Why study organization theory?

Before you answer 'Why indeed?' and walk away, consider this: people have discovered many different reasons to study organization theory and one or more of these might apply to you. Some people are motivated by curiosity. They wonder what it would be like to think like an organization, to get inside organizing processes, or to understand the patterns that structure organizations. Others are attracted by the opportunity to stretch their minds in new ways. Organization theory draws on the sciences, the humanities, and the arts, and so promises the intellectual challenge of interdisciplinary thinking stretched across the full array of human knowledge.

Need a more practical reason? Kurt Lewin, a founder of social psychology, once said, 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory.'[1] Practical people find that embracing organization theory improves their chances of becoming successful executives in business, government, or non-profit organizations. To fire up your imagination for its practical benefits, Table 1.1 describes how organization theory applies to an array of different management specialties.

Let me be honest with you. There is another reason some people study organization theory: they are forced to do it. That was my story. My doctoral program required me to study this subject. To say that I did not appreciate organization theory when I first encountered it would be a gross understatement. It seemed abstract, dry and, well, far too theoretical! In a way, my initial reactions inspired this book. When I started teaching, my search for ways to bring this subject to life for my students taught me how interesting and useful organization theory can be. The contrast between my early feelings and my later experiences transformed me from a reluctant student of organization theory into an enthusiastic theorizer. From there it was a short step to writing this book.

If you are like me, it will take some time to build the body of concepts and skills required to appreciate organization theory and start to theorize. But, if you work hard and hang in there, I promise to introduce you to intriguing ideas and help you discover how to be creative in applying them to organizations and your own organizing and theorizing practices.

What is theory?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'theory' as 'the sphere of abstract knowledge.' Such a definition makes it all sound pretty intimidating. Therefore you might be surprised to learn that you already use theory, and probably use it every day. As an example, take any old adage

Table 1.1 Some practical applications of organization theory

Strategy/Finance	Those who want to increase the value of a company need to know how to organize to achieve strategic goals; those who want to monitor and control performance must understand how to structure activities and design organizational processes that make sense within the context of the organization's culture and allow for needed human growth and creativity.
Marketing	Marketers know that to create successful brands the organization must stand for and deliver the brand promise; a thorough understanding of what organization is and how organizations behave will make their efforts to align an organization with its brand strategy and identity more trustworthy and productive.
Information technology (IT)	The way information flows through the organization affects work processes and outcomes, so knowing organization theory can help IT specialists identify, understand, and serve the organization's informational needs as they design and promote the use of their information systems.
Operations	Value chain management requires that managers interconnect their organizing processes with those of suppliers, distributors, and customers; organization theory not only supports the technical aspects of supply chain and business systems integration, but explains their political, social, and cultural aspects as well.
Human resources (HR)	All HR activities from recruiting to compensation have organizational implications and hence benefit from knowledge provided by organization theory; organizational development and change are particularly important elements of HR that demand deep knowledge of organizations and organizing, and organization theory provides content for executive training programs.
Communication	To design communication systems, corporate communication specialists must be sensitive to the interpretive processes of employees and other stakeholders. Organization theory helps them understand how people interact with each other and the environment so that information and knowledge can be shared.

you learned as a child. 'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink' is an apt example drawn from many my mother taught me. A familiar saying like this one presents a theory about how the world works.

Through application a theory offers practical guidance. To apply the 'leading-a-horse-to-water' theory, consider yourself the horse, organization theory the water, and my job to lead you to it. This adage reminds me of your right to decide if and how you will 'drink.' Does it make you realize that much of the burden of learning organization theory and developing theorizing skill rests on your shoulders?

Whenever you start examining yourself or reality you form ideas about things, feelings, experiences, values, or expectations that can inspire you to theorize. Without effort and training, most people won't take their theorizing any further than repeating the common sense contained in old adages. But with training your everyday theorizing skills can be refined into extraordinary appreciation, understanding, and explanation of whatever interests you. The basic difference between everyday and advanced theorizing is the added care experts take to specify and reflect on their practice, correct its errors, and connect their theories to those of others, thereby contributing to the accumulated body of knowledge.

Defining theory, phenomena, concepts, and abstraction

Put most simply, a **theory** is a set of concepts whose proposed relationships offer explanation, understanding, or appreciation of a **phenomenon of interest**. Consider Albert Einstein's theory concerning how matter relates to energy. *E* (for energy) was Einstein's phenomenon of interest, which he explained using the concepts of mass (*m*) and the speed of light (*c*, for constant, because Einstein assumed that the speed of light does not vary). Squaring the product of *m* multiplied by *c* explains how the concepts of mass and light speed are related to energy, namely $E=mc^2$.

The formula $E=mc^2$ illustrates how a set of concepts and the relationships between them can produce a theory about the phenomenon of interest. It is not always this straightforward, however. When theorists confront social behavior or aim to enhance understanding or appreciation of organizations and organizing, then theory does not lend itself so easily to formulaic statements like $E=mc^2$. Nonetheless, this basic definition of what a theory is provides an entry point to discuss theory. The basic building blocks of theory are concepts, such as energy and mass.

Concepts provide mental categories into which you can sort, organize, and store ideas in memory. They are formed by **abstraction**, a process that involves mentally separating an idea about something from particular instances of it. Once the idea is distilled from its instances you can assign a label and talk about the concept in a general way. Take a concept most of us hold in common—'dog.' Your 'dog' concept, like mine, can be applied to all dogs and we use it when we talk about them, as we do now. But each of us built our concept upon personal encounters with particular animals, so our concepts may not be identical. Yours has been built on exemplars such as dogs you owned or met, or that bit you, but also with non-dogs like cats or goats. Concepts build upon both positive and negative instances and these are not identical for all the users of a concept, even though, through abstraction, we may have all arrived at the same set of features and similar understandings.

As you can see, although concepts are associated with specific examples, they are not an aggregation of all the information you acquire about them. They are more compact than this. As you form a concept you start ignoring what is unique about specific examples and focus on only what is common to all of them. Thus, the concept 'dog' is associated with four legs, a tail, a cold wet nose when it is healthy, and two ears, but not black spots, big paws, or a habit of barking or jumping on strangers, which are features of particular dogs, but not all dogs.

Removing the unique details of particular examples produces an abstraction. Through the abstraction process you distill the common aspects from a set of examples and give them a place in the knowledge structure of your memory. Such an effort produces a single abstract idea that can be related to all your examples but also to other examples of a similar kind you encounter in the future.

You may be wondering why you should drop the details out of your experience in order to build concepts. Shortening the time it takes to process information is one benefit. When you encounter a new example of a well-developed concept, you can instantly apply your prior knowledge to it. For example, recognizing that an animal is a dog will make you instantly aware of the possibility that it will growl and then bite if it feels threatened. In addition to speeding up your information processing, abstract conceptualization also makes it possible for you to communicate your knowledge. Your knowledge about dogs will not only prevent you offering your hand to a growling dog, you can also teach your children what a dog is and then pass on your knowledge.

Chunking and generalizability

In addition to rapid processing and communication of knowledge, abstraction allows you to pack large quantities of knowledge into a single concept and thereby to process what you already know efficiently. You can see the importance of efficient processing in terms of a cognitive phenomenon known as chunking. Cognitive psychologists tell us that humans have the capacity to think about, roughly, seven (plus or minus two) chunks of information at one time.[2]

Chunking means that you can think about seven different dogs and nothing else, or, through forming bigger chunks using abstract conceptualization, you can think about all the dogs in the universe and six other kinds of animal as well. You can even think about the entire animal kingdom and have room to think about six more things besides. Chunking allows you to manipulate large blocks of knowledge distilled by abstraction into concepts, a handy capacity to have when your daily activity demands that you understand and stay abreast of developments within a complex phenomenon such as an organization that is embedded in the even more complex phenomenon of its environment.

Chunking makes a significant contribution to theorizing—it permits you to relate immense bodies of knowledge to each other and manipulate them to generate new knowledge. Remember, a theory is rooted in the relationships between a set of concepts. When the concepts upon which a theory is built are defined at the highest levels of abstraction, the theory may achieve **generalizability**, which means that it applies across many situations with few limiting conditions, as $E=mc^2$ does.

As with most things in life, generalizability has drawbacks as well as benefits. For example, if you assume your knowledge is more generalizable than it is, you may apply it to the wrong situations or be more likely to impose your beliefs on others when it is inappropriate or misleading to do so. The main benefit is that, the more general the theory, the more cases to which it can be applied. But because you sacrifice specificity to achieve generalizability, the more general the theory, the less obvious or direct its application will be. My mother would have said the devil is in the details, and you meet this conundrum in abstraction.

Abstract concepts give you the ability to think rapidly and efficiently about numerous instances, but you lose the rich detail that those instances contain. Without considering the specifics of the organization to which you want to apply your theory, you will miss some of the nuances required for successful application. When you want to apply an abstract concept or theory, you have to reverse the abstraction process and add crucial details back into the picture. In other words, you need to customize applications of concepts and theories to fit the organization with which you are dealing. Theory application demands creativity!

The challenges of theorizing

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a 'theorizer' as one who evolves or indulges in theory. Whether for you theorizing is a matter of indulgence or evolution, change is required, and change can be hard on some people. So, if at first organization theory seems dry and boring, consider this: the concepts you are building as you study organization theory will most likely be introduced to you before you have had time to discover their richness. If when you encounter a new concept it seems empty and meaningless, it probably *is* empty and meaningless—*for you*! But it doesn't have to stay that way.

You can get to work enriching unfamiliar concepts by trying to relate them to personal experiences in the same way you did when you built your 'dog' concept. Start right away exploring your world looking for instances that might fit new concepts and trying ideas out to see which ones bring insight about yourself and the organizations you know or meet. This should be fun and rewarding; if it isn't you need to work harder! Read about organizations that interest you and apply organization theory to these examples.

While I will offer examples to get you started down the path to conceptualization and theorizing, your own examples count the most. For that reason I won't just hand you my examples, I will present them in ways designed to trigger associations with *your* experiences. Think of it as me leading you to water and hoping you will drink. Reading this actively may be more work than you are used to with other textbooks, but more work brings more rewards!

Your ability to handle concepts and theories will expand as you continue to read this book. You can check your progress by answering a few reflexive questions at different points on your journey:

- What previously hidden or overlooked aspects of your experience have you discovered?
- What surprises or insights have you had that changed your thinking, attitudes and/or behavior?
- How would you at this moment define 'organization'?

Changes in how you answer these questions now and at various points in the future will show you how much progress you have made and give you confidence that you are learning organization theory even if and when you feel it is all just a frustrating and confusing mess.

Your capacity to handle the material this book covers will grow with exposure and practice. So, if the content you are reading leaves you feeling overwhelmed, try coming back to read it again later. If you find you need to read some of the material more than once, rest assured you are not alone. And remember, the highlighted terms in this book are much more than jargon; they are the basic vocabulary of organization theory and the concepts from

which its theories are formed. You have to master a sufficient number of them before you can begin to theorize, which is why you may feel overwhelmed at times during your study of this field.

Bear in mind that abstraction does not happen in one move, nor is the process of conceptualization ever really finished. You will find as you work through the book that the concepts you form become increasingly richer. A person who trains dogs learns more about them all the time, and your knowledge of organizations and organization theory is going to grow. Building a steadily expanding body of theories about how concepts are related will eventually make you an expert, but it also means your work is never done.

For any and all of the reasons presented, most people become frustrated by organization theory from time to time, including me. I can all but guarantee that the messiness in the middle of translating other people's abstract concepts, theories, and perspectives into your own will confuse and frustrate you, particularly as the concepts and theories start to multiply. But as your conceptualizing and theorizing skills strengthen you should experience moments of clarity and insight. Then you will taste the thrill of organization theory. After that it gets, not easier exactly, but much more rewarding.

I have often heard people complain that theory isn't good for anything because it does not give immediate answers to their problems. Theory alone cannot solve your specific problems, only applications of theory can do that. It is wrongheaded to reject theory as having little practical value simply because you have not yet learned how to use it.

In the end, learning to theorize is probably more important than learning theories, but learning theories is essential to learning to theorize. An ancient, most likely Chinese, proverb states: 'Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish he will eat for a lifetime.' Organization theory may be full of fish, but its gift is to teach you how to fish for ideas to improve organizations and organizing. Organization theorists constantly find new ways to appreciate, understand, and explain organizations. This book will introduce you to what they have learned so far, but be aware that what you are studying now will change, just as you will.

What about those perspectives?

Defining relationships between concepts builds theory, but related theories form even bigger chunks: **theoretical perspectives**. Theoretical perspectives evolve from similarities in the way phenomena are defined, theorized, and studied and this book draws mainly upon three that have come to dominate organization theory over the past 50 or so years—modern, symbolic, and postmodern.[3] All three followed on the heels of a prehistory that grew out of practical demands for normative knowledge concerning how to achieve success through organization and organizing. The normative urge is interwoven with the three perspectives since its demands to relate theory and practice never go away. Its concerns are so pervasive it could even be considered a perspective in its own right.

Taking a **normative perspective** means defining a theory by its practical applications. Being normative implies assessing a phenomenon on the basis of an ideal, a standard, or a model of how things *should* be. Advising organizations on the best technology and social structure for their purposes, or the most effective factory or office layouts, are popular normative pursuits. Today the normative perspective is exemplified by **best practices** and

benchmarking. Normative theories of best practice and benchmarking propose that emulating the methods or techniques of the most successful organizations will lead to similar success. Their danger lies in assuming that one organization's success can be transferred to another. Calling for **evidence-based practice** is one way to improve the transferability of normative solutions, but providing evidence means grounding normative advice in theory drawn from one of the other perspectives.

The **modern perspective** focuses attention on causal **explanation**, which requires defining the antecedents and consequences of the phenomenon of interest.[4] Its methods often rely upon mathematical reasoning. However, although advocates of the modern perspective strive for the mathematical precision of theoretical physics, the data they use are often too messy to realize this aim. The wider variability of organizational behavior compared to the behavior of matter or energy often means resorting to statistical probabilities and relying on correlations to suggest the presence of causal relationships. For example, those who use the modern perspective make inferences addressing questions like: 'How does the technology of an organization affect the relationship between its structure and performance?' A grave danger of this approach involves confusing correlation with causality. Modern organization theorists devote a great deal of their time and energy to developing, testing, and applying mathematical methods for confirming causal inferences based on quantitative data analysis.

The **symbolic perspective** moves outside the limits imposed by the ways of knowing favored by modernists to study phenomena embedded in subjectivity. For example, culture, the use of symbols, narrative, and meaning-making are among the phenomena symbolic researchers brought to prominence in organization theory. Taking a keen interest in subjective experience and interpretation processes produces **understanding**, which is the contribution to knowledge provided by the symbolic perspective. Getting into the symbolic perspective means putting yourself into situations framed by those you want to understand and studying how they define, interact with, and interpret phenomena that interest them. The qualitative methods of description, ethnography being the most popular, are favored over those of causal explanation both because they are better able to communicate subjective experience and because it is so difficult to objectively represent subjective experience. The danger here is that the researcher over-generalizes, for example, assuming the interpretations of a phenomenon they have studied in one group apply to people they did not study, or mistaking their own subjective experience for someone else's.

Rather than seeking either explanation or understanding, the **postmodern perspective** offers critique and other forms of **appreciation**. The primary phenomena that interest postmodernists are modern management practices. Methods preferred by postmodernists involve reframing the concepts and theories of modernism by adopting a critical or aesthetic stance toward them. For example, postmodernists are fond of pointing out that modernist organization theorists too often uncritically (i.e., without awareness or reflection) adopt the perspective and interests of managers to the detriment of lower level employees, society, or the environment. Postmodernists offer appreciation, both as an alternative to explanation and understanding, and to provoke reflexivity and greater awareness of the moral and ethical implications of managing, organizing, and theorizing from any perspective. By promoting appreciation of power and its uses and abuses they hope to inspire emancipation from the domination of modernist organizing practices like hierarchy. Their work builds upon emotional empathy and aesthetic appreciation to increase resistance to any and all restrictions to human freedom.

Table 1.2 presents two dimensions for comparing the perspectives that frame this book. Inside the boxes you will find ways to think about the types of theorizing that each supports. Be attentive to the two-by-two matrix used here. This is an analytical tool borrowed by organization theory from sociology that you will meet again.

The two-by-two presented in Table 1.2 relies upon two dimensions extracted from the similarities and differences between the perspectives—what disciplines inspired theorizing and how theorizing is shaped by the role the theorist adopts. You can make these two dimensions work even harder by exploring these differences. Digging deeper into ideas is something theorists do to develop their theories.

The first dimension embedded in the framework (look at the columns shown in Table 1.2) identifies that which inspires theorists working within different perspectives. Theories inspired by the sciences, such as those of the modern and normative perspectives, stand in sharp contrast to those of the symbolic and postmodern perspectives inspired by the arts and humanities. This distinction sharpens by recognizing that the sciences prosper from their ability to predict and control outcomes, as do modern theories and the normative advice extracted from them, whereas the arts and humanities thrive on creativity, self-insight, and liberation, the central concerns and contributions of symbolic and postmodern theories.

A second way you can differentiate the perspectives (now look at the rows of Table 1.2) stems from examining the role the theorist adopts in each perspective. While in their normative applications all theories influence decisions and actions, theorists who take different perspectives are not equally comfortable influencing their phenomena while they are investigating them. Modern and symbolic theorists emphasize the importance of observing their phenomena without any unnecessary interference from the researcher, whereas getting others to change is the whole point of doing research for normative and postmodern theorists. The main difference between those comfortable in the role of influencer is that those advocating the normative perspective are more likely to base influence attempts on their beliefs about what governs success, while those adopting the postmodern perspective typically base their change efforts on ethical, moral, or aesthetic considerations.

I will limit myself in Part II to presenting concepts and theories drawn from the modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives, with occasional reference to their normative implications. Once you have achieved a level of comfort switching between these perspectives, others competing to become part of organization theory will be introduced, including recent efforts to reposition normative theory using pragmatic philosophy, but I will save that discussion for Part III.

Table 1.2 Theories, theorists, and theorizing practices in perspective

	Theories Inspired by the Sciences	**Theories Inspired by the Arts and Humanities**
Theorist as Observer	Modern Perspective: Theory as causal explanation	Symbolic Perspective: Theory as deep understanding
Theorist as Influencer	Normative Perspective: Theory as practice	Postmodern Perspective: Theory as critical appreciation

The philosophy of perspectives: Ontology and epistemology

In addition to their contributions to explanation, understanding, appreciation, and practical guidance, differences between perspectives can be stated in terms of their ontology and epistemology. **Ontology** is a branch of philosophy that studies assumptions about existence and definitions of reality. **Epistemology**, another branch, studies how we know and what counts as knowledge. The two are interrelated because our epistemological assumptions define the kind of knowledge that will be used to address what our ontological assumptions define as real.

With or without awareness, you make assumptions about what exists, for example, whenever you think about or discuss reality. Ontology is important to organization theory because different perspectives holding different ontological assumptions bring different phenomena of interest (aspects of reality) into focus. You similarly make assumptions about how knowledge is formed whenever you conceptualize or theorize, and these assumptions vary with the perspective taken.

Because different criteria for evaluating truth are adopted by different perspectives, what one considers true, another may deny, leading to disagreements and misunderstandings. For example, by privileging objective ontology, interpretive epistemology, or the use of language to constitute reality, you lay claim to one or another theoretical perspective and thereby undercut the others. The ontological and epistemological differences between the modern and symbolic perspectives were the first to come to light in organization theory. Some time later, adopting the linguistic turn in philosophy, postmodern organization theorists formulated its opposition to the modern perspective.

Ontology as objectivism versus subjectivism

Modernists embrace **objective ontology**, which means they believe in an unshakable reality existing outside human influence. For them, things (objects) exist exclusive of our knowledge about them and therefore knowledge can be verified through independent observation. Notice the assumption modernists make that knowledge is always knowledge *about things*. Treating all phenomena as if they are objects, by objectifying them if they are not literally objects, is a hallmark of the modernist perspective.

Independent observation implies that different people, all having the same relationship to an object, can make similar (reliable) observations about it. Their observations should not be biased by their subjective feelings about phenomena, or by preconceived notions or expectations of them. For hardcore objectivists, subjective understanding equates to personal bias that needs to be shed to establish valid knowledge about what exists. Thus, within the modern perspective, knowledge is produced by testing theories against objective observations of and in a real world.

Those who adopt **subjective ontology** believe that many phenomena would be unknowable using objective ontology. For example, culture would be unobservable if not for our capacity to experience and communicate what can only be approached subjectively. In contrast to objectivist worries about bias, subjectivists deliberately focus on what is revealed in private thoughts, feelings, and by allowing oneself to be influenced by context. Thus the phenomena that interest subjectivists require use of the very observational biases objectivists dismiss as making research findings unreliable.

Given their positions on ontology (what is regarded as real) and epistemology (how you can know reality), it is no wonder the advocates of modern and symbolic perspectives find it so challenging to see eye to eye. But there is more to their story. Because the phenomena that interest subjectivists are difficult if not impossible to perceive using the five senses alone, knowing them requires empathy and intuition as well as reason. This raises epistemological concerns.

Epistemology as positivism versus interpretivism

Because one would not expect two subjective experiences of a phenomenon to be the same, the question of how to treat interpretation arises. While those holding to a positivist epistemology discount interpretation because of the subjective bias it introduces, for interpretivists it is the only way of knowing and communicating subjective experience.

Positivist epistemology assumes you can discover the truth about phenomena through application of the scientific method. Acceptable knowledge is generated by developing hypotheses and propositions on the basis of theory, and then testing these by gathering and analyzing data that allow you to compare the implications of your theory to external reality.

Interpretivist epistemology assumes that knowledge can only be created and understood from within the contexts that give meaning to experience. That is, each of us makes sense of what is happening based on the situation we face at the time, and any memories and expectations we bring to that situation. This assumption implies that there may be many different understandings and interpretations of reality co-existing at one place and time depending upon who is involved.

Because interpretivists believe that all knowledge is filtered through subjectivity, many believe that objective ontology is insupportable. Therefore interpretivists reject the traditional scientific method and turn instead to interpretive methods developed within the arts and humanities. Methodological choices specify how to conduct oneself as a researcher, what counts as data, and how to go about collecting them. For example, organization theorists who adopt positivism prefer 'hard' data, such as numbers gleaned from financial records or by surveying large samples of the population studied. Interpretivists prefer 'soft' data, such as those produced by unstructured interviews or through participant observation in the contexts in which the researchers' informants live and work.

Some objectivists admit that it is impossible to remove all bias from observation, thus they accept part of the subjectivist argument: we cannot know anything separate from interpretations of it. They then use this revised objectivist ontology to deny the need for interpretive epistemology: 'We have managed thus far in spite of the constant intercession of interpretation, so why change?' Instead of ceding any philosophical territory to the symbolic perspective, they claim that the symbolic perspective makes no distinctive contribution to knowledge.

Observing all this maneuvering leads postmodernists to claim that the modernists' revision of objectivism appropriates rather than accepts subjectivism's ontological position thereby revealing its hegemonic intentions. They accuse modernists of weakening their position merely to maintain dominance. To see how postmodernism justifies its position you need to know about the linguistic turn the arts and humanities took and how this sensibility moved into organization theory.

The postmodern (linguistic) turn

Postmodernism starts by denying that words represent things. Instead they believe that language constitutes reality; what is spoken is real (at least until it is overturned by another instance of speech). As German philosopher Martin Heidegger put it: 'In the saying it comes to pass that the world is made to appear.' In making the case for defining reality linguistically—the **linguistic turn**—Heidegger accused Plato of leading his followers astray by focusing attention on things and their properties instead of attending to what grants these entities existence.

Heidegger wanted to know how being appears as substantial—as things—and concluded that language and the discourses created by speaking, writing, and reading give the state of being a substantial appearance. Recognizing, thanks to Heidegger, that existence is insubstantial provided postmodernism its point of departure: the claim that the world is made by, rather than mirrored in, language. Postmodernists claim that, when modernists treat language as a mirror reflecting nature, they ignore the effects of language. Postmodernism reveals the errors modernism hides and attempts to correct them.

To experience the linguistic turn, consider the subject position 'I' in a sentence beginning 'I am' and assume that using this statement constitutes your existence, just as anyone's saying this or that 'is' constitutes reality. Adopting the postmodern perspective implies there can be no identity or reality apart from that created in and by language because language grants us, and the things that appear around us, whatever substance it has.

Within the context of language, things exist as texts written or spoken within a discourse that speech and writing constitutes. Discourses provide contexts that enable and constrain how language is used such that texts and discourses are mutually constituted in and by language use. For the postmodernist, everything is a text located in one or more discourses so there is no escaping the effects of language (adopting this assumption performs the linguistic turn). Epistemologically, postmodernists believe you cannot truly know anything. This belief does not necessarily deny epistemology, as some postmodernists assert, rather it can be regarded as an epistemological assumption in its own right. Similarly, the postmodern denial of the existence of reality outside language defines an ontological position, though for some it seems a nihilistic one.

Many postmodernists share several beliefs stemming from the linguistic turn. First, the discourses in which we engage shape our reality by influencing how we use language and what we talk about (e.g., things or processes; organizations or organizing). Second, speaker, spoken, and speech are all constituted in and through language. And finally, meaning cannot be fixed, nor can reality—these remain in flux as they move within and between discourses, potentially changing with each new utterance. There is no independent reality against which to test knowledge, as assumed by modernists, all is text read or performed in the moment of their continual becoming. Therefore postmodernism is not so much an anti-philosophy as it is a philosophy whose foundation floats adrift in perpetual change.

Power and communication are central phenomena within postmodernism because anyone who controls discourse can make something exist, or disappear. For example, maladies such as multiple sclerosis (MS) or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) were not considered treatable until they were given existence by being defined within the discourse of medical practice by influential doctors. After its linguistic invention, the diagnosis of ADHD permitted treatment with powerful mind-altering drugs. The power of words transfers to

those who have better access to or influence on mainstream discourse, for example, experts, journalists, and celebrities. Power gives rise to communicative distortions when imbalances of power supported by ignorance of what produces reality allow some to define the reality in which others must live, creating the potential for exploitation and abuse.

Emancipation from linguistically induced exploitation can be gained only through awareness of how language embedded in discourse produces reality. Since our language writes and rewrites us into discourses constructed through language, it also suggests an escape route. Postmodernists offer us the option of joining forces through participation in discourse. Doing so reflexively, that is, with awareness of the effects of language, permits desired change. If we find organizing processes to be degrading or exploitative, it is up to us to voice our concerns and thereby change the discursive reality that sustains what we oppose.

For example, criticizing organizations or governments is an important step toward emancipation from injustice. Just think about the Facebook moment in which participants in the Arab Spring movements of 2011 realized they were not alone in their criticism of government and went out into the streets to create a new discourse that changed reality in Tunisia and Egypt. Occupy protestors similarly seek to change the terms of a dominant discourse they believe serves only the wealthy. There is a strong flavor of democracy running through postmodernism, which helps it to define an ethical/moral position that combines with its anti-foundational ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Table 1.3 summarizes the key philosophical differences constituting the modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives and their implications for organization theory. For now I have left the normative perspective out of view as its assumptions depend on what theory, if any, it relies upon. Ideas about the role of normative theory will come up again in Part III when discussing possible futures of the field.

One last thing, if you find you did not fully grasp any of the material presented in this chapter, I hope you will return to it later. And even if you feel you 'get' it now, returning to read it again after grappling with Part II will bring deeper insight and greatly benefit your learning.

A conceptual framework and tips for using this book

To this point I have said almost nothing about organizations or organizing. The reason is that this entire book addresses the question: What is organization? This devil will be found in the details presented as the six big chunks shown in Figure 1.1, each of which will be treated to its own chapter in Part II.

Please don't mistake the diagram in Figure 1.1 for a theory. It is only a framework dividing up the territory organization theory covers. The highly abstract concepts indicated in the figure—environment, technology, social and physical structure, culture, and power—each embrace a whole range of other concepts and theories, and each will reveal something different about organization, types of organizations, or organizing practices. There will be points of contact between all of these different ways of thinking, shown as overlapping areas connecting the circles of Figure 1.1, and their implications will be discussed as we distinguish one concept from the others.

Table 1.3 The modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives of organization theory

Modern Perspective	Symbolic Perspective	Postmodern Perspective
Ontology	**Ontology**	**Ontology**
Objectivism—belief in an external reality whose existence is independent of knowledge of it; the world exists as an independent object waiting to be discovered	Subjectivism—the belief that you cannot know an external or objective reality apart from your subjective awareness of it; what we agree exists, exists for us, of and in our intersubjective awareness	Postmodernism—belief that nothing exists separate from renderings of it in speech, writing, or other forms of expression; the world is made to appear in language, discourse and artwork without referents because there is nothing to which to refer
Epistemology	**Epistemology**	**Epistemology**
Positivism—belief that truth is discovered through valid conceptualization and reliable measurement, which allows the testing of knowledge against the objective world; knowledge accumulates, allowing humans to progress and evolve	Interpretivism—belief that truth is relative to the knower and can only be understood from the point of view of individuals who are directly involved; truth is socially constructed via multiple interpretations by the subjects of knowledge, thereby they and their truth are co-constructed and change over time	Postmodernism—belief that because there is no independent reality, there can be no truth about it, truth is an empty concept; there are no facts, only renderings and interpretations, therefore every claim to knowledge is only a power play
Organizations are	**Organizations are**	**Organizations are**
Objectively real entities operating in a real world; when well-designed and managed they are systems of decision and action driven by norms of rationality, efficiency, and effectiveness directed toward stated objectives	Contexts continually constructed and reconstructed by their members through symbolically mediated interaction (e.g., organizational dramas); socially constructed realities where webs of meaning create bonds of emotion and symbolic connection between members	Sites for enacting power relations, giving rise to oppression, irrationality, and falsehoods but also humor and playful irony; as they are texts or dramas, we can rewrite organizations so as to emancipate ourselves from human folly and degradation
Focus of Organization Theory	**Focus of Organization Theory**	**Focus of Organization Theory**
Discovering the universal principles and laws that govern organizations, defining the theories that explain them and/or their performance, and developing methods to test theory and its implications; emphasizes structure, rules, standardization, and routine	Describing how life unfolds within the organizational context in rituals and other meaningful activities in order to produce understanding of how organizing happens; favors interpreting symbols to reveal organizational culture through its assumptions, values, artifacts, and practices	Appreciating and/or deconstructing organizational texts so as to reveal managerial ideologies and destabilize modernist modes of organizing and theorizing; favors marginalized and oppressed viewpoints; encourages reflexive and inclusive forms of theorizing and organizing

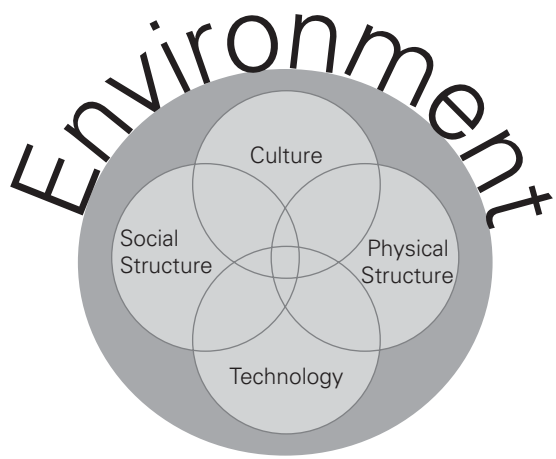

Figure 1.1 A conceptual model of organization

The five intersecting circles of this model represent organization as five inter-related phenomena conceptualized as shown. Power, a sixth, is indicated with the grey tint infusing the other circles. These six concepts will be examined in depth in Part II of the book.

A popular assignment for students of organization theory involves using Figure 1.1 to guide analysis of a particular organization. It will help you to do this if you focus on a real problem the organization faces, or imagine one for it. For example, an organization may need to rethink its competitive strategy, implement a new technology, or deal with cultural change. In the context of the stated problem, any of the concepts and theories presented in this book has the potential to provide insight and suggest desirable courses of action. But you won't know until you try them out which concepts and theories are best suited to addressing the problem.

Don't just guess at which concepts and theories might apply. My advice is to keep looking at your organization and its problems using as many concepts and theories as you can until your struggle to explain, understand, and appreciate starts to pay off with insights and surprises. The five circles model of Figure 1.1 can serve as a checklist to make sure you do not leave out something important—Did I remember power? Did I skip over physical structure?—but you cannot derive much insight from these umbrella notions without applying them one concept or theory at a time.

Applying concepts and theories to your own experiences and examples will give you practice and provide depth to your knowledge of organization theory. At the same time it will help you learn to relate the different parts of Figure 1.1 to each other. As you find your way to selecting appropriate concepts, theories, and perspectives from the range organization theory makes available and applying them to concrete examples, you will find yourself theorizing about organization. You know you are starting to theorize when you are able to draw surprising conclusions about an organization or an organizing experience that call forth explanation, understanding, and/or appreciation. Organization theory will seem more useful, the organizations you study richer, and your observations and reflections more valuable, as a consequence of your efforts.

Summary

This book presents organization theory, which is really a bunch of theories rather than just one. A theory is built from a set of concepts whose relationships offer appreciation, description, or explanation for the phenomenon of interest chosen as the focus of theorizing. The primary phenomenon of interest to organization theorists is broadly defined as organization, which includes different kinds of organizations as well as organizing activities and processes.

I believe that the best theories are those that match your own experience of organization and organizing. In this book you will learn about concepts and theories that others have developed and how and why they created them. This will give you a foundation for theorizing as well as introducing you to the knowledge and discipline organization theory offers.

As a student of organization theory, you will want to learn to use concepts, abstraction, and theorizing because they permit you to process information rapidly and efficiently and to appreciate, understand, explain, and communicate ideas. But you should also remember that theorizing through abstract conceptual reasoning alone will not provide all that you need to analyze and solve problems or take advantage of opportunities in a specific organization. Applying theory demands that you be able to add important details back into abstract formulations. Developing your concepts and theorizing skills with a broad base of personal experience will help you to translate abstractions for the specific application of concepts and theory to unique situations.

Finally, you have your own reasons for studying organization theory. Mine are that organization theory broadens my appreciation of organizations and the world in general and opens my mind to new ideas and possibilities. I am constantly renewed by my work in this field and find that my continuing study of its offerings generates new concepts and nurtures my skill in applying them to creatively solve problems and generate other innovations. Although it may hold other meanings and possibilities for you, I hope that my enthusiasm and example will inspire you to explore and learn to use organization theory to enhance your knowledge, creativity, and career.

Key terms

theory
phenomenon of interest
concepts
abstraction
chunking
theoretical perspective
- *normative*
- *modern*
- *symbolic*
- *postmodern*

explanation
understanding
appreciation
ontology
- *objectivist*
- *subjectivist*

epistemology
- *positivist*
- *interpretivist*

the linguistic turn

Endnotes

1. Lewin (1951: 169).
2. Miller (1956).
3. Thomas Kuhn's 1970 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* combined with Graham Allison's (1971), *The Essence of Decision*, an analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis from different theoretical perspectives, inspired many organization theorists to adopt multiple perspectives. Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan (1979) provided the earliest comprehensive survey of organization theory framed by the perspectives of functionalism, interpretivism, radical humanism, and radical structuralism. John Hassard and his colleagues (1991; Hassard and Pym, 1990; Hassard and Cox, 2012) have since been active in promoting and extending Burrell and Morgan's framework. Others to frame organization theory with multiple perspectives were W. Richard Scott (1981/1992, rational, natural, and open systems) and Joanne Martin (1992, integration, differentiation, and fragmentation).
4. Whetten (1989).

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Further reading

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