

**Theory Criteria and Evaluation Resource**  
 Theory Committee  
 Academy of Human Resource Development  
[www.theorypractice.net](http://www.theorypractice.net)

1. Selected source citation:

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review* 14(4), 532-550.

2. Stated purpose of selected source:

“This paper describes the process of inducting theory using case studies—from specifying the research questions to reaching closure. Some features of the process, such as problem definition and construct validation, are similar to hypothesis-testing research. Others, such as within-case analysis and replication logic, are unique to the inductive, case-oriented process. Overall, the process described here is highly iterative and tightly linked to data. This research approach is especially appropriate in new topic areas. The resultant theory is often novel, testable, and empirically valid. Finally, framebreaking insights, the tests of good theory (e.g., parsimony, logical coherence), and convincing grounding in the evidence are the key criteria for evaluating this type of research.”  
 (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 532)

3. Direct quotation of the theory criteria or evaluation:

**Theory Building:** Eisenhardt described a process for building theory from case study research using the following steps:

Table 1  
*Process of Building Theory from Case Study Research* (p. 533)

Step	Activity	Reason
Getting Started	- Definition of research question	- Focuses efforts
	- Possibly a priori constructs	- Provides better grounding of construct measures
	- Neither theory nor hypotheses	- Retains theoretical flexibility
Selecting Cases	- Specified population	- Constrains extraneous variation and sharpens external validity
	- Theoretical, not random, sampling	- Focuses efforts on theoretically useful cases—i.e., those that replicate or extend theory by filling conceptual categories
Crafting Instruments	- Multiple data collection methods	- Strengthens grounding of theory by triangulation of

and Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Qualitative and quantitative data combined</li> <li>- Multiple investigators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- evidence</li> <li>- Synergistic view of evidence</li> <li>- Fosters divergent perspectives and strengthens grounding</li> </ul>
Entering the Field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overlap data collection and analysis, including field notes</li> <li>- Flexible and opportunistic data collection methods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Speeds analyses and reveals helpful adjustments to data collection</li> <li>- Allows investigators to take advantage of emergent themes and unique case features</li> </ul>
Analyzing Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Within-case analysis</li> <li>- Cross-case pattern search using divergent techniques</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gains familiarity with data and preliminary theory generation</li> <li>- Forces investigators to look beyond initial impressions and see evidence through multiple lenses</li> </ul>
Shaping Hypotheses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Iterative tabulation of evidence for each construct</li> <li>- Replication, not sampling, logic across cases</li> <li>- Search evidence for “why” behind relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sharpens construct definition validity and measurability</li> <li>- Confirms, extends, and sharpens theory</li> <li>- Builds internal validity</li> </ul>
Enfolding Literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comparison with conflicting literature</li> <li>- Comparison with similar literature</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Builds internal validity, raises theoretical level, and sharpens construct definitions</li> <li>- Sharpens generalizability, improves construct definition, and raises theoretical level</li> </ul>
Reaching Closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theoretical saturation when possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ends process when marginal improvement becomes small</li> </ul>

**Theory Evaluation:** Eisenhardt stated that there are no generally accepted guidelines for the assessment of this type of theory-building research, although she does describe criteria that seem appropriate.

1. Developing a good theory from case study research depends on criteria for good theory already accepted. For example, she relies on a common understanding that “good theory is parsimonious, testable, and logically coherent” (p. 548).
2. Assessing theory from case study research also, “depends on empirical issues, strength of method, and the evidence grounding the theory. Have the investigators followed a careful analytical procedure? Does the evidence support the theory? Have the investigators ruled out rival explanations? Just as in other empirical research, investigators should provide information on the sample, data collection procedures, and analysis. Also, they should display enough evidence for each construct to allow readers to make their own assessment of the fit with theory. . . . thorough reporting of

information should give confidence that the theory is valid. Overall, as in hypothesis testing, a strong theory-building study has a good, although not necessarily perfect, fit with the data.” (p. 548)

3. Eisenhardt concluded the evaluative criteria with, “Finally, strong theory-building research should result in new insights. . . . A strong theory-building study presents new, perhaps framebreaking, insights.” (p. 548)

#### 4. Contributor:

Russell Korte, 2008

#### 5. Contributor’s comment

Eisenhardt described a specific means to build theory when little is known or understood about a phenomenon or anomalies exist in current theories. The value of this method is the explicit grounding in reality. A common criticism of case study research is the narrowness and non-generalizability of the results of this research method. Eisenhardt proposes a rigorous method to help support claims of validity in case study research. Often, case study research is more feasible than other traditional methods that afford more generalizable results. Eisenhardt’s contribution is to provide a means for researchers to increase the rigor of their case study research and for theory to be built on the richness of the qualitative data typically collected in case study research. Theories that are closer to the data are more practical.

#### 6. Classification of this source:

Theory end-product

Theory development process

Theory evaluation

Other: \_\_\_\_\_