

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

PE.550 Designing Your Life
January (IAP) 2009 - Spring 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

Designing Your Life (IAP-Spring 2009)
Lauren Zander and Gabriella Jordan
Lecture/Discussion 2: Theories

New rule: no being late. \$1 for every minute you are late to class, or \$1 for each day your homework is late. This helps you build the muscle of your integrity.

Principle: Theories

Theories are ideas about the way the world works. For example:

- If you are nice to someone, they will be nice back to you.
- Sex dies after marriage.
- If I don't lose a few pounds, no one will find me attractive.

There is no "absolute" truth in our theories, only conjecture. Our theories are usually unconscious, and we don't realize we have them. We see the world through our theory, and it colors everything we see. Everything we do, everything we see as possible or impossible, justified or not justified, comes from our theories. Theories come from your life experiences, your parents, your family, your friends, and the culture in which you live.

Theories can live a long time, even when counter-evidence for the theory presents itself. This is because we are continually gathering evidence to reinforce our theories. We focus on examples that support our theory, and interpret events that happen to us in such a way that they support the theory. For example, you may have the theory that "there are no good single men at MIT." Unbeknownst to you, you then look for "flaws" in every man you meet. And you will be right! With this theory, you will find only flawed men.

Additionally, by believing in a theory, we make it real, because our thoughts really do influence reality. For example, say that you have a theory that your coworker Joe doesn't like you. You notice every time he doesn't say "good morning" to you. Or every time he doesn't invite you to a meeting or outing. Each one of these events reinforces your theory. You get angry with Joe, and you *treat* him like he doesn't like you. Pretty soon, regardless of if he really did like you or not, he's not going to like you.

Theories can be detrimental when you form them without regard to your dreams. Some theories are aligned with your dreams (positive theories), and some are not (negative theories).

Example of positive theory: I am invincible.

Example of negative theory: No one cares what I have to say.

Theories can be especially damaging in a relationship. We make a mental model of how someone is, and interact with that model instead of with the person himself. It is far simpler to interact with the model than the actual complicated person.

One of the secrets to changing your life is to find negative theories and reauthor them. Remember that there is no absolute truth in theories, so you can pick the theory that you want to be your truth. We all are in the business of proving our theories, so pick the one you want to prove, and live your life as proof that that theory is valid. For example, prove the theory that sex gets hotter the longer you are married to someone.

To elicit change in your life, you:

1. Find the negative theories. You prove what you believe. If you don't have the career of your dreams, you don't believe you can have the career of your dreams.
Example: "I can't figure out what I really want to do" is a theory. If you hold on to it, you will never find what you really want to do.
Example: "I am afraid of elevators" is a theory. To fix this, you have to admit that you made this theory. You need to come to terms with the fact that you might have been deliberately crazy your whole life. So many of us just keep the theory.
2. Create new theories. This is a fun game. Play. The reason we don't want to make new theories is that things will change. And we don't want to change. Think about how much fun it would be to make your own rules.
Example: If I need an answer to a question, I write it down and put it by my pillow, and I'll have the answer the next day. And guess what? It's always worked.
Example: If I catch a negative thought, it will help my career.
Example: "The DMV is no fun" is a theory. The bulk of our lives is spent doing things like going to the DMV. How do you want to relate to it? You really could enjoy cleaning the bathroom.
3. Prove the new theory by gathering data.
4. Make good weekly promises to implement your new theory (see next lecture).

The truth is, we are often reluctant to change our theories, because they are comfortable, and a new theory might mean that we then have to do something that scares us or that we don't want to do it. It's so much easier to not figure it out, and keep the old, safe theory.

Class participation

Examples of theories you have

Participant 1: "My husband doesn't care." I keep it because I don't want to admit my role in our relationship, and be guilty for how things are. I don't want to have to fess up my ickiness.

Participant 2: "My ex-advisor was horrible." Now that I am in someone else's lab, we have a great relationship. I am realizing that I might have had a role. But I DID tell him how I felt, and he just didn't get it. So I left.

Lauren: This seems suspicious. It sounds like you are having a relationship with him in your head. But you didn't resolve it. You told him X, he heard Y, and then you walked away. We repeat this stuff until we learn what we need to learn. In this case, you need to learn how to communicate with authority figures. Fix it now, and you'll avoid problems in the future.

Example from the homework: This participant had all of the answers in his homework, but worded his answers in such a way that he didn't need to own them. "I worry that I don't have enough time, and I waste time on junk websites. My parents don't really have issues with time, but my father would flop on the couch and watch mindless TV after work, and my mom was stressed about her schedule." Huh? He sounds exactly like them. But he's not owning them.

Lauren: We could really prove any theory we want. But that means we would have to give up things that we like but aren't good for us. You have a theory "Cupcakes are better than apples." But that is really a theory. There is nothing inherently true about that. You could also believe "Apples are better than cupcakes."

Participant 3: I am doing well with food, but sometimes I have lapses. I don't have 100% control over my food.

Lauren: Can you hear that theory? "I don't have 100% control over my food." What a convenient theory for allowing those lapses you want. You will feel better when you stop having lapses. Write a theory without lapses (note: we also argue in support of theories that demonstrate our powerlessness).

Lauren: When relationships change, odds are because you are now doing something differently. You stopped communicating. You stopped calling every day. Many of us have a theory "After 3 years of marriage, things start to go downhill..." and so of course our marriage problems aren't your problem if you have that theory.

Participant 4: I want to run a marathon, but I have theories that it will kill my knees, my Achilles tendon is weak, and my shin splints will come back.

Lauren: You are betting against yourself. You need to decide between "I will run a marathon" and "My body won't let me run a marathon." If you stay somewhere in between, you will mess up your body. You will go for the marathon, but your body won't let you.

Participant 5: I want to be more organized in my physical universe. But it's hard. I am lost in the fog. I am lazy.

Lauren: You *are* the fog. And you have a theory that you are lazy. You can prove any theory you want. You are not fixed lazy. That is not a truth. You are just in the business of proving that you are lazy.

Homework

1. Continue making and keeping promises, reporting in every Sunday. Report on whether you kept or did not keep your promises. Suggested format:
 - a. Describe the promise
 - b. Write for each promise "KEPT" or "NOT KEPT"
 - c. Describe the consequence
 - d. Write if you paid the consequence or not. IF no, by when will you pay it?
 - e. What are your stats on keeping the promise (e.g. I kept 5/7 days).
 - f. What did you notice about yourself? Where did you stop yourself? Where were you a chicken or brat, and where were you great? You can include this for any promise, but ALWAYS do this for every promise that was NOT KEPT.
2. Beat the Mind Game. Play a sport with yourself. Pick one area of life, and take one action that rocks your world in that area. This action should directly challenge one of your theories. For example:

- a. If you have the theory that it's hard to eat healthily, plan a day of perfect eating.
 - b. If you have the theory that people don't care about strangers, go to a park and ask people for help.
 - c. If you have a theory that your friends don't want to hear your truth, design a beautiful conversation with them in which you share your truth.
3. Watch your thoughts as you do this inspired action. Look at your thoughts before, during, and after the action. Show yourself that you can prove a *different* theory. Come back and share the results with us.