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Editorial

What are We Talking About When We Talk About Theory?

Perhaps there is nothing more frustrating to aspiring authors than to be told that their paper does not make a theoretical contribution to the literature. There are a lot of different ways in which this message is delivered: “Your paper does not answer the ‘so what’ question for me,” “You do not ground your arguments in theory,” “Just because something has not been studied does not mean it should be,” and “I do not understand the integrating theoretical framework which informs your research.” However it is worded, though, the message is still clear that the author has apparently failed to make a theoretical contribution to the literature.

After reading close to 1000 initial submissions and revisions, it strikes me that at times journals have created something of a Kafkaesque environment for authors. We tell authors that their papers do not make theoretical contributions, but often do not give authors much insight into what counts as a theoretical contribution or how to build stronger theories. We tell authors what theory is not, but not what it is. The publication of the first Special Theory Issue of *Journal of Management* seems an appropriate time to address this concern.

Let us be clear: theory is often in the eye of the beholder. What is theory to one reader may not be theory to another. However, there are some elements of manuscripts that enhance the likelihood that a paper will be perceived as building theory and I would like to briefly describe 10 of them below.

1. The question being researched is non-trivial in scope. That is, it may be the case that variable X has never been studied in the context of phenomenon Y. However, there is no good a priori reason to think that variable X matters or that it matters more than the other variables which have already been studied in this context. Or, everyone else has posited a linear relationship between M and N and now we are throwing in a quadratic term. An article’s reach constrains its grasp.
2. The article shows mastery over previous research in the area. Admittedly, reviewers, editors and authors will disagree sometimes over how broadly the author should review the literature. However, when key articles are not cited and when there are virtually no references within the past five years, reviewers and editors are more likely to get nervous. And, of course, authors need to accurately portray and describe the findings of previous research in their areas, too.

3. The manuscript finds a balance between being overly exhaustive and overly exclusive. In studying any phenomenon, authors have an almost infinite variety of variables which could be brought to bear. Including 50 means an author is racing breathlessly through too many variables too quickly; focusing on only 2–3 may leave critical, potential alternative explanations out of a model. It is admittedly more art than science to know how many variables or theoretical streams need to be included, but making a theoretical contribution requires avoiding both kinds of slippery slopes.
4. One of the hardest tasks facing an author building theory is to clearly, precisely and succinctly define key constructs. Leaving aside for the moment the need to empirically demonstrate convergent and divergent validity, authors would still do well to provide concise definitions and demonstrate how new constructs add value above and beyond existing constructs. Parsimony has always been a major criterion on which theories are evaluated and that applies to using as few new constructs as necessary to explain a phenomenon.
5. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the most commonly given reasons for rejecting an article on theoretical grounds is that the nature of the relationships (propositions) is unclear. It is unfortunately quite common to read theories where the independent and dependent variables are not clearly specified and the nature of the mediating and moderating relationships are not made explicit. Sometimes, too, the text, the figure of the model and the hypotheses do not align properly. While most authors tend to send their draft versions to scholars in the same research niche, I often wonder whether authors would also not be well served by getting a “friendly read” from people not in the same research niche. Maybe it takes some distance from a manuscript to see the fuzziness in it.
6. I often see reviewers comment that the paper is “not informed by theory.” This phrase apparently means different things to different reviewers. For some, it means that an article does not fall squarely within one theoretical paradigm (e.g., the next logical study in transaction cost economics). For others, it means an article is focused on explaining a phenomenon rather than testing a specific theory’s predictions. For still others, it means that a variety of theoretical perspectives have been used in explaining a phenomenon, but the themes that cut cross theories have not been identified. There should be room in our field for both theory-driven and phenomenon-driven research; papers that push the envelope in theory but are disconnected from real world phenomena are no more valuable than papers that use a hodge-podge of theories to explain an important real world phenomenon. For me, the three most basic elements in judging theory are: (1) Is there anything surprising here? (2) Can some theory or theories be used to explain the predictions? and (3) Can the theoretical perspectives employed be integrated in some parsimonious and coherent fashion?
7. Providing readers with a clear focus of the article and its boundary conditions is invaluable in strengthening a manuscript’s theoretical contribution. What is the theoretical domain of the article? Are you trying to look at differences across people, across units, across organizations, or across cultures? Are you trying to present a process model or to modify one? Are you testing a theory or examining a specific phenomenon? If your goal is to explain how a process works in a new context, have you adequately explained why you believe your new context is sufficiently different to warrant its

own context-specific theory? What phenomena or samples lie outside your field of vision and what phenomena and samples fall within your domain? The more clearly you can focus the article and delineate its boundaries, the more readily readers can understand where you are going and why you are going there.

8. Needless to say, writing clearly is of enormous importance in building theory. Most reviewers can wade through even a poorly written methodology section; even if they have some questions, they can usually follow the gist of the procedures. Not so with theory articles; if the writing is unclear and tortured, it makes it virtually impossible that reviewers will put in the time and effort to try to make sense of new ideas. It is the author's affirmative responsibility to ensure that the writing quality enhances, rather than detracts from, the theoretical contribution of the work.
9. Another key element of theory-building is going beyond simply rehashing previous research or adding together previously studied phenomena in one research project. Theory articles have to go beyond synthesizing previous research to provide new insights, new critiques, or new directions for theory testing. Moreover, if we know X and Y regularly occurs, showing that X and Y have the same effects when tested together is typically perceived as a relatively modest contribution. Somehow, authors have to show what value they themselves are bringing to the table beyond organizing their predecessors' results.
10. Finally and probably the most difficult task of all, authors have to show that the differences they postulate somehow makes a difference. In some sense, then, a good theory has to travel well into the world of data. Will we get significantly different results if we look a phenomenon through the author's prism? How much variance could we reasonably expect to account for? Are the author's ideas at least a plausible and meaningful alternative to the existing literature on the topic? Will adding a new construct clarify and organize previous research or simply muddy the waters even further? Do the author's ideas relate to the real world in any meaningful way and can they be empirically tested?

I am pleased to introduce the first annual Special Theory Issue of *Journal of Management*. Our field currently has very few outlets for theoretical articles and I believe JOM can play a large role in shaping theory-building in the field of management. The authors in this issue have taken a wide array of approaches to building theory and focus on a wide variety of topics, ranging from the very micro to the very macro. We had over 50 submissions for this issue and the articles we chose represent some of the best theoretical research we have received in the past 18 months. Collectively, these articles highlight the 10 elements of strong theories identified above. I hope you will enjoy reading them, learn from them and consider submitting a theory article to JOM in the future yourself.

D.C. Feldman
University of Georgia, Terry College of Business
Athens, GA 30602-6256, USA
Tel.: +1 706 542 9387
E-mail address: dfeldman@journalofmanagement.org

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