

## **Framework for Theory in Applied Disciplines: Boundaries, Contributing, Core, Useful, Novel, and Irrelevant Components**

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March 7, 2007

### **Abstract**

*Most applied disciplines are attempting to make significant advancements in articulating the theoretical foundation of their fields of study. The theory discussions and theory research in most applied disciplines are not held together in a manner that allows interpretation and integration. This article presents a holistic Theory Framework for Applied Disciplines to help scholars and practitioners create and critique the theory of an applied discipline as well as the contributing, core, useful, novel, and irrelevant theory components within it. Each of the six components in the framework are described and illustrated through relevant theory examples. The role that each component plays in advancing the theory and practice in an applied discipline is also examined.*

### **Introduction**

Within any discipline or field of study, rival views regarding its purposes and practices exist at almost every level. The rival perspectives can be very broad, such as the focus and the nature of the discipline itself, or narrow, such as the explanation of a simple elemental aspect of the discipline. In applied disciplines, where matters of both theory and practice are of great concern, the range of perspectives widens even further in an effort to satisfy the demands of both scholars and practitioners. Van de Ven (1999) refers to this state within organization and management theory as being buzzing, blooming, and confusing.

Having rival theories in a discipline is not a disturbing state of affairs. Not having well-developed theory is disturbing. This holds true when framing an entire discipline or when considering even the smallest aspect of a discipline. The assumption is that theoretical challenges from within can only help to advance the theory. For applied disciplines rooted in professional practice (such as human resource development or management), a problem emerges that is less likely to exist in more staid disciplines that are disconnected from practical matters (such as history, religion, or philosophy). The theory development challenge in applied disciplines is exacerbated by the dynamic that comes from practice and the relative youthfulness of most applied disciplines.

### **Problem and Purpose**

Most applied disciplines are attempting to make significant advancements in articulating the theoretical foundation of their fields of study. Management (Weick, 1979), human resource development (Swanson, 2001) and information science (Benbasa, 1999) are just a few. The problem is that the theory discussions and theory research are not held together in a manner that allows interpretation and integration. Theory development related to the essence of a discipline can be laid up against a theory effort focused on an extremely narrow sub-phenomenon within the applied discipline with no discernable means of logically connecting the two. Without a theory framework, there is a sense of randomness and incoherence to theory discussions and developments. Van de Ven (1999) characterized this theory state as buzzing, blooming, and confusing.

In response to the problem, the purpose of this article is to theorize about theory by presenting a *Theory Framework for Applied Disciplines* to help scholars and practitioners think about, develop, and critique the status of the theory in their disciplines with a holistic perspective.

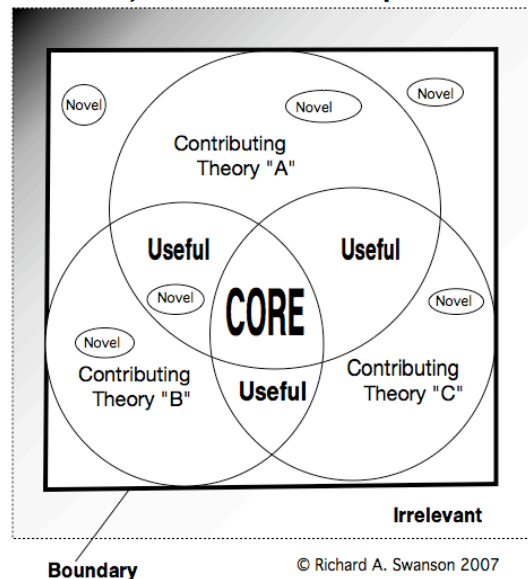
### **Proposing a Theory Framework**

Scholars rarely, if ever, set forth the core theory of their applied disciplines or a formal theoretical structure for discussing, organizing, or advancing their disciplinary view of theory and its components. In discussing their disciplines, they have relied on (1) the perspective of being interdisciplinary and (2) on dead-end philosophical debates as to the definition and purpose of the discipline.

### **A Theory Framework for Applied Disciplines**

The proposed *Theory Framework for Applied Disciplines* is made up of six components that are displayed in a graphic presentation (Figure 4).

Figure 4  
**Theory Framework for Applied Disciplines:  
 Boundaries, Contributing, Core, Useful,  
 Novel, and Irrelevant Components**



### Description of the Theory Framework Components

Each of the six theory components for applied disciplines is described below. These descriptions establish the purpose and features of each component.

**Boundary of the Theory of an Applied Discipline:** The boundary of the theory of an applied discipline is established by specifying its name, definition, and purpose along with assumptions or beliefs that conceptually frame the theory and practice of that discipline.

**Contributing Theories for an Applied Discipline.** The contributing theories are selected theories that fundamentally address the definition, purpose, and assumptions under-girding an applied discipline.

**Core Theory for an Applied Discipline.** The core theory of an applied discipline is the intersection and integration of the contributing theories that operationalize the definition, purpose, and assumptions of an applied discipline.

**Useful Theory for an Applied Discipline.** The theory of a phenomenon that is outside the *core theory* of an applied discipline and within the intersection of two *contributing theories* that has utility in explaining an important realm of practice within the discipline.

**Novel Theory for an Applied Discipline.** The theory of a narrow phenomenon that is related to an aspect of the applied discipline under consideration that could logically provide an unusual explanation of how it works.

**Irrelevant Theory for an Applied Discipline.** Any theory that falls outside the theory boundary, contributing theories, core theory, and useful theory of the applied discipline under consideration with no compelling evidence as to its usefulness or logic supporting its potential for a novel contribution.

### Utility of the Theory Framework for Advancing an Applied Discipline

The utility of the theory framework and its six components-- fully pursued-- provides the mental scaffolding for the structural advancement and articulation of the theory of an applied discipline. This is an important contribution in that most serious thinkers in applied disciplines have primarily relied on inadequate means to do their theorizing-- persuasive arguments supplemented with paradigms of graphic models to advance their disciplinary understanding.

The *Theory Framework for Applied Disciplines* provides an important disciplined alternative for gathering up research and experience for advancing an applied discipline. The theory framework provides wholeness to developing and connecting the components. The theory framework does not replace the theory development journey described through Lynham's (2002b) General Method of Theory Building Research in Applied Disciplines and other prescribed theory research methods. For example, as Chermack's scenario planning theory research continues to develop and mature, it could ultimately be viewed by some applied disciplines as a useful or contributing theory.

### Conclusion

The next step is test the capacity of capacity of the *Theory Framework for Applied Disciplines* to deliver on its purpose. This can be achieved by applying it across numerous applied disciplines for the purpose of affirmation or revision.