorize underlying processes and structures as mechanisms	Explanation – the elaborated trajectories conceptualize alternate causal paths and theorize underlying processes and structures as mechanisms	Interpretation – the (re)conceptualization of a topic fosters renewed understandings and creates opportunities for knowledge development through novel questions or concepts	Interpretation – the deep reading and synthesis of existing categories of theorizing creates reflexivity and provides pointers to alternative ways of studying and knowing topics	Emancipation – the critique of default assumptions around a topic and their implications leading to a theory-informed basis for action and change	Emancipation – the synthesis and critique of existing categories of theorizing creates reflexivity and provides an ardent call for alternative ways of studying and knowing topics
Style of reasoning	Formal-analytical	Formal-analytical	Formal-analytical	Interpretive-synthetic	Interpretive-synthetic	Critical-synthetic	Critical-synthetic
Stance of the researcher	Objective/neutral	Objective/neutral	Objective/neutral	Involved	Involved	Involved-personal	Involved-personal
Level of abstraction	Medium (topic-based)	Medium (topic-based)	Medium (topic-based)	Medium to high	High (universal system)	Medium to high	High (universal system)

Cornelissen, J., Höllerer, M. A., & Seidl, D. (2021). What Theory Is and Can Be: Forms of Theorizing in Organizational Scholarship. *Organization Theory*, *2*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/26317877211020328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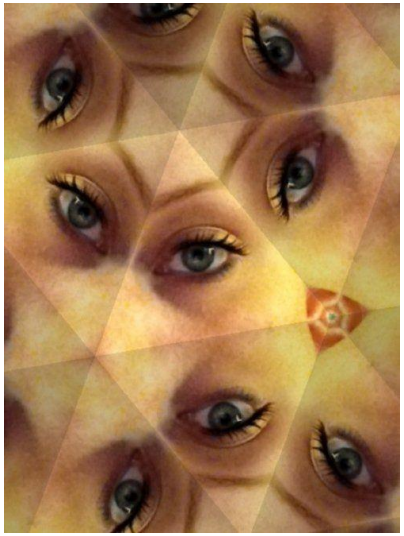

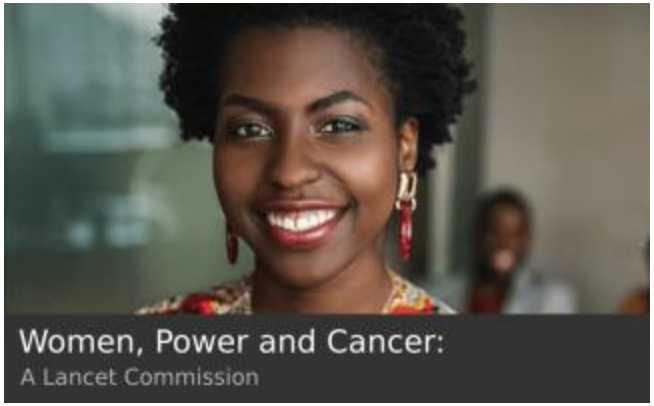
Women, Power and Cancer:
A Lancet Commission

Implications and reflections

- *General*: Phenomenon-based theorising: contributions to knowledge (e.g., offering ways of explaining phenomena differently or better) rather than contributions to a 'theory'.
- *General*: an inclusive, pluralistic view of different grammars of theorising and of different epistemic goals in relation to phenomena.
- *General*: epistemic humility towards other grammars and goals, which are recognized for what they bring and are not devalued as 'not science' or as 'not proper research'
- *Practical*: need for different article and reporting formats (e.g., AMA phenomenon-based knowledge syntheses in the form of "integrative reviews" (Cronin & George, 2023))
- *Practical*: need for a practical methodology and collaborative forms of research to join up different forms of theorising into a heightened or enlightened understanding of a phenomenon.