



Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application

Fourth Edition

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Thinking about Theory and Research

Chapter Overview

- Defining Theory
- Features of Theories
- Relationship Between Theory and Experience
- Approaches to Knowing
- The Research Process

Defining Theory

A **theory** is an abstract system of concepts and their relationships that help us to understand a phenomenon.

Theorizing is the process of systematically formulating and organizing ideas to understand a particular phenomenon.

Three Features of Theories

1. Level of generality

- Grand
- Mid-range
- Narrow

2. Components

- Concepts: Elements of the theory
 - Nominal / real
- Relationships: How concepts are connected
 - Linear / interactive / transactional

Three Features of Theories

3. Goals

- Explanation
- Understanding
- Prediction
- Social change

Relationship Between Theory and Experience

- Abstract theory enables us to understand concrete experiences
 - Theory floats above the observations and is anchored by interpretation
 - From observations, we can ascend to the theory via an interpretive string
 - Definitions and hypotheses can bring us back to the observations
- Theory in turn can be modified by observations

Approaches to Knowing

- How one sees and talks about the world influences how and what one chooses to research
- Three major approaches to knowing
 - Positivist/empirical
 - Interpretive
 - Critical

Positivist/Empirical Approach

- Objective truths can be uncovered about human interactions
- Research processes can be partially value-neutral
- Natural scientific methods, with control over the variables
- Goal is to construct general laws governing human interactions
- “Theory-then-research”

Interpretive Approach

- Truth is subjective and co-created by the participants in the research process
- Complete objectivity is often impossible
- The study of interaction is believed to be value-relevant, so researchers should “monitor assumptions and inferences”
- No concern for control or generalizeability; focus is providing rich descriptions
- “Research-then-theory”

Critical Approach

- Those in power shape knowledge in ways that perpetuate the status quo
- Researchers seek to change the status quo to resolve power imbalances and give voice to the silenced
- These imbalances are often reproduced accidentally through social norms

Approaches to Knowing

- The types of questions one asks about the world influences how and what one chooses to research
- Three major types of questions
 - Ontological
 - Epistemological
 - Axiological

Ontology

- The study of being/nonbeing, or the nature of reality
- The three approaches' views on ontology
 - Empirical: General laws govern human interactions and free choice is limited
 - Interpretive: People have free choice and the researcher's job is to co-create reality
 - Critical: There is choice and constraint in the power structures they wish to change

Epistemology

- How we go about knowing and what counts as knowledge
- The three approaches' views on epistemology
 - Empirical: Strive for control over research process and rely on statistical tests
 - Interpretive: Rely on their own and their participants' explanations/interpretations
 - Critical: Focus on power imbalances

Axiology

- The role of values in theory and research
- The three approaches' views on axiology
 - Empirical: Avoid allowing values to influence the research process as much as possible
 - Interpretive: Recognize that values unavoidably influence the entire process
 - Critical: Values should be closely intertwined with scholarly work

Approaches to Knowing

- The answers to the preceding questions influence how one goes about building theory
- Three major approaches to theory-building
 - Covering law
 - Rules
 - Systems

The Covering Law Approach

- Seeks to explain an event by referring to a general law
- Believes communication behavior is fixed and generalizeable
- May specify various types of relationships
- Can hypothesize and test but never fully confirm such theories
- In communication, researchers strive for probabilistic laws or “law-like” predictions

The Rules Approach

- People engage in intentional, goal-directed behavior
- Although we may be restricted by rules and other constraints, human behavior is viewed as a result of free choice
- Researchers investigate the rules that govern actions in a particular community
 - Habitual Rules
 - Parametric Rules
 - Tactical Rules

The Systems Approach

- Free will is constrained by the system in which people operate
- Derived from General Systems Theory
- Changes the focus from the individual (part) to the group (whole)
- Agrees with rules perspective assertion that communication behavior is not characterized by universal patterns

The Systems Approach

- Systems can be described in terms of six properties:
 - Wholeness
 - Interdependence
 - Hierarchy
 - Boundaries
 - Calibration/Feedback
 - Equifinality

Systems: An Illustration of Hierarchy

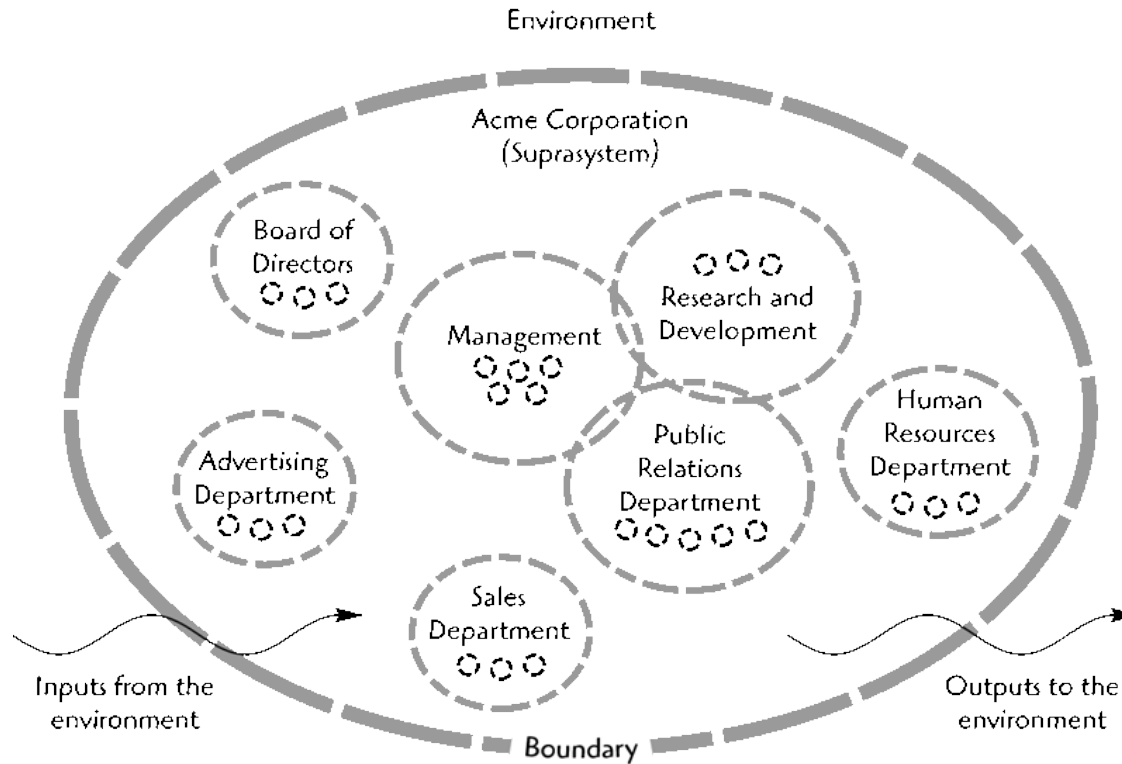


Figure 3.1: Suprasystems, Systems, and Subsystems in the Acme Corporation

The Research Process

- Scientific method uses deductive logic
 - Moving from the general (theory) to specific (observations) using hypothesis derived from theory
- Operationalization
 - Researcher specifies how concepts will be measured
 - Turns abstract concepts from the theory into concrete variables
- Make observations/collect data
 - Researcher codes or directly measures the occurrence of the concepts

The Research Process

- Grounded theory approach uses inductive logic
 - Moving from the specific (observations) to the general (theory)
 - Hypotheses are not tested; rather, theory is “discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis”

The Wheel of Science

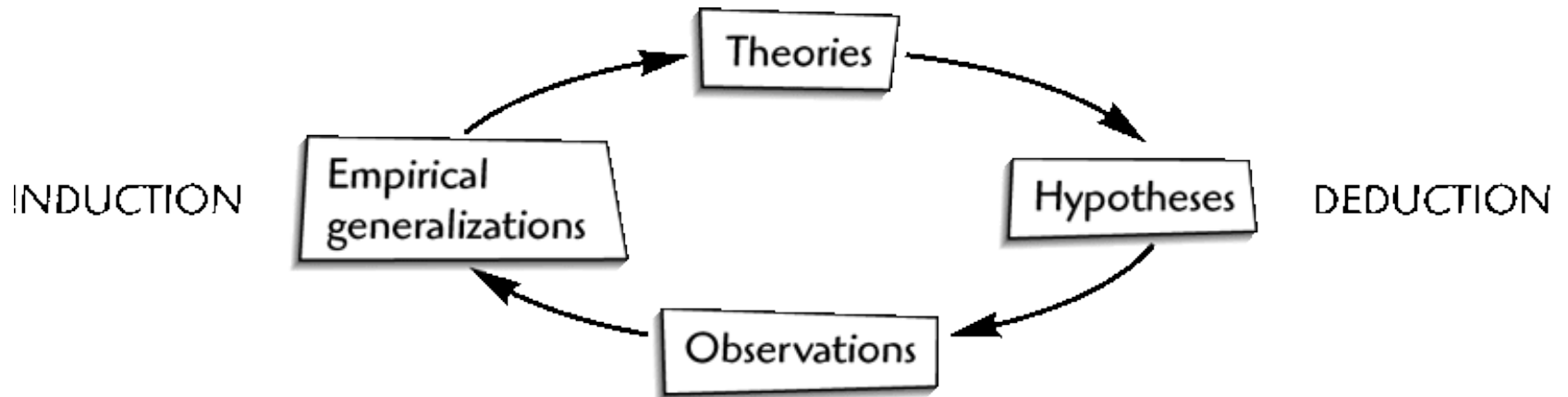
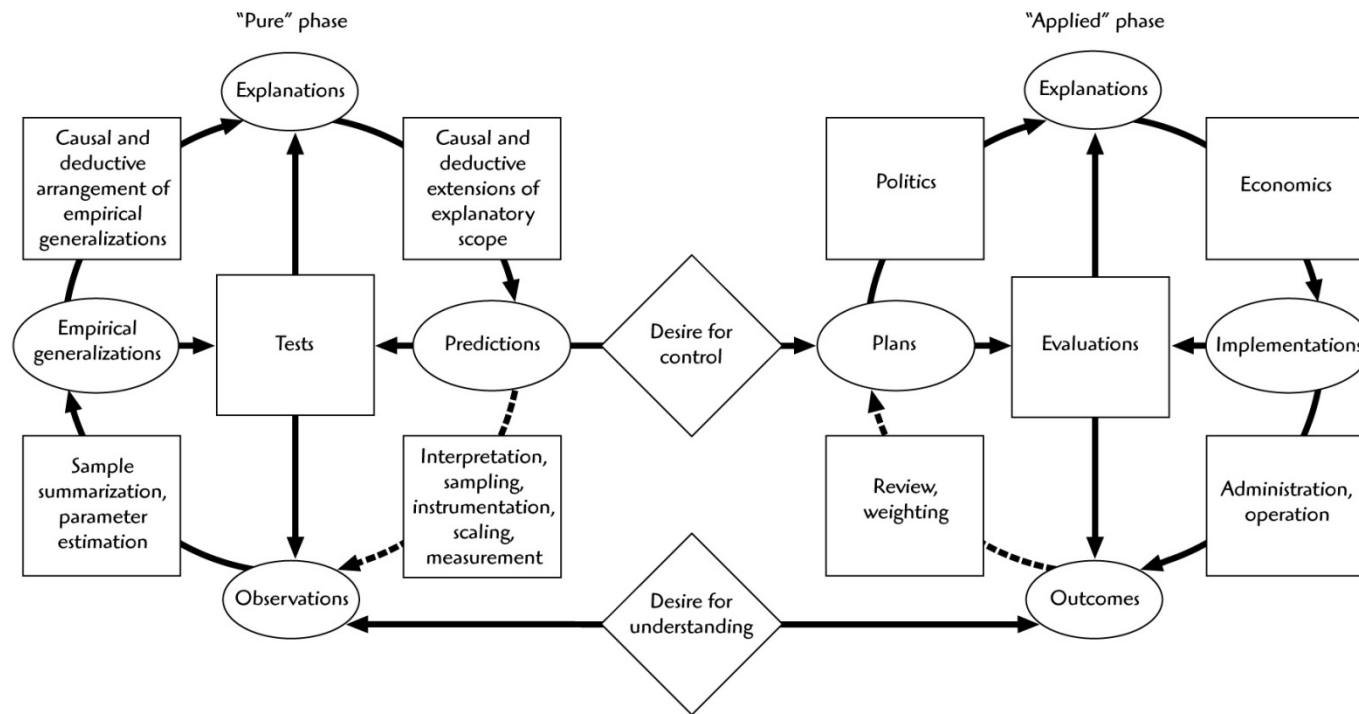


Figure 3.2: The Wheel of Science

The Research Process

- Two types of research
 - Pure: Researchers are guided by knowledge-generating goals
 - Applied: Researchers wish to solve specific problems with the knowledge generated
- These processes are interrelated in a “practical” discipline like communication

The Procedures of Scientific Analysis



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Figure 3.3: The Procedures of Scientific Analysis

The Research Process

- Naïve vs. trained scientists
 - Naïve scientists follow inductive logic, relying on one/few observations and generalizing
 - Trained scientists do not rush to generalize on the basis of too few observations
- Reliability and validity
 - Reliability is the ability to get the same results over time
 - Validity is the ability to measure the variable of interest