3

Theoretic Explanation

❖   ❖   ❖

As you begin to identify an interesting and significant project, one that you feel you can carry out in a trustworthy way, it is helpful to be more explicit about how you might help others make sense of your efforts. This chapter suggests that we primarily talk to each other in terms of generalized, theoretic explanation, which

- *Is generated through inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning*
- *Uses speculation, assertion, clarification, reiteration, adjustment, negation, synthesis, redirection, and rebuttal as a conversational strategy*
- *Avoids (to the extent possible) perpetuating power, researcher bias, inadequately considering impact, and any other aggrandizement*

The last sections of the chapter suggest that these categories are not equally important for any given conversation, and recommend responding to a few well-chosen articles as a practical means of developing your contribution.

❖   THEORETIC EXPLANATION AS A
     FOCAL POINT OF SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTION

I emphasize theoretic explanation in this chapter and the rest of the book as a primary form of scholarly communication because it is very difficult to capture and hold audience attention without simplifying and generalizing the results of your scholarly activities. As I think about my own work and talk with others, I am struck by how easily we become

immersed in detail. Contribution must be found in these details, and (most of the time) they fascinate the scholar doing the work, but the specifics tend to be incredibly boring to others. I can illustrate the problem by briefly telling you about a miserable social occasion. We were invited to a neighbor's house for dinner just after the family returned from a trip to Hawaii. The entertainment of the evening was to look at an enormous number of repetitive pictures from the trip. As our hosts exclaimed with enthusiasm, "Look at this wonderful sunset—oh, and here is another one!" we couldn't wait to escape. Obviously, you had to have been there.

Too many academic presentations elicit the same urge to retreat. We are all interested in our own vacations and our own research, but tend to be much less enthused about the details of other people's activities. Remember the words of the classic sitcom skit in which the character talks endlessly about himself and then says, "But enough about me. Tell me about you!" The statement is funny because it is clearly insincere. As scholars, we have to really make the transition: we have to construct *and cross* a bridge to other scholars' interests. The central idea of this chapter is that generalized theoretic explanations take the equivalent of our pictures of Hawaii, meaningful only to us, and transform them into something that is also meaningful to others.

Before further discussion, I want to remind you that people who become academics enjoy thinking about explanations and have the ability to work with them. We are the result of a long educational process that teaches us about clarification, annotation, analysis, argument, assertion, demonstration, commentary, meaning, reason, disclosure, description, verbalization, definition, illustration, exemplification, indication, evidence, understanding, exhibition, signification, narration, interpretation, and solution—all synonyms for "theory" in Roget's Thesaurus.[1]

We also know a lot about theorizing from our private lives, just as we already know a lot about conversation. We speculate when we do not understand something, and we tend to involve others in our efforts. A friend might say casually about an acquaintance, for example, "My theory is that A is overly cautious because he is worried that he might lose his job." This is a clear oversimplification, but it generates conversation if I am curious about A's behavior and motivation, if I have questions, similar opinions, or can propose alternative explanations. Further conversation is a sign that we have a common interest in understanding more about our acquaintance. Once common domain and explanatory purpose are established, interesting debates are possible.

❖   SCHOLARLY EXPLANATIONS AS THEORY

The word **theory** comes from the Greek *theoria,* which means "contemplation" or "speculation." The first definition of theory in the *Compact Oxford Dictionary* is "a system of ideas intended to explain something; especially [an explanation] based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained." Universities were founded centuries ago to facilitate a move from the contemplation and speculation of private life to more systemic and generalized explanations. Our practical efforts at explanation are often

connected with experience, which is why I find David Kolb's work on experiential learning insightful. Figure 3.1 suggests that we are learning, as described by Kolb,[2] in a way that could also be described as **"theorizing."**[3]

Explaining something to the satisfaction of a group of scholars can be accomplished in different ways that relate to this figure. **Deductive theorizing** begins with the formation of abstract generalizations, as shown at the bottom of the figure, and then moves clockwise one step to the left to test its implications. Arthur Stinchcombe, a well-known sociologist, describes this widely accepted approach to scholarly activity in three hierarchical steps:

1. "[Make] a theoretical statement . . . [that says] one class of phenomena will be connected in a certain way with another class of phenomena."[4]

2. "From this theoretical statement . . . derive, by logical deduction and by operational definitions of concepts, an empirical statement . . . [that] the theoretical statement . . . implies logically."[5]

3. "[M]ake the observations called for in the empirical statements to see whether or not they are true."[6]

This approach to theory building is used most easily by those who feel that it is possible to accept or reject claims of truth, at least within a group of like-minded individuals. This is a positivist or post-positivist worldview (discussed in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 11), which assumes that phenomena can and should be observed in ways that do not vary significantly from observer to observer.
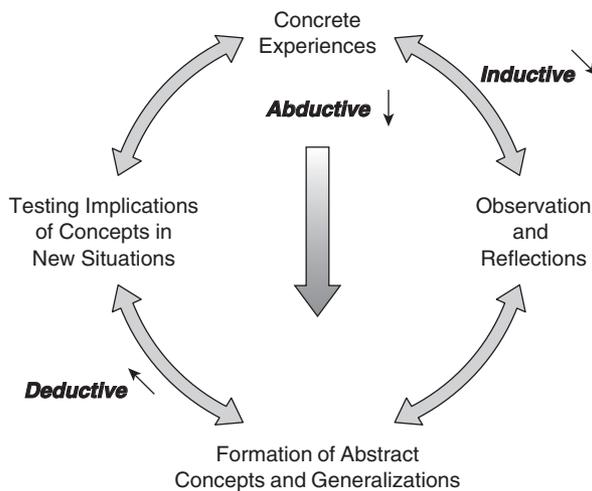
Figure 3.1   Experiential Learning as Theorizing

SOURCE: Based on Gill, G., & Johnson, P. (2003). The role of theory in research methods. *Research methods for managers* (3rd ed.). London: Sage Publications. Adapted from Kolb, D. A., Rubin, I. M., & McIntyre, J. M. (1979). *Organization psychology: An experiential approach* (p. 38). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Primary attention is given to the initial clarification of *concepts* or **constructs**—building blocks that are put into *hypotheses* and then tested so that the new theoretic statement can be accepted, revised, or rejected. Stinchcombe argues that the objective of the exercise is theory improvement, and ideally, comparison and selection among different theories on the basis of what they imply.

Some scholars are not comfortable with this approach to scholarly activity and theory building. Their alternative way of developing theoretic explanations can be described as beginning at the top of Figure 3.1 and moving two steps clockwise. Often, the underlying worldview of **inductive theorizing** is interpretivist—a point of view that again is described in greater detail in Chapter 6. The key idea is that meaning must be linked to a specific observer, in a specific situation. *Grounded theory*, first named and described by Glaser and Strauss in 1967,[7] is often used as a primary resource in the social sciences. The steps that lead to generalized explanation from this perspective can be summarized as follows:

1. Extensively describe an interesting situation without using specialized vocabulary from the existing academic literature.

2. Create a first level of substantive categories by coding these descriptions.

3. Modify and improve codes as additional data are collected, categorized, and compared.

4. Expect theoretic insights to emerge as categories stabilize and their relationships become apparent.

5. Conclude empirical observation when new categories are not required to account for further observations.[8]

Deduction and induction are often described as the only alternatives for theory development, but Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), a statistician and founder of American pragmatism, suggests a third alternative: **abductive theorizing.** Peirce felt that both deductive and inductive reasoning must be involved in theory development, thus potentially touching at all points shown in Figure 3.1. Abductive reasoning begins with observation, but tries to deduce more general laws from this evidence by assuming that empirical observations are a sample from a larger population of similar phenomena.[9] There is less reliance on the gradual saturation of categories from empirical observation than just described for grounded theory.[10] In other words, abductive theorizing starts at 12:00 and jumps directly to 6:00. An example briefly discussed at the end of the next paragraph suggests that it is then possible to move in either an inductive or deductive direction.

This form of reasoning has found particular favor in the professions. Andy Van de Ven suggests that scholars typically

1. Begin with a problem/situation

2. Make a first attempt at theory building by describing the more general situation that could create that problem/situation

3. Refine the description by further modeling and testing.[11]

He also provides an excellent example:

The first step in theory building is conceiving the germ of an idea that may become a theory. This idea may be a "half-baked" conjecture in response to an anomaly that violates our understanding of how things are expected to unfold. For example, most people view interruptions as impeding the work of teams in organizations. However my colleague, Prof. Mary Zellmer-Bruhn, was surprised to find that teams she was observing in her field studies learned more when their work was interrupted by events, such as losing team members, changing tools and technology, and organizational restructurings. What explains this anomaly? She reasoned by abduction that interruptions might be occasions for teams to reflect on what they were doing and "get out of their ruts" in following mindless routines.[12]

Andy and I both believe that theory development requires all three kinds of reasoning. It is easy to see in this example that further deductive and inductive reasoning could be useful. Professor Zellmer-Bruhn or someone else responding to her work might formalize a hypothesis about the relationship between interruption and learning for a deductive project. They might propose, for example, a U-shaped relationship between interruption and learning such that too much interruption is as problematic as too little. Empirical investigation of this hypothesis could be carried out in a laboratory setting to systematically compare team work in different conditions.

But inductive theory building would also be useful. Before moving to the rigors of deductive theory building and testing, the next project could be a longitudinal study of interrupted teamwork over time. The inductive researcher would avoid speculating about things like "level of interruption" in favor of creating categories and drawing conclusions from what is directly observed.

A third approach would continue in an abductive mode of inquiry. For example, a group of researchers with prior experience studying teams might compare their experience. This period of theorizing would precede the decision to move in either a deductive or inductive direction in Figure 3.1.

In short, theories are thinking tools that can be developed in different ways. All three forms of theorizing are familiar ways of learning about the world, but scholars must develop theoretic explanations with much more precision than day-to-day activities require. For example, I mentioned above that a friend might say, "My theory is that A is overly cautious because he is worried that he might lose his job." I accept a statement like this in casual conversation. My reaction as a scholar is that my friend does not have a "theory" in an academic sense, but something much weaker: a speculation based on beliefs about stress and behavior.

Andy Van de Ven's book *Engaged Scholarship: A Guide for Organizational and Social Research* is one of many sources that provide more detail about theory development. In a comment that is compatible with my description of the difficulties of describing a wonderful vacation to others, he too argues for generality as the important result of scholarly projects:

[J]ournal papers include two kinds of words: those referring to general concepts that might appear in any paper (y words) and words referring to substantive issues

> *Theories are generalized explanations that draw from and facilitate comparison and analysis of empirical observations.*

that are specific to particular articles (x words). The ratio of x words to y words suggests how much jargon the article contains. . . . [The] process of emptying theories of incidental x-words is crucial, for they often prevent us from "seeing the forest because of the trees." Parsimonious theories are preferred not just because of simplicity, but more importantly because they tend to go beyond the information given by having been emptied of incidental details.[13]

❖ THEORETIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOLARLY CONVERSATION

Now I want to return to the idea that theoretic generalization facilitates communication, and suggest that scholarly conversations often follow a predictable pattern. Conversation tends to begin with exploration, growing enthusiasm, discovered agreement, and a feeling of solid progress—interspersed by suggested variations. As time goes by, the general pattern tends to be one of increasing diversity and also increasing doubt. Conversation may flourish for a long time, but at some point the attention of most people in the community turns to new subjects even though all problems with current explanations are not yet resolved. In the process, the original group often splinters and reorganizes into several different conversations.

The progression is not this linear, of course, but see if you recognize these types of contributions from your own readings:

1. *Speculation*—Many conversations have indeterminate beginnings. Only after direction is established is it possible to look back and see that the initiators of what turned out to be an interesting new area of inquiry were saying about the same thing: "This is curious, interesting, and perhaps important."[14]

2. *Assertion*—The speculative phase of conversation ends when a more definitive claim is accepted by colleagues. This turn is often marked by the more explicit statement, "X is important because it creates Y, a subject we all agree is important." That argument typically becomes a classic reference in later discussion, and the conversational "gears" are definitely beginning to turn as scholars increase in number and become more definite in their claims. Still, direct debate often does not occur at this early stage because there is not yet enough common ground for focused interaction.

3. *Clarification*—Conversation takes another critical step forward as additional detail is provided. This requires statements like "X is a useful explanation because of reasons a, b, and c," or "X is created in steps 1, 2, 3, 4." Among other things, these more focused contributions to conversation indicate that scholars now are sure enough about their domain to distinguish difference and variation. Theoretic development now makes it easier to see how one project can be linked to others, not only by those in the

conversation but also by potential newcomers and audiences farther away from the work being done.

4. *Reiteration*—It is worth thinking about reiteration as a distinct phase of theoretic development, even though it is often hard to distinguish clarification from reiteration. I once did a field study in which an executive seemed to say virtually the same thing every time we met over a period of several months. After some confusion about what was going on, my collaborator and I decided that we had been listening to a richer "rehearsal" than we had realized. Our informant was listening to himself as well as hearing the response of others, and he was receiving new information from statements that we thought contained minimal differences. When he had sufficient confidence, he took action.

Rehearsal provided by apparently similar theoretic explanations can be equally important. We reiterate and gradually improve arguments in conversation with ourselves and our coworkers in the middle of a project. Conference presentations can also be informative for those who organize a project and others in the conversation. Ultimate publication of a reiterating project might add information about timing or other details that had not been sufficiently appreciated.

Unfortunately, however, a project or an entire conversation can be unproductively caught up in published reiteration. Jim Walsh noted in 1995 that management scholars interested in cognition had used 81 (!) different words to describe the existence and impact of cognitive schemas.[15] I suspect that something similar could be said about many scholarly conversations. The trick, of course, is to decide whether the project you present as "reiteration" is likely to be seen as clarifying poorly understood ideas or merely echoing accepted ideas in an uninteresting way.

5. *Adjustment*—Debate is more and more likely as conversations mature. If it is assumed that X is created by a series of processes (1, 2, 3, 4), for example, an adjusting contribution may propose that these steps can occur in a different order, or not appear at all. Bolder adjustments (e.g., "X is created by 1, 2 and 3, but almost never by 4") fall within the challenges Davis recommends, as summarized in Chapter 2.

6. *Negation*—Clarification, reiteration, and adjustment characterize the bulk of scholarly activity over time, something Thomas Kuhn calls puzzle solving "normal science."[16] A more startling turn in conversation attacks the subject of inquiry itself and thus moves beyond the kind of challenge Davis proposes. For example, Chapter 7 briefly discusses the introduction of a "positive" perspective in many different disciplines. In 1998, one proponent, the president of the American Psychology Association, observed that his profession had overemphasized explanations about psychosis and illness, while more revealing insights could be gained by looking at health.[17] This is definitely a rejection of widely shared beliefs.

7. *Synthesis*—Negation can directly reframe conversation, but after one or more significant alternatives have been proposed, another possibility is that new contribution proposes a synthesizing perspective.[18] It was rather quickly recognized, for example, that

health and illness are both part of human experience and that balanced psychology should consider the simultaneous existence of both in the single individual. This kind of contribution is often cheered because it recovers knowledge that must be discarded if a negating contribution is accepted as a new center of scholarly conversation.

8. *Redirection*—However, no conversation lasts forever. Sometimes there is an explicit turn when someone suggests, "X is no longer important; we have to look at Q." More often, a new subject has its own fuzzy beginning, there is no standoff, but attention turns in a new direction.

9. *Rebuttal*—While many scholars interested in the new subject may not pay attention to previous conversations, which they feel have little relevance to their current enthusiasm, others may continue the established conversation, perhaps claiming their work's superiority over recent attempts to redirect conversation. Typically, this work has a much lower probability of publication than it would have when larger numbers are involved.

Table 3.1 summarizes these ideas as a continuation of the brainstorming tools offered in Chapter 2 about interesting and engaging research. The claims shown, though certainly not exhaustive, can be useful in many different situations: actively reading the literature, responding to a colleague's presentation, justifying a proposal for research funding, making helpful suggestions when reviewing a manuscript, as well as positioning a submitted manuscript in a conversation marked by previous publications.

The basic idea of Table 3.1 is that we should pay attention (as listeners and as readers) to how statements agree and disagree with what is already known or believed by others. As presenters and writers, we must recognize that our listeners and readers will make similar connections. This is the important premise of rhetoric: every statement links a speaker to an audience.[19] The word *rhetoric* is sometimes used in a pejorative way to express a disconnection among words, beliefs, and actions. We know from advertising and politics, as well as from more personal interactions, that words often hide a speaker's beliefs and intentions. We also know that apparently neutral statements can have unintended consequences.[20] Important criticisms of academic work draw on these and other observations. Before summarizing some important concerns, I urge you to consider argument more neutrally. For many years, my sherry-sipping view of academics made me reject what I saw as inappropriate attention to idea packaging. Now, I believe that we owe our colleagues a well-organized presentation of our ideas—one that makes the strongest case possible (within the bounds of trustworthy behavior) for connections among our interests.

> *Scholarly argument advances as contributors link their work and ideas to the work and ideas of others. Rhetorical skill increases the effectiveness of this connection but can be abused.*

Furthermore, as suggested in Figure 3.2, understanding about what is interesting, significant, and trustworthy typically refers not only to the immediate scholarly conversation, but also to other scholarly conversations as well as our

Table 3.1   That's Interesting Because It Makes a Theoretic Claim!

Speculation	A is a curious or provocative idea or phenomenon that cannot be explained by current theory.
Assertion	The new subject A is interesting or significant because it explains things (or is explained by things) that we should know more about.
Clarification	We agree that A is interesting/significant, and I can expand our knowledge by providing details about its composition and/or causal connections.
Reiteration	We agree that A is interesting/significant, and I can reinforce and improve that understanding.
Adjustment	We thought that A was composed of 1, 2, and 3 (or created by a, b, and c), but I argue that misunderstood or overlooked phenomena indicate that A has different components or different causal relationships.
Negation	We thought A was interesting/significant, but I argue that it is not, because B is more important or significant.
Synthesis	We have been confused by contradictory claims about A and B, but I can provide a broader explanatory framework that resolves apparent contradictions and shows how both are important.
Redirection	We thought that A was interesting/significant, but a different subject is more interesting and more significant.
Rebuttal	Some scholars have doubts about the importance and significance of A, but my arguments or evidence reestablishes that A is interesting and significant.

experience outside of academia. This broader context may be the focus of publication; in fact, I would argue that too many justifications can be confusing, but it is useful to recognize that our insights as scholars are not generated within one domain alone.

❖   CRITICISMS OF THEORY

Theories are developed at many different levels and can cause considerable confusion and disagreement about both the purpose and mode of scholarly activity. The last two centuries were marked by ambitious **Grand Theories** associated with names like Adam Smith, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jane Adams, Max Weber, Madame Curie, Bertrand Russell, Alfred Einstein, and Margaret Mead. Wikipedia can provide
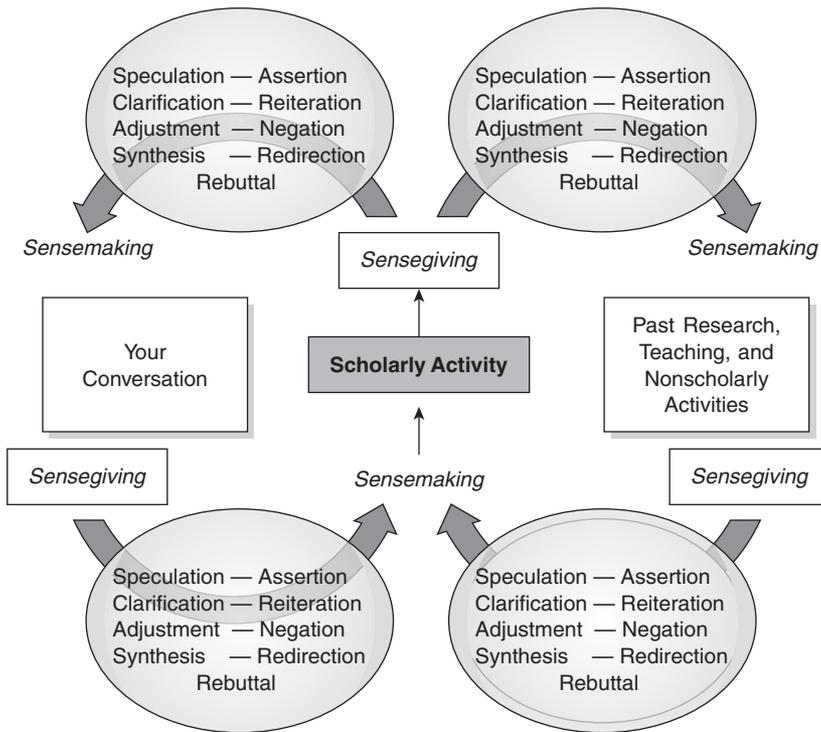
Figure 3.2   Explanatory Sensegiving

additional and more contemporary examples of major theoretic efforts (but remember
not to use it as a scholarly source: see Appendix A).

- Mathematics: Axiomatic set theory, chaos theory, graph theory, number theory,
  probability theory
- Statistics: Extreme value theory
- Physics: Quantum field theory, acoustic theory, antenna theory
- Planetary science: Giant impact theory
- Biology: Evolution by natural selection, cell theory
- Chemistry: Atomic theory, kinetic theory of gases
- Geology: Continental drift, plate tectonics
- Climatology: Global warming
- Humanities: Critical theory
- Sociology: Social theory, critical social theory, value theory
- Philosophy: Speculative reason
- Computer science: Algorithmic information theory, computation theory
- Games: Rational choice theory, game theory[21]

I certainly wasn't confident enough to work at this level as a young scholar. In addition, this kind of theorizing didn't interest me very much. The words I've just listed are textbook subjects for most people, learned as a static, concrete block of interrelated assertions. It is hard to gather the courage to break that block apart and add or change a piece of the whole. Of course, the theory that seems so imposing can be traced back to explanations by one or more individuals, but over time the historical face rarely invites conversation.

You, of course, may decide that you like and understand this kind of theory building. Or perhaps you will focus on model building as a more specific kind of generalized explanation. At whatever level of analysis we work, however, it is important to consider how theory has been challenged over time. Critique is the subject of many book-length arguments, but many concerns apply to most efforts to provide theoretic explanation, as three friends and I discuss in Chapter 14. We highlight four issues:

• *Recognition that theoretic statements are not neutral.* A strong set of arguments insists that theory is a tool of power. Even though the rhetoric of science stresses impartiality, the components of the academic task (definition of subjects, choice of phenomena studied, forms of analysis, etc.) tend to prioritize status, wealth, male interests, and Western/developed economies. Those who are concerned about this aspect of theory building often have an emancipation agenda, though by whom/for whom continues to be a touchy subject.[22]

• *Arguments that the person theorizing provides the framework that determines theory.* Language is not independent, at least from a social constructivist point of view (a subject discussed in Chapter 6). Generalization is therefore problematic from this perspective because statements make sense only if context is specified. At the extreme, some scholars have argued that the "physical world" has no meaning—everything is "constructed" by the viewer. This is a grand theory subject in itself, even thought it attacks the possibility of generalized explanations.

• *Concerns about human limits and confusions.* A humanist perspective sees doubt and uncertainty as inevitable. This idea tends to come in and out of focus in different conversations over time. Once the critique is recognized, however, it is difficult to accept the certainty many theories present. When I talk about this idea in class, I invite reflections on changing advice about diet: Is fat bad for us? Or is it good? Is caffeine a poison? Or does it help prevent heart attacks? Most of us have changed our diet on the basic of well-argued theory, then changed it again as new theory emerged. Our scholarly lives are likely to be in similar flux.

• *Demands for increased academic contribution.* A fourth concern has to do not with form but with content and consequence. Many reasonable observers point to the limited impact of academic endeavors and ask if our explanations are relevant. The general public and government sources of funds increasingly want more accountability. Serious political, social, economic, and environmental problems need attention. If the "ivory tower" ever existed, it is a thing of the past.

A small amount of research will reveal an enormous literature on these and other limitations of theory in various disciplines and professions. I assume that you are already familiar with some references and critiques that pertain to your area of interest. My reading has left me with four challenging questions:

1. What is my ethical responsibility to those who might be harmed by carrying out this project or publishing its outcomes?

2. Have I sufficiently considered and reported how my background, my interests, and even my presence might affect my observations and theoretic explanations?

3. Do I maintain a suitable sense of modesty, even though I know that attracting attention requires confidence?

4. Is there a strong reason to carry out this project when it is compared with other compelling subjects, especially given inevitably limited resources for inquiry?

The questions most relevant to you depend upon your specialty, as well as your own values and beliefs. In general, however, trying to answer questions like those noted has not resolved the angst about theory. I have found it very helpful to distinguish the grand theories I learned in my formal training from the more specific explanations that now interest me. "Theoretic explanation" or perhaps just "explanation" is a label that fits these scholarly attempts to generalize—and generalization still seems to be an important contribution of scholarship.

Of course, it is possible to ask whether theory building should be tried at all. Don Hambrick, a noted theorist in my professional field, recognizes that "theories help us organize our thoughts, generate coherent explanations, and improve our predictions. But he also suggests that "a theory fetish . . . prevents the reporting of rich detail about interesting phenomena for which no theory exists. And it bans the reporting of facts—no matter how important or competently generated—that lack explanations, but that, once reported, might stimulate the search for an explanation."[23]

This is a compelling argument, though I worry that Hambrick's arguments might be used to justify lazy research design and reporting. If the result is rejected for publication, his misunderstood arguments also may reinforce the discontented conclusion that elites too narrowly constrict publication outlets. Don and I both want reviewers and editors to reject manuscripts that describe sunsets in Hawaii without a clear purpose. If you are contemplating a project that is not oriented toward theory building, I think there are several things you must do to lessen the probability of rejection:

• **Justify**—Every scholar must convince him- or herself and others of the project's importance. Books on research often suggest finding a gap in the literature, but as Don notes, a "gap" presumes a conversation underway. Room for exploratory work can be claimed. Be careful, however, if you argue that it is important to establish the applicability of previous findings to a new context. If you only assert that we should be sure there are sunsets in Hawaii, publication of a one-page affirmative will resolve doubt. Some scholars will rightly resist the commercial metaphor, but I believe we all can benefit from thinking,

"My time is an expensive part of our collective effort. How can I use it most effectively?" Your answer may be that you should sit quietly on the beach in inductive study. Your confidence increases my confidence as the ultimate recipient of your efforts.

- **Link**—You can't expect others to decide if and how your "spectacular sunset" relates to a previously reported "theatrical panorama." It's your job, not the reader's, to establish the comparative domain. More generally, if you do not refer to some vocabulary, constructs, evidence, or arguments from previous publications in your work, you are not a scholar as I have defined it. Weaving ideas from the literature into your study is often done in general terms, though a well-chosen comparison to a specific study may be more engaging and thus provoke a conversational response.

- **Compare and contrast**—Again, you cannot leave the hard work to your audience. I need quite specific information to decide if I can and want to relate my inquiries to yours. It is therefore necessary to show how your design and findings relate to published work we have both read.

- **Judge—**Designing and reporting research that can contribute to an ongoing conversation requires judgment. "That's why we pay you so much," I say with a smile. But actually, I'm very serious. You've spent a lot of time and effort to get to the point where you have some confidence about carrying out a scholarly study. The larger academic community has made a much greater investment in your training. The evidence that our collective commitment was worthwhile is not primarily your abilities with the mechanics of research, though that's a desirable first indicator. The mechanical aspects of inquiry can be completed by an able assistant. The contribution you cannot delegate is first, discriminating among the range of things that might be done in your project and second, highlighting the results that are most likely to attract others.

- **Illustrate—**It isn't enough to tell your audience that "you should have been there." You have to present evidence.

- **Anticipate skepticism**—Editors may be sad to receive a potentially promising manuscript that has not been tempered by the gaze of others, but it is usually easy to reject. You might look at Don Hambrick's paper as an exemplar of how a happier outcome might be achieved. He knows that his thesis violates accepted wisdom and counters several likely concerns. Skeptical readers are more likely to consider his argument because he meets them on ground they feel is important.

Though my effort here is to support work that does not make theoretic explanation its primary objective, this list further convinces me that all scholarly work has to reach out to an audience with some generalizing statement. The effort should not distort your scholarly effort; it should strengthen it.

The expectations for theoretic explanation vary among conversations, but scholarly communication depends upon some level of generalization.

❖ SUPPORTING CONVERSATION WITH THEORETIC EXPLANATIONS

The concerns about theory and theory testing of the last few decades remind me of a story that delighted me as an undergraduate: A group of scholars is determined to estab-lish tests that will verify the truth of a statement like "The object I hold is a telephone." Their problem, however, is that an infinite number of tests seem relevant. It would not be a telephone if it turned into a tiger in the night, right? So we should stay awake and make sure that doesn't happen. It would not be a telephone if a baby could eat it. Who has a baby so we can check? Scientific inquiry seemed impossible, until someone suggested a differ-ent test: Can I call my mother? If yes, it's a telephone![24]

I am going to take that pragmatic perspective in this book, and focus on theoretic explanations. When we **explain**, we offer a reason or justification for a specific, located "system of ideas."[25]

Many people agree that six things facilitate that effort:

1. *Vocabulary and relationships*—Useful contributions to scholarly conversation offer a vocabulary for explanation and a rationale for relating these words. By exten-sion, when a manuscript is accepted for publication, it is a sign that reviewers agree with or at least accept the vocabulary and relationships used to clarify, challenge, or diversify current discussion.

2. *Contestable but credible claims*—Explanations that are very widely accepted (e.g., the sun will rise tomorrow because the earth is revolving in an orbit around it) do not encourage conversation. Explanations that have a very low probability of being accepted (e.g., it is possible that the sun will not rise tomorrow) are rarely worth dis-cussing either. Scholarly conversations take place in the much more interesting territory between these extremes. Think of conversationalists who attract attention at a party— somehow they establish a position that makes other people want to respond with addi-tional ideas.

3. *Bounded domain*—Generalization makes a contribution interesting to a larger audience. To be worth discussing, however, theoretic contributions must also have a bound-ary. In order to understand what any contribution to conversation is about, and when and where it applies, scholars have to indicate where their explanation does *not* apply.

4. *Logical, consistent argument*—Logic facilitates understanding. Western readers, for example, typically expect a recognizable temporal sequence. We also tend to find ambiguity problematic. Our (often unexamined) expectations provide the framework within which contributions to scholarly conversation are understood, although there are exceptions. David Boje, for example, suggests that "antenarrative . . . [defined as] frag-mented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and prenarrative speculation,"[26] can be a useful counterpoint to overly rational conversations.

5. *Substantiation (or potential substantiation) by empirical evidence*—When something is "substantiated," it is "made real or tangible." The word is further defined as "strengthened by demonstration," and perhaps (especially in the positivist tradition) "strengthened by proof."[27] Many conversations about theory emphasize empirical evidence as the primary means of establishing credibility.[28] On the other hand, interesting and important discussions in subjects like theoretic physics take place even when empirical evidence is not available. Conversation about black holes, for example, proceeded intermittently for centuries before supporting evidence was found.

6. *Evocative implications*—Intriguing examples are often used to attract attention to as well as advance theoretic discussions. I do not have the background to understand much about black holes, for example, but along with many others I was fascinated by descriptions of intense mass and gravity that would swallow everything in its vicinity, including light. Steven Hawking made the intriguing claim that even information could not escape.[29] These ideas contradict ordinary experience. Their attraction is highlighted by the very words used. *Black hole* sounds mysterious, and previous labels (*black star* or *dark star*) are similarly evocative.[30] Recent evidence that black holes may be formed by the merger of smaller galaxies uses even more engaging vocabulary: scholars are now discussing the "tadpole" phase of a black hole.[31]

Perhaps you will find these characteristics of explanation useful as you try to understand the literature in your area of interest, establish objectives for your research, persuade funding bodies of your design's importance, or connect your project to the work of other scholars in a manuscript submitted for publication. They also should be of assistance as you work on your own generalizations. My friend Gary Gaile does caution in Chapter 14, however, that these are neither necessary nor sufficient for theory building. Therefore, the place to start is once again the literature in your field of interest.

EXERCISE 8

List and Evaluate Theoretic Explanations
That Influence Your Field and Conversation

1. Examine at least 10 articles or books that have shaped the conversation that interests you.

2. Do they use the words theory, theoretic, or explanation? If not, what words do the authors (and perhaps those who cite them) use to convey their contributions?

3. Consider whether these contributions exhibit the six characteristics of theoretic explanation just listed and, if not, whether they would be improved if held to these standards.

(Continued)

(Continued)

4. On the basis of this evidence, describe the role of theoretic explanation in your conversation and the larger subfield(s) with which it is associated.

5. List specific explanations or theoretic statements that you feel will be most useful to your own scholarly project.

6. Keep the list and add to it as you identify important explanations from other published sources.

❖   TARGETING CONVERSANTS FOR A SPECIFIC PROJECT

I have just suggested that you outline the major theoretic features of your conversational domain. Now, I encourage you to focus more narrowly on a smaller set of references that pertain more directly to your potential contribution. One advantage of this move is that the scholarly conversation you intend to join becomes embodied in the work of a few individuals who are easier to track and potentially easier for you to relate to.

The influence of specific people becomes clear as you start to attend meetings—not just the large meetings of national and regional associations, but also the smaller, more focused conferences and workshops that support rich conversation about more specific subjects. I encourage you to be active in the face-to-face conversations these events encourage. The multiple opportunities for scholarship tend to be both easier to recognize and more compelling in interpersonal conversation than on the printed page. In fact, interpersonal conversation is so important that I recommend you consider actively constructing conversation from the beginning of your career. Arranging a conference symposium that includes more established scholars is the kind of thing I have in mind. Other possibilities include establishing an online chat, or informally asking a few people with similar interests to lunch.

———❖❖———

*Join and then form verbal conversations
among scholars with similar interests.*

———❖❖———

The rewards from personal contact are similar to those achieved by interacting with the literature. To assure the connection, at the start of every academic project I identify a few specific articles as a helpful focal point for outlining my research, carrying it out, and then writing about it. (Coauthors are often involved; I chose to use the first-person singular for convenience and to encourage you to take this advice personally.) The articles are chosen from my review of the literature, as discussed in more detail in Chapters 8 and 13. I use these articles to help position my work in a specific conversational domain to help me go beyond current contributions in some way. You might think the link to specific

articles would be limiting; I argue that it is helpful precisely because it helps me find a larger audience. Other people can more easily make sense of what I am trying to do by following the conversational trail I establish with published **conversants.**

I literally pin my three or four conversant articles above my computer. Books do not work as well for projects I anticipate reporting in an article or two. Their content is often too weighty—literally and metaphorically. Of course, I violate my own advice on occasion and choose a book-length conversant, but it often turns out to be less helpful than an article because books are meant to cover many topics by design.

In planning my research project, I try to do things that would interest my conversants. That requires an in-depth analysis that I outline in Exercise 9. The familiarity gained from careful reading helps frame my project. Even more important, as choices have to be made in the course of the project, the decisions made by my conversants inform mine—not as templates, but as points of departure for trying to do something different. Of course, I'm looking at a lot of other references, too, but my key conversants are critical. They assist my sensemaking and thus my later attempts at sensegiving.

One sign that identifying conversants has been a helpful organizing idea is that I have drastically cut the long literature reviews that used to introduce my work. Naming conversants reminded me that they already know most of that material. I also write in a more energized way when I imagine authors' faces in front of me, and I am confident that energy attracts a larger audience in presentations and publications. I hope that you can image such a conversation in the area that interests you.

EXERCISE 9

Anticipate Conversation With a Few Conversant Articles

1. Choose three or four articles as a conversational base for the contribution of your current project.

2. Using the format established in Table 3.2, specify an organizing question and summarize a limited number of claims (perhaps one to five) from conversant articles in the left column that you expect to rely on in planning and reporting your project. If necessary, construct more than one table to support a large project, but remember that simultaneously responding to multiple claims strains your focus and reader goodwill.

3. For each claim, consider the options for response suggested in this chapter and summarized in subsequent columns in the table, adding categories as necessary.

4. Circle your most interesting, significant, and trustworthy potential contributions.

5. On a separate page, anticipate the author's rejoinder to these few points and strengthen your entries, if possible.

6. Update a worksheet that includes only relevant columns as necessary to rehearse the logic supporting your project.

To clarify the "careful" at the top of the "reiterates," column, I will remind you again of the horrible evening I spent looking at my neighbors' pictures from Hawaii. A familiar story from a new context is rarely interesting to others. However, the observation that at first seems to merely reiterate claims already found in the literature can often be transferred to other categories. It is important to remember that a useful contribution does not have to be earthshaking, but it does have to make a claim for contribution.

While Exercise 9 refines arguments from Chapter 1 that suggest you anticipate how conversation can generate and improve your ideas, its first objective is to test your definition of conversation and choice of key references. I suggest you ask yourself the following questions:

• Do my primary references point toward issues that others in my field will recognize? (It is possible to include one "outsider" or "unknown" as a key conversant, but remember that you are trying to help your potential readers locate your effort in their own mental maps.)

• Can I argue that the specific claims I have listed are interesting and significant? Are my ideas for building on these claims interesting and significant? Before doing very much work on a scholarly project, it makes sense to assure yourself that things that interest you are also of interest to others. You don't have to aspire to a Nobel Prize; just start with an external audience in mind.

• Have I confused well-known people/articles that helped establish the terrain with the people/articles that I find most interesting? (Typically, the field-defining paper has launched ideas that moved in new directions. You may want to revisit founding articles, but only if they also can be linked to more contemporary concerns.)

• Am I confusing making a contribution *to* the conversation I want to be part of with drawing insight *from* other perspectives? (Scholarly progress in one field often comes from borrowing ideas from other fields. I believe, however, that a single project is unlikely to make a significant contribution to conversations in both the import and export fields.)

It can be especially helpful to carry out activities suggested in Exercise 9 as part of a group. That will allow you to trade the tables created, then ask each other these challenging questions.

You have three potential sources of ideas once you have established a conversational domain, as summarized in Figure 3.3. The central ovals in the diagram suggest three sources of ideas that may provide an "unfamiliar" or unexpected lens on current conversation: your insights, the insights of other scholars, and the insights available from empirical observation. It is your job as a scholar to search for interesting/significant ideas from each source and use the most promising to carry out and communicate your scholarly project. Your message will be easiest to understand if you avoid trying to simultaneously make a contribution to a field that you consider your conversation and a conversation that helps you establish your contribution. Multiple audiences expand the literature you must

Table 3.2   Matrix for Responding to Key Conversants

Primary Question:

Contribution→	My Paper:									
Conversant↓	Speculates	Asserts	Clarifies	Reiterates (Careful)	Adjusts	Negates	Synthesizes	Redirects	Rebuts	?
Claim 1 (conversant____)										
Claim 2 (conversant____)										
Claim 3 (conversant____)										
Claim 4 (conversant____)										
Claim 5 (conversant____)										
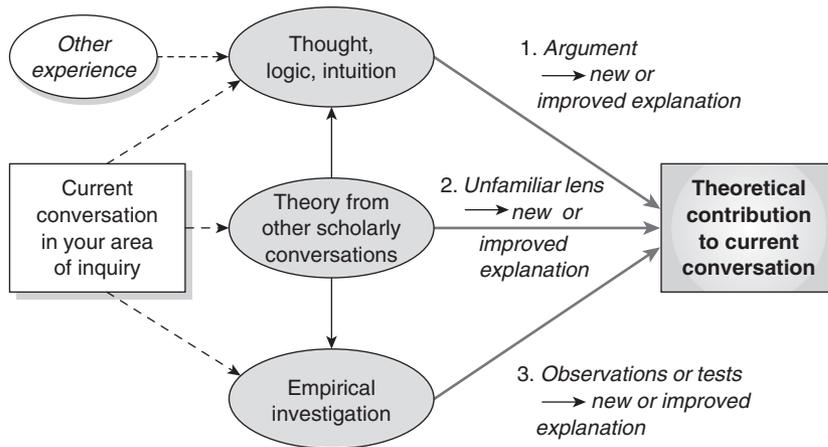
Figure 3.3   Three Sources of Theoretic Ideas

consider, the vocabularies you must use, and the conclusions you must reach—all of which are likely to simultaneously bore and confuse readers. In short,

———❖❖———

*Recognize the risks of trying to contribute
to multiple conversations in one article.*

———❖❖———

❖   CONCLUSION

Perhaps you are in a field, as I am, where editors of major journals demand a theoretic contribution from the manuscripts they accept for publication. If so, it will not be hard to convince you to put theory development at the center of your research efforts. But the next steps may not be obvious. A primary motivation for writing this book is the difficulty of knowing what "making a theoretic contribution" means. There are many different ways in which theory can be developed. Often, the objective is not Theory with a capital T. Editors want clear frameworks, and outputs that can ultimately be generalized. You do not have to aspire to be the next Adam Smith, Margaret Mead, or Sigmund Freud to meet these criteria.

Theories generated by these and other well-known people have been attacked. Given its contentious nature in some conversations, I considered dropping the word "theory" from my vocabulary. It was impossible. "Argument" is too vague, and it evokes the endless conversations I try to avoid. I like argument, but I want it to move toward conclusion if at all possible. The other words suggested by looking at the literature and a thesaurus seemed

equally weak, or burdened with other baggage. "Analysis," for example, has all the problems that "theory" has, if not more, and evokes a clinical approach that repels some scholars.

In the end, I decided to use "theoretic contribution," defined as "generalized expla-nation," as a useful description of the outcome of the great majority of scholarly projects. I suggest that a focus on explanation will facilitate your publishing objectives. Even more important, I believe that it will help **you** categorize and consolidate your scholarly activi-ty. If this idea makes sense to you, you might look ahead to Chapter 11, where David Whetten provides much more explicit advice on developing theoretic propositions using graphical representations.

❖ NOTES

1. The synonyms for theory listed come from http://thesaurus.reference.com/ (accessed on March 1, 2006). I should acknowledge that this source also lists *song and dance* as a synonym for *elaborate explanation.* This is an indication of the common-language use of "in theory," which can be roughly translated as "not in reality." The issue is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 10, Links to Practice and Policy.

2. Kolb, D. A., Rubin, I. M., & McIntyre, J. M. (1979). *Organization psychology: An experien-tial approach* (p. 38). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

3. This link between practical experience and academic work, including the diagram from Kolb, is described in Gill, G., & Johnson, P. (2003). The role of theory in research methods. *Research methods for managers*, 3rd ed. (Chap. 3). London: Sage Publications.

4. Stinchcombe, A. L. (1968). *Constructing social theories* (p. 15). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

5. Ibid., p. 16.

6. Ibid.

7. Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago: Aldine. Barney Glaser continues to actively promote what many would consider to be an inductive approach. See http://www.groundedtheory.com/soc16.html, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Grounded_theory (both accessed March 26, 2007). Strauss now supports an abductive approach, as noted in endnote 10.

8. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grounded_theory_%28Glaser%29#GT_nomenclature (accessed March 26, 2007).

9. Discussion of Peirce in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is a good introduc-tion. See http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce/ (last accessed March 26, 2007).

10. Abductive reasoning is favored by Anselm Strauss, the coauthor of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grounded_theory_(Strauss) (last accessed March 26, 2007).

11. Van de Ven, A. H. (2007). *Engaged scholarship.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

12. Ibid., p. 103. See also Zellmer-Bruhn, M. E. (2003). Interruptive events and team knowl-edge acquisition. *Management Science, 49*(4), 514–528.

13. Van de Ven (2007), *Engaged scholarship.* The argument is much more subtle than sum-marized and is worth examining.

14. The speculation phase of discussion can be prolonged. Albert Einstein is often seen as a central figure in the discussion of black holes, for example (though he did not use this term, which was coined in the 1960s), but I have read that related ideas were expressed as early as the late 1700s.

15. Walsh, J. P. (1995). Managerial and organizational cognition: Notes from a trip down memory lane. *Organization Science, 6*(3), 280–321.

16. For a discussion on the nature and importance of "normal science," see Lakatos, I., & Musgrave, A. (1970). *Criticism and the growth of knowledge.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

17. Seligman, M. E. P. (1999, July/August). Teaching positive psychology. *APA Monitor Online, 30*(7). Available at http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug99/speaking.html (last accessed March 26, 2007).

18. Disagreement is central to Hegelian inquiry. See Churchman, C. W. (1971). *The design of inquiring systems: Basic concepts of systems and organizations.* New York: Basic Books. An accessible summary can be found at http://www.bus.ucf.edu/jcourtney/FIS/inqorg.htm#s2 (last accessed March 26, 2007).

19. Greek philosophers gave a great deal of attention to rhetoric, and their ideas are an important foundation for continuing study. For a preliminary overview, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhetoric#Online_primary_texts (last accessed March 26, 2007). Aristotle's views on rhetoric have been particularly important. See http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/#means (last accessed March 26, 2007).

20. "Unintended consequences" is a term used by Anthony Giddens. For an overview, search for the term at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Giddens#_note-Mestrovic (last accessed March 26, 2007).

21. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory (last accessed March 26, 2007).

22. Chapter 10 briefly discusses the concerns of research subjects who feel alienated by scholarly projects that presume to understand and interpret their life situations and interests.

23. Hambrick, D. C. (2007). The field of management's devotion to theory: Too much of a good thing? *Academy of Management Journal, 50*(6), 1346–1352.

24. I apologize for not having a specific reference for this story, which is obviously about logical positivism and pragmatism. The emphasis of the course was on thinking, not learning labels. That is a good position to take, in my opinion, unless the conversations that interest you are deeply absorbed in theory development.

25. Definition of *explain* retrieved from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/explain (accessed March 7, 2008).

26. Boje, D. M. (2001). *Narrative methods for organizational and communication research* (p. 1). London: Sage Publications.

27. *Oxford English Dictionary* online, http://dictionary.oed.com (subscription required).

28. Stinchcombe (1968), *Constructing social theories*.

29. Hawking, S. W. (2005, July). *Information loss in black holes.* Available at http://arxiv.org/PS_cache/hep-th/pdf/0507/0507171v2.pdf.

30. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_hole#Recent_discoveries (last accessed March 26, 2007).

31. Than, K. (2006, January 10). Space tadpoles signal black hole mergers. *Space.com.* Accessible at http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/060110_blackhole_merger.html (last accessed March 26, 2007).