

Thesis Seminar

Theory & theoretical contribution

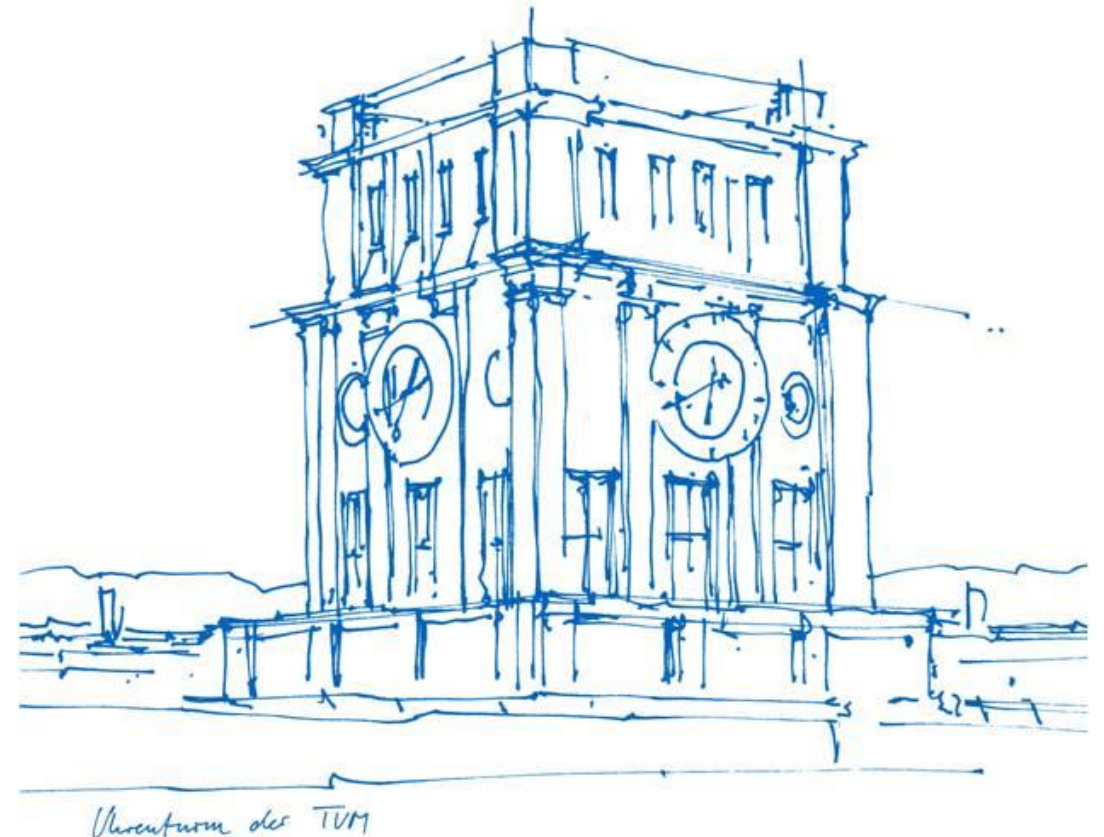
Dr. Theresa Treffers

Technical University of Munich

TUM School of Management

Chair for Strategy and Organization

Prof. Dr. Isabell M. Welp



Generating a research topic

(Systematic) literature search – state of research

Identification of research gaps

Formulation of research question

Theory choice

Formulating hypotheses

Planning research design

Pilot study

Data collection

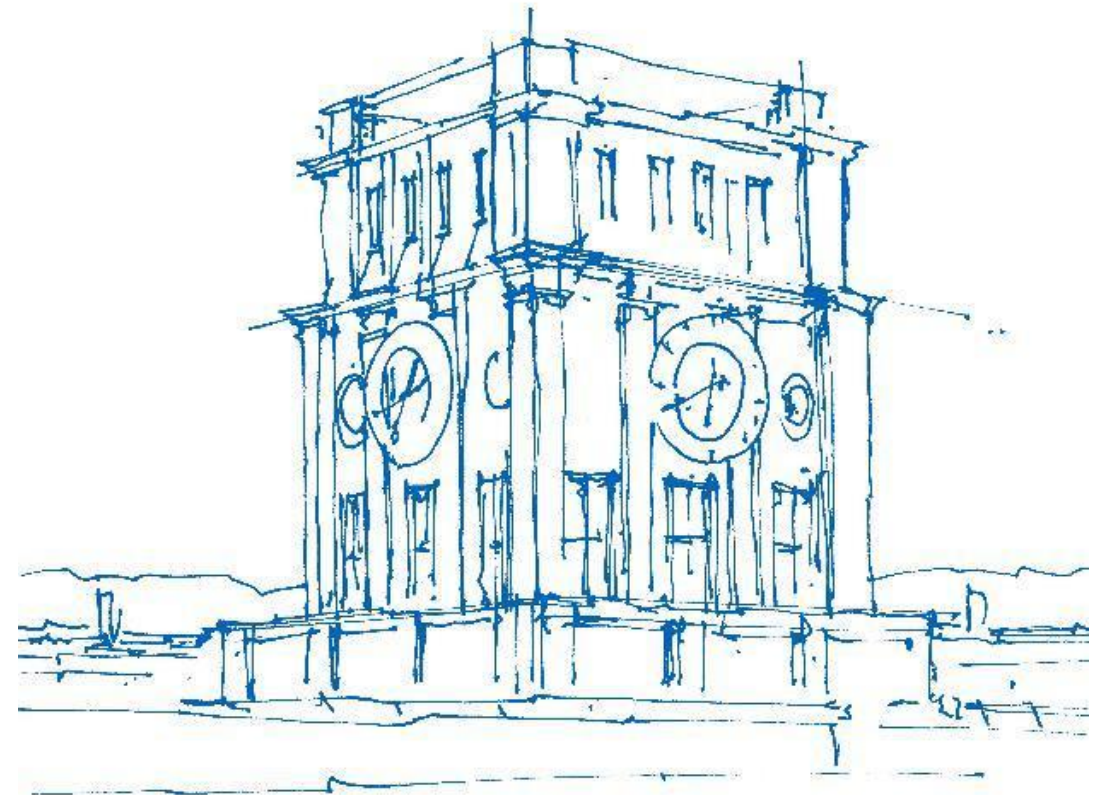
Data analysis

Interpretation of results

Distributing / Communicating results



What is theory?



Uhrenturm der TUM

What theory is not...

1. References are not theory - what is the causal logic contained in the references?
2. Data are not theory – Data describe which empirical patterns were observed, theory explains why these patterns were observed.
3. Lists of variables or constructs are not theory – theory explains how variables are connected.
4. Diagrams are not theory – the logic underlying the portrayed relationships needs to be spelled out.
5. Hypotheses (or predictions) are not theory – hypotheses do not contain logical arguments about why empirical relationships are expected to occur – they are statements about what not why!

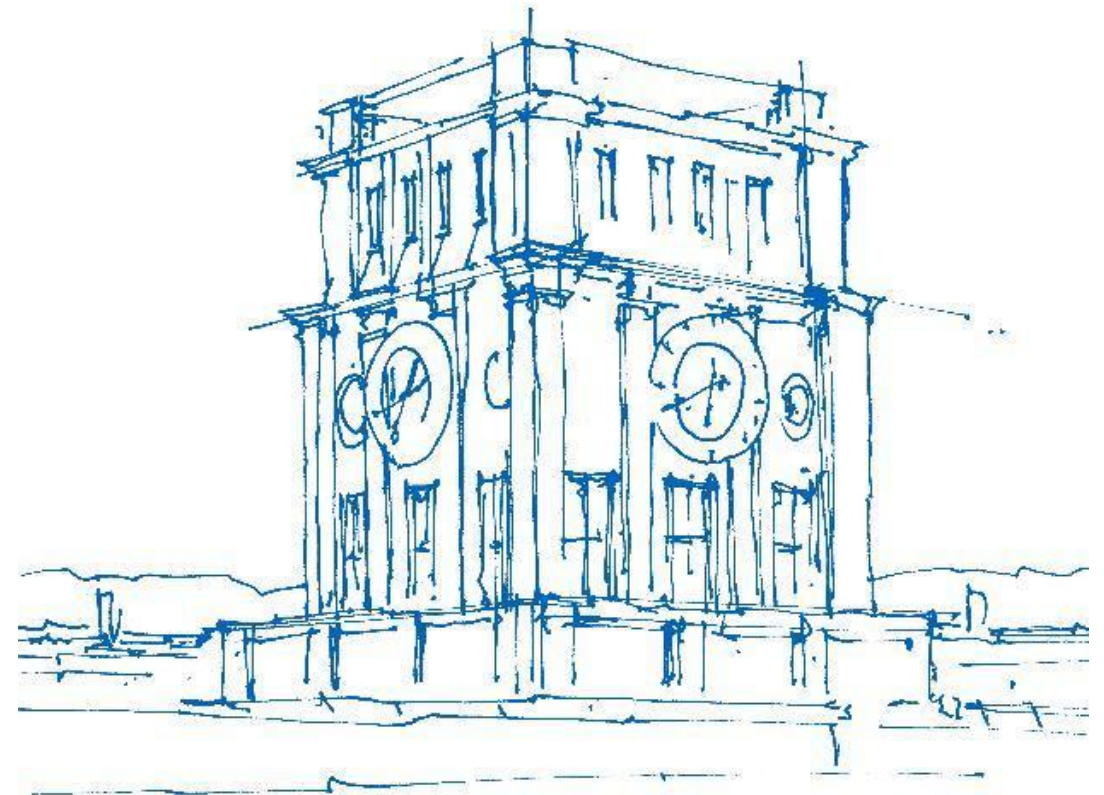
What theory is.....

1. “A coherent group of general propositions used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena.”
2. Theory is about answers to questions of why.
3. Theory is about the connections among phenomena, a story about why acts, events, structure and thoughts occur. Theory emphasizes the nature of causal relationships.
4. Strong theory delves into underlying processes so as to understand the systematic reasons for a particular occurrence or non-occurrence.
5. **A good theory predicts, explains and delights.**

Which theories do you know?



What constitutes a theoretical contribution?



Uhrnturm der TUM

A theoretical contribution is NOT...

- relationships (or variables) that you look at
- „nobody has done this before“ (German research „gap“ logic)
- a practical contribution

A theoretical contribution...

- **challenges, changes, or advances** what we know at a conceptual/theoretical level
- states the theory field it contributes to („which table of scholars are you sitting at“)
- states **how** it contributes to this theory („most interesting things you can add to these scholars‘ conversation“)

Answers: „What’s new?“, „So what?“, „Why so?“ (Wetten, 1989)

What constitutes a theoretical contribution?

1. **What:** the essential, or constituent, elements of a behavioural phenomenon
Constructs, or variables (boxes, nouns)
2. **How:** The relationship between the constructs
Sequential logical, causal (arrows/verbs)
3. **Why:** The underlying assumptions about human behaviour, or organising
Necessary conditions (meta theory)
4. **When, where, and who:** the boundaries of generalizability
limiting conditions (parameters)

Does my paper make a theoretical contribution?

1. Does this study provide an explanation for the phenomena?
 - Examine causes, sources, origins, directions, processes
 - Eliminate alternative explanations
2. Do the implications of this study suggest modifications in an existing theory?
3. Does the theory used in this study provide non-intuitive implications for practice?
4. Does it talk about a difference that makes difference?

Challenges with theoretical contributions

Low incremental

- Has been shown elsewhere
- Authors may have ignored literatures using different constructs/terminologies

Narrow

- Only a moderator / mediator added to previously examined topics

Not surprising

- Confirms common sense (the „person in the street“ already knew this)

Unclear importance

- Researchers only describe what was done, but not why it was important

What do these reviewer's statements have in common?

"Your paper **doesn't answer the ,so what' question** for me"

"You **don't ground your arguments in theory**"

"Just because **something has not been studied before, doesn't mean it should be**"

"I don't understand the **integrating theoretical framework which informs your research**"



The reviewer thinks that you have failed to make
a theoretical contribution to the literature!