
Building theories of organizations is challenging: theories are partial and "folk" categories are fuzzy. The commonly used tools--first-order logic and its foundational set theory--are ill-suited for handling these complications. Here, three leading authorities rethink organization theory. Logics of Organization Theory sets forth and applies a new language for theory building based on a nonmonotonic logic and fuzzy set theory. In doing so, not only does it mark a major advance in organizational theory, but it also draws lessons for theory building elsewhere in the social sciences. Organizational research typically analyzes organizations in categories such as "bank," "hospital," or "university." These categories have been treated as crisp analytical constructs designed by researchers. But sociologists increasingly view categories as constructed by audiences. This book builds on cognitive psychology and anthropology to develop an audience-based theory of organizational categories. It applies this framework and the new language of theory building to organizational ecology. It reconstructs and integrates four central theory fragments, and in so doing reveals unexpected connections and new insights.

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"The book will appeal to different audiences, making the book itself an interesting case study for the theory developed in it. The broader message of the book, developing a new set of tools that aid theorizing in sociology and the administrative sciences, will appeal to those interested in social science methodology. But first and foremost, it is of interest to researchers working on organization theory in general and on organizational ecology in particular. It goes substantially beyond earlier formalizations of organizational ecology published in the last decade, with a radical shift in focus toward the whole process of theory building."—Administrative Science Quarterly

"There is nothing like this book in the field today. Its remarkable contribution is to demonstrate that logical formalization can breathe new insights into a social science research program, even when it has attained a mature level of development. The book's process of logical reconstruction sheds light not only on the ecological paradigm, but also on other social science perspectives—both within and outside organization studies."—Martin Ruef, Princeton University
patterns peak appeal Podolny possible worlds postulate predicate logic premises presumably producers producers/products q and q random variable realized niche relevant reorganization scale advantage schema schemata semantic similar social positions sociological specific structure taste theorem theory fragments tion typical unit universally quantified universe of discourse variables

Michael T. Hannan is the Stratacom Professor of Management in the Graduate School of Business and professor of sociology at Stanford University. Laszlo Polos is professor of organization theory at the Durham Business School in the United Kingdom. Glenn R. Carroll is the Laurence W. Lane Professor of Organizations in the Graduate School of Business and (by courtesy) professor of sociology at Stanford.

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"It is vanishingly rare for organization theorists (social scientists more generally) to make such a big investment in regrounding theory--especially when it is their own theory! This book really challenges the reader to think seriously about developing good theory, and about fixing the theory we have. I particularly appreciate the role given to the 'audience' in creating organizational forms, as well as the use of fuzzy sets to capture how categorization processes work. These new building blocks pay off in many fresh insights into longstanding issues. As such, the book is a huge service to the field."--Ezra Zuckerman, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Organizational ecology (also organizational demography and the population ecology of organizations) is a theoretical and empirical approach in the social sciences that is especially used in organizational studies. Organizational ecology utilizes insights from biology, economics,[1] and sociology, and employs statistical analysis to try to understand the conditions under which organizations emerge, grow, and die.

Introduced in 1977 by Michael T. Hannan and the late John H. Freeman in their American Journal of Sociology piece “The population ecology of organizations” and later refined in their 1989 book Organizational Ecology, organizational ecology examines the environment in which organizations compete and a process like natural selection occurs. This theory looks at the death of organizations (firm mortality), the birth of new organizations (organizational founding), as well as organizational growth and change.

Organizational ecology has over the years become one of the central fields in organizational studies, and is known for its empirical, quantitative character. Ecological studies usually have a large-scale, longitudinal focus (datasets often span several decades, sometimes even centuries). The books The Demography of Corporations and Industries by Glenn Carroll and Michael Hannan (2000) and Logics of Organization Theory: Audiences, Codes, and Ecologies by Michael Hannan, Laszlo Polos, and Glenn Carroll (2007), provide the most comprehensive overview of the various theories and methods in organizational ecology.


This theory fragment holds that organizations that are reliable and accountable are those that can
survive (favored by selection). A negative by-product, however, of the need for reliability and accountability is a high degree of inertia and a resistance to change. A key prediction of organizational ecology is that the process of change itself is so disruptive that it will result in an elevated rate of mortality.

Theories about inertia and change are fundamental to the research program of organizational ecology, which seeks a better understanding of the broader changes in the organizational landscape. Given the limits on firm-level adaptation, most of these broader changes thus come from the entry and selective replacement of organizations. Hence organizational ecology has spent considerable effort on understanding the founding and mortality rates of organizations.

The theory fragment on niche width distinguishes broadly between two types of organizations: generalists and specialists. Specialist organizations maximize their exploitation of the environment and accept the risk of experiencing a change in that environment. On the other hand, generalist organizations accept a lower level of exploitation in return for greater security (Hannan and Freeman 1977: 948).

Niche theory shows that specialisation is generally favoured in stable or certain environments. However, the main contribution of the niche theory is probably the finding that "generalism is not always optimal in uncertain environments" (Hannan and Freeman 1977: 958). The exception is produced by environments which "place very different demands on the organization, and the duration of environmental states is short relative to the life of the organization" (Hannan and Freeman 1977: 958).

Organizational ecology also predicts that the rates of founding and mortality are dependent on the number of organizations (density) in the market. The two central mechanisms here are legitimation (the recognition or taken-for-grantedness of that group of organizations) and competition. Legitimation generally increases (at a decreasing rate) with the number of organizations, but so does competition (at an increasing rate). The result is that legitimation processes will prevail at low numbers of organizations, while competition at high numbers.

The founding rate will therefore first increase with the number of organizations (due to an increase in legitimation) but will decrease at high numbers of organizations (due to competition). The reverse holds for mortality rates. Thus, the relationship of density to founding rates has an inverted U shape and the relationship of density to mortality rates follows a U-shaped pattern.

Liability of adolescence. The risk of mortality will be low at first as the organization is buffered from failure due to support by external constituents and initial endowments. But when these initial resources become depleted, the mortality hazard shoots up and then declines following the liability of newness pattern.

Organizational ecology can be usefully compared with evolutionary theories in economics (e.g. Nelson & Winter, 1982).[2] Main similarities between these strands of literature are: (1) the emphasis on organizational routines and the limits to organizational adaptibility, (2) the population or system level of analysis and (3) the importance of environmental selection. Organizational ecology's perspective is more Darwinistic (see Hannan & Freeman, 1989, pp 20-22), while Nelson & Winter (1982, p. 11) provide a more Lamarckian perspective. Another important difference concerns the question what is selected by the environment: "organizational forms", as in organizational ecology, or "routines" as in the evolutionary economics literature? Authors like Joel Baum and Arjen van Witteloostuijn have argued for the potential of cross-fertilization between these two research strands.

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