

# From Data to Theory and Back Again

Linda L. Price

May 2005

Qualitative  
Workshop

Omaha,  
Nebraska



# What is Theory?

- Lots of things that masquerade as theory are not
- A theory is a **story** about why acts, events, structure and thoughts occur.
- Theory itself is a continuum or process. The process of theorizing consists of activities like abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing and idealizing.
- **Concepts** give shape to the theory, whereas the **relationships** specify the underlying process or mechanism through which the theory becomes a living organism.



# What Makes a Good Story?

- something that preserves plausibility and coherence
- something that is reasonable and memorable.
- something that embodies past experience and expectations.
- something that resonates with other people
- something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively
- something that captures both feeling and thought
- something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities
- something that is fun to construct.
  
- Karl Weick (1995), *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage Publications.



# What makes a good story publishable?

A good story that hasn't been told this way before



# What is the Relationship Between Theory and Data?

- Data do not generate theory—only researchers do that
- Data help
  - Thick description helps us breakdown and re-form categories by identifying the “taken for granted”—making us mindful of the mindless
  - Unusual cases can help us change our story to better account for the evidence
  - A range of cases help us identify “under what conditions” and “common threads”
  - We might ask, “What sort of questions do the data we have provide the answer to?” (rich data bases are vast resources for finding questions)
- Data help in different ways at different stages of the research? (easy cheap data/ hard expensive data)
- Data do not exist independent of the theories we use to account for them.
- There is always slippage between the theory and the data

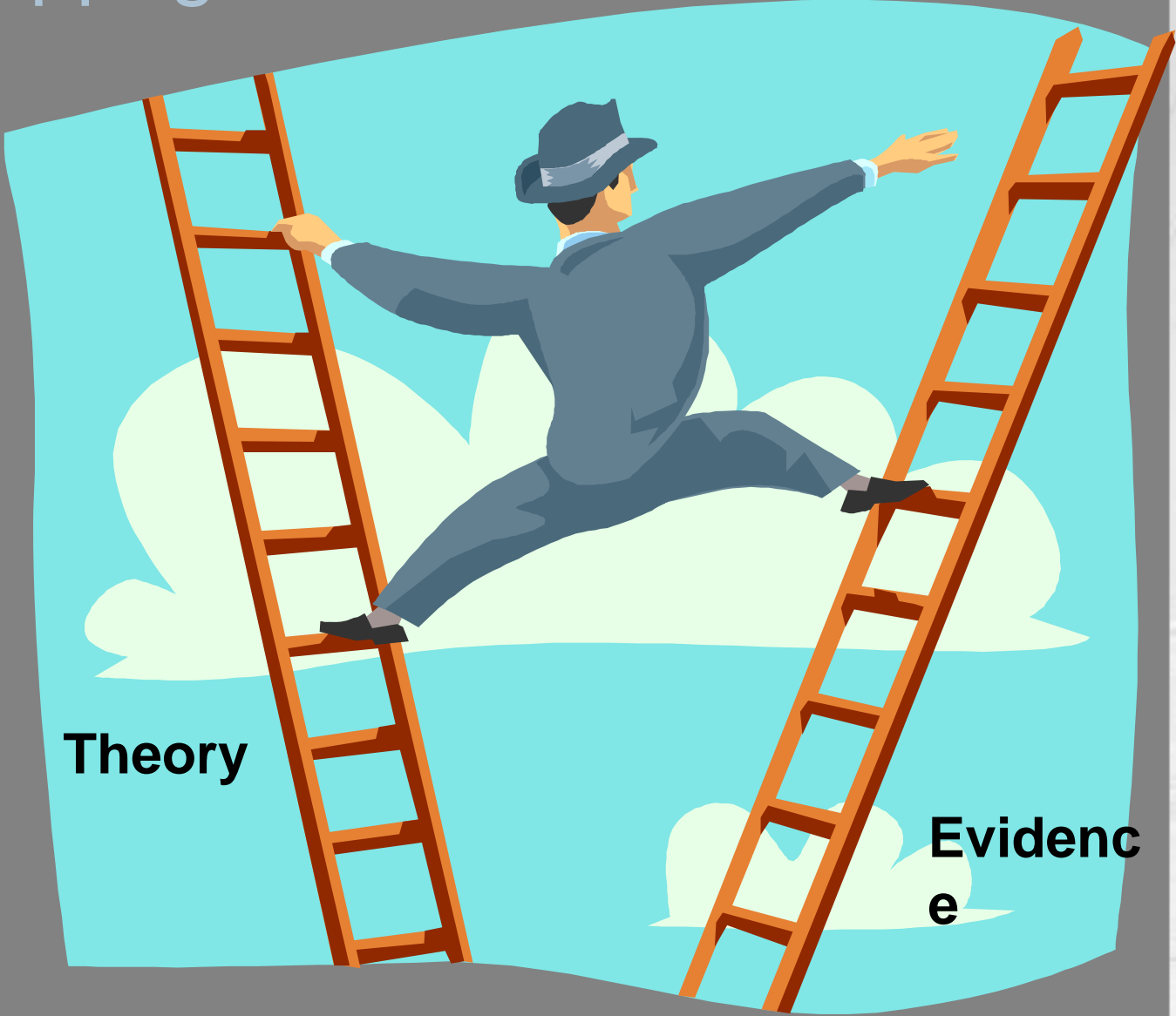


# How do you track between theory and evidence?

- A problem is not a research question
- A good research question points in two directions toward the theoretical framework that justifies the question and toward the empirical evidence that will answer.
- Formulating research questions involves a sequence of **choices**—“what are the aspects of the problem that I can handle and finish?”
- Deciding on questions is a rolling process. Research questions are always successive approximations as you learn more about the phenomenon being analyzed.
- There is always slippage—the evidence never quite fits the theoretical claims and the concepts never quite grasp the complexity of the empirical phenomenon.



# Slippage



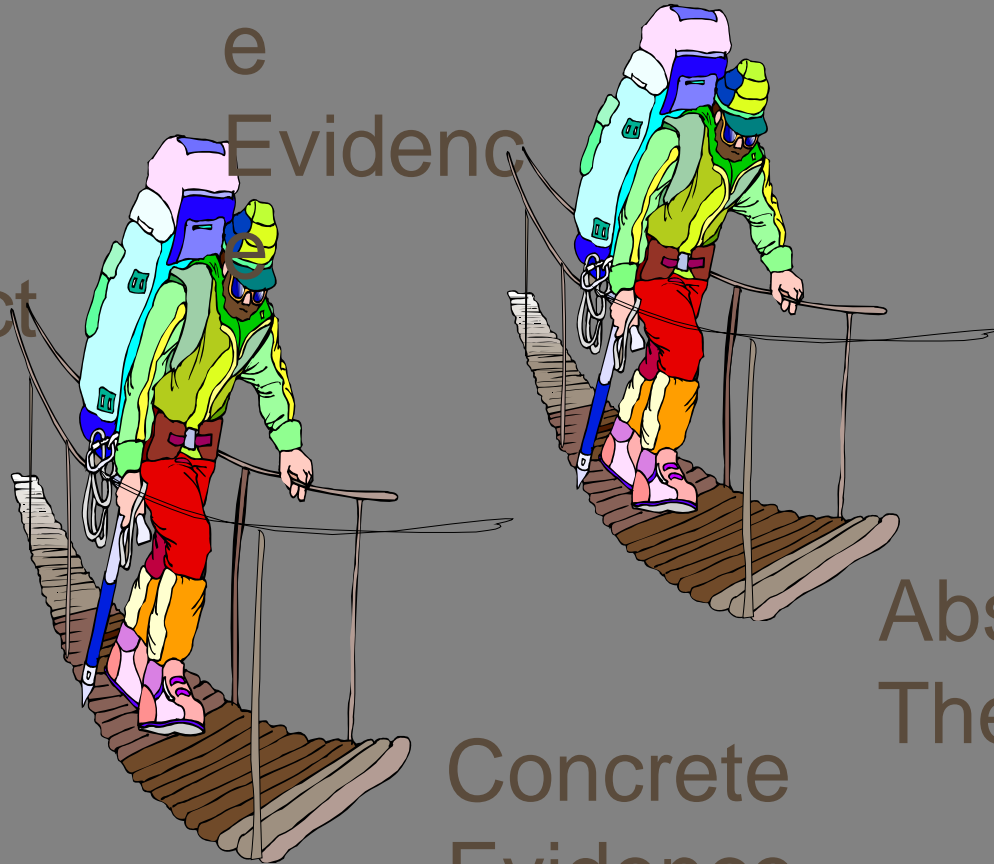
# The Great Divide

Concrete

e

Evidence

Abstract  
Theory



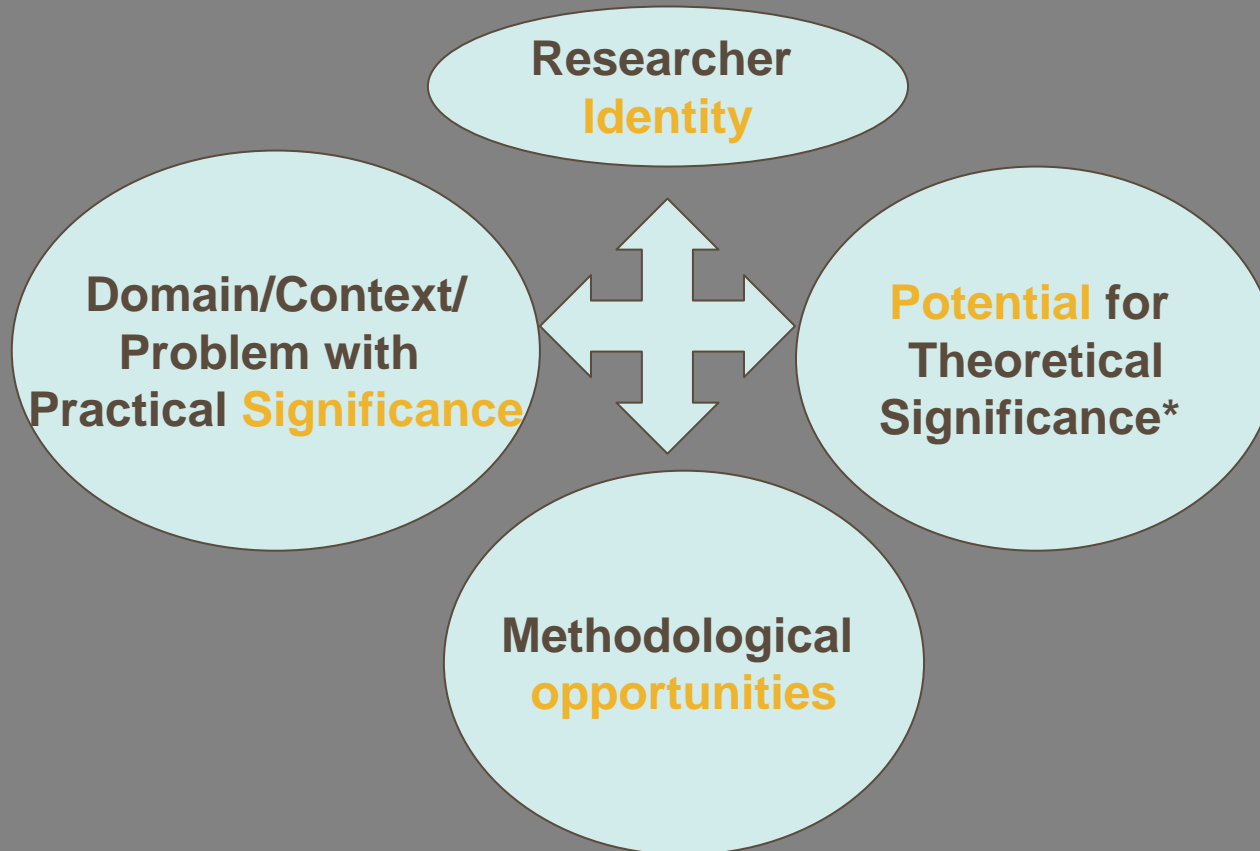
Abstract  
Theory

Concrete  
Evidence

1. Good research requires you to traverse this divide many times in both directions
2. All good research is hard and takes time



# What makes a “good”/ “interesting” research question?



\*The taxi cab driver test,  
Theoretical potential guides what you observe, what you probe on,  
who you talk to



# Context

Not a good enough reason? \*

Wouldn't it be fun to study...?

I have a lot of experience in...

I've always loved to...

No one has studied this context...

No one has studied this phenomenon in this context before...

A good enough reason?

This context tests the theoretical boundary of...this is the place where relationships among constructs change. This is the place where different constructs come into play...

This context is an exemplar/prototype of... therefore by sampling this context I will gain a good theoretical representation of this phenomenon.

This context highlights a set of responses that are different than I would expect in other contexts or different than what has been described in other stories

What I have read does not ring true with my experience.. [But be careful that the taxi cab driver doesn't already know this as well!! ]

\*these can be an entry point to a good enough reason



A black and white photograph of a snowy landscape. A path or road is visible, leading into the distance. Several utility poles with cross-arms and power lines are visible, receding into the distance. The sky is overcast and grey. The overall mood is quiet and desolate.

# Metaphors for thinking about other people's theories

**Toolkit**

**Lens (getting new  
eyeglasses)**

**Stories to change,  
embellish, qualify...**

# A Paradox?

Brand “loyalty”

Share of market

Share of heart



# An Example?

## Work/family/life “balance”

### **Is this an important problem?**

Are grant agencies looking for work on this problem?

Do many people report that this is a big problem in their lives?

Do I personally feel that this is an important problem that I would like to understand better?

If I could come up with some understanding and advice would it make a difference in people's lives?



# Work/family/life “balance”

## What is the potential theoretical significance of this for marketing and/or consumer research?

What constructs are fundamental in thinking about work/family/life balance? (loyalty, conflict, role norms, stress, balance, juggling, multi-tasking...)

What do we know about the role of consumption in work/family/life relationships? (almost nothing; Hochschild; Schor; Thompson)

Do we understand whether and how consumption activities mediate and moderate work/family relationships?

What do we know about the role of marketing in work/family/life balance?

(almost nothing: Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian 1996; Netemeyer, Maxham and Pullig 2005)

Do we understand how issues related to juggling work and family impact key marketing outcomes?



# Work/family/life “balance”

## Are there methodological opportunities?

- How has this problem/domain been studied in the past?
  - Types of data
  - Boundaries: what important boundaries have not been examined
  - Samples: who’s been left out and what might they tell us that we don’t know?
  - Constructs: are there constructs that look different under this lens? [loyalty]
  - Point of view/premises [TV and children, dinner and children]
- How might our thinking about this change if we studied it differently?



# Researcher Identity

What is my research identity?

What kind of problems am I interested in?

What kind of data do I like to work with?

What kind of stories do I like to tell?

What constraints or parameters do I want to put around the type of research I do?

Establish a fit between the research question and your research identity?

Willfully eliminate research questions that might be interesting but don't fit with who you are



# Ten questions for thinking about your research

- The **purpose** of my research is...
- The **practical importance** of this research is...
- The **theoretical significance** of this research is...
- Theory has suggested these **basic ideas** relevant to my research:
  - The most important constructs for my research are...
  - These constructs are related to each other in the following ways...
- **Other research** has empirically substantiated...
- What **we don't know** is...
  - My research is different from previous work because...
  - My research extends theory and previous research because...
- My **specific research objectives** are...
- My **methodology** for answering these questions is...
  - The sampling frame is...
  - The research boundaries are defined as...
  - The basic procedures for data collection that I will use include...
  - The basic procedures for data analysis that I will use include...
- This is the **appropriate research approach** because...
  - My approach is better than previous work because...
  - My approach enables answers to my specific research objectives because...
- Some **surprising findings** we may learn from my research are...



# Select References

Robert R. Alford (1998), *The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence*, Oxford University Press.

Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research, *Journal of Consumer Research*, (forthcoming, 2005).

Bacharach, Samuel B. (1989), "Organizational Theories: Some Criteria for Evaluation," *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (no. 4.), 496-515.

Richard P. Bagozzi (1984), "A Prospectus for Theory Construction in Marketing," *Journal of Marketing*, 48 (Winter), 11-29.

Howard S. Becker (1998), *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research while You're Doing It*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Jerome Bruner (1986), "Possible Castles," *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Harvard University Press, 44-54.

Donald T. Campbell (1986), "Science's Social System of Validity-Enhancing Collective Belief Change and the Problems of the Social Sciences," in *MetaTheory in Social Science: Pluralisms and Subjectivities*, eds. Donald W. Fiske and Richard A. Shweder, 108-135.

Murray B. Davis (1971), "That's Interesting," *Philosophy of Social Science*, 47, 22-43.

Robert Dubin (1976), "Theory Building in Applied Areas," in *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, ed. Marvin D. Dunnette, Rand McNally, 17-39.



Phoebe Ellsworth (1977), "From Abstract Ideas to Concrete Instances: Some Guidelines for Choosing Natural Research Settings," *American Psychologist* (August), 604-615.

Susan T. Fiske (2004) "Developing a Program of Research," in *Handbook of Methods in Social Psychology*, Eds. Carol Sansone, Carolyn Morf and A.T. Panter, Sage Publications.

Anthony G. Greenwald, Michael R. Leippe, Anthony R. Pratkanis and Michael H. Bumgardner (1986), "Under What Conditions Does Theory Obstruct Research Progress?" *Psychological Review*, 93, 2, 216-229.

Arie W. Kruglanski and E. Tory Higgins, Eds. (2004) "Special Issue: Theory Construction in Social Personality Psychology: Personal Experiences and Lessons Learned," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, (2), Vol. 8.

Williams J. McGuire (1997), "Creative Hypothesis Generating in Psychology: Some Useful Heuristics," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 48, 1-30.

Douglas G. Mook (1983), "In Defense of External Invalidity," *American Psychologist*, 38 (April), 379-387.

Linda Price and Eric Arnould (1998), "Conducting the Choir: Representing Multi-method Research," in *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views and Visions*, Barbara Stern (Ed.), Routledge Press, pgs. 339-364.

Susan Spiggle (1998), "Creating the Frame and the Narrative: From Text to Hypertext," in *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views and Visions*, ed. Barbara Stern, New York: Routledge Press, 156-190.

Robert I. Sutton (1997), "The Virtues of Closet Qualitative Research," *Organization Science*, 8 (January-February), 97-106.



Robert I. Sutton and Barry M. Staw (1995), "What Theory Is Not," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 40, 371-384.

Karl Weick (1995), *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage Publications.

Karl E. Weick (1989), "Theory Construction as Disciplined Imagination," *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 516-531.

Whetten (1989), "What Constitutes a Theoretical Contribution," *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (no. 4.), 490-495.

Allan W. Wicker (1985), "Getting Out of Our Conceptual Ruts: Strategies for Expanding Conceptual Frameworks," *American Psychologist*, 40 (October), 1094-1103.

Gerald Zaltman (2000), "Consumer Researchers: Take a Hike!" *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26 (March), 423-428.

Gerald Zaltman (1990), "One Mega and Seven Basic Principles for Consumer Research," Association for Consumer Research Fellow's Award Speech," presented at the Association for Consumer Research Meetings, October 1990

Gerald Zaltman (1983), "Presidential Address," *Advances in Consumer Research*, eds. Richard P. Bagozzi and Alice M. Tybout

Gerald Zaltman, Karen LeMasters and Michael Heffring (1982), "Being Interesting," in *Theory Construction in Marketing*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

