

FROM THE EDITOR

WHAT IS A PRE-THEORY PAPER? SOME INSIGHTS TO HELP YOU RECOGNIZE OR CREATE A PRE-THEORY PAPER FOR AMD

As you will read in our mission statement, the *Academy of Management Discoveries (AMD)* exclusively seeks *pre-theory papers*. But what exactly is meant by pre-theory papers? And how can you know if you have such a paper? This article will try to answer these questions.

PRE-THEORY ORIENTATION

AMD papers, be they quantitative or qualitative, share a pre-theory orientation. They typically begin with a question, based on an observation, surprising or unexpected results, a hunch, and/or simple logic, which leads to an exploration of new, emergent, or poorly understood phenomenon. This is in contrast to more traditional papers, which rely on theoretically driven logic, be it deductions from a grand theory or well-developed deductive logic derived from such a theory.

Papers in *AMD* may seek to *directly* address new, emergent, and/or poorly understood phenomena. These phenomena may be new or poorly understood for various reasons. First, they may have been largely overlooked by organizational scholars. An example might be, say, crying in the workplace (Elsbach & Bechky, 2018). Second, they may have simply never been observed until now. Such might be the case when one uncovers a surprising result in their data. Third, they may be so new that our field has not had an opportunity to study them yet. For example, phenomena such as Uber drivers or Twitter bots (Salge & Karahanna, 2018). Finally, it may be our field mistakenly thought we understood a phenomenon when we did not.

These emergent and/or poorly understood phenomena may not always lend themselves well to existing theory. Extant theories may be inappropriate or not easily applied, given the phenomenon, the context, or the goals of one's research. In some cases, one may realize *post hoc* that extant theories are a poor fit when the results of one's studies do not support the theory one originally used. In other cases, one may realize that extant theory cannot adequately or parsimoniously be used for one's paper because the theory is inadequate for deriving clean, confident, and theoretically robust hypotheses. For this reason, *AMD* embraces an abductive rather than

deductive approach to research. All of us are familiar with deductive approaches to our research: One identifies a general principle or overarching framework, develops hypotheses that are clearly grounded on this principle or framework, and then empirically tests these hypotheses. By contrast, *AMD* looks for papers that take an abductive approach: a process of reasoning *from data to understanding*, with the aim of offering a tentative, "first suggestion" as to the nature of, and perhaps even the mechanism underlying, the observed pattern. One begins with a hunch, an observation, or a simple logic to guide one's exploration of the data, but ultimately develops plausible explanations for it, and, in doing so, extends and enriches theory.

AMD papers also oftentimes address questions regarding known phenomena, but for which the theory-grounded answers are inconsistent or incomplete. One example of the former is the impact of positive effect on performance: As Liu, Vashdi, Cross, Bamberger, and Erez (in press) noted, the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2013) would suggest that positive effect will facilitate performance through more flexible and integrative thinking, whereas the affect-as-information theory (Schwarz, 2012; Schwarz & Clore, 2007) would suggest that positive effect could result in overconfidence and, thus, a tendency to under-reflect and over-rely on automatic processing. In cases such as this, we are forced to draw from and integrate multiple theories. This operates against a cardinal principle of theorizing, namely, to be parsimonious.

Perhaps you recognize a commonly observed phenomenon, but you do not believe it can be readily understood on the basis of existing theory. Or perhaps you encounter some surprising, counterintuitive, or anomalous findings in the process of your research which you find does not lend itself easily to an existing theoretical explanation. Alternatively, you may have a hunch about a potentially important relationship or a relatively unstudied organizational phenomenon, but you are either unable to find a theory or find competing theories that make it difficult to draw confident predictions about it. These are the papers that belong in *AMD* as they are ones that do not readily lend themselves to be adequately or parsimoniously addressed on the basis of *a priori* theorizing.

WHAT IS NOT A PRE-THEORY PAPER

It may also be helpful to briefly address what a pre-theory paper is not. First, pre-theory papers are *empirically based* quantitative or qualitative papers. They are not conceptual papers discussing theoretical models or how a particular line of research should develop. Even if a conceptual paper lays the groundwork for new theorizing, if it is not empirically driven, it is not suitable for *AMD*.

Second, a pre-theory paper is not an atheoretical one. Quite the contrary. Although *AMD* papers do not typically begin with conventional theorizing, they should wholly embrace theory in the discussion and, ideally, lay out an empirically driven pathway for new theorizing in the future. Our papers attempt to surface new phenomena or relationships and develop plausible insights into their nature. It is this process of exploration that leads to the revision, extension, or new insights into existing theory or even possibly providing the springboard for the creation of new frameworks, conceptual models, or theories (Shapira, 2011). The back end theoretical development takes a form that is dependent on the nature of the paper. It may, for example, involve highlighting how the findings identify boundary conditions about existing theory, future directions for theory development, or throw into question theoretical assumptions. But these are only examples.

A pre-theory paper is also not simply a paper with weak or poorly developed theory. Many papers are identified in the review process as suffering from insufficient theoretical development. Such papers are flagged for many reasons, such as the misapplication or misunderstanding of theory, poorly developed arguments, leaps in logic, or unexplained assumptions. The key question when considering whether such papers might fit with *AMD* is this: why does the paper have underdeveloped theory? If it is due to authors failing to do their due diligence and leverage the extensive theoretical basis underlying much of what we do in management research, then it is not for *AMD*. It is only an option for *AMD* when it is clear that existing theory is too underdeveloped to adequately explain a particular phenomenon. In other words, if the “not enough theory” problem of a given paper is due to the insufficiency of the existing theory to adequately, comprehensively, and parsimoniously address the research question and offer clear predictions, rather than due to the insufficiencies of the authors, that is a paper that should be sent to *AMD*.

Pre-theory papers are also not traditional papers that have simply been converted to fit the mission of *AMD*, by removing the theory and formal hypotheses from the front end. In some cases, it makes sense to make that conversion, such as when the initial theory

was inadequate to begin with, when no overarching theoretical perspective offers a parsimonious framework for understanding the phenomenon in question, and/or when one is forced to piece together a model from a smorgasbord of theories to offer *a priori* hypotheses. But merely taking out the front-end theory and moving it to the discussion does not, in and of itself, make it a pre-theory paper.

CHALLENGES OF IDENTIFYING PRE-THEORY PAPERS

The idea behind pre-theory may be straightforward, but identifying such papers in practice is a bit more challenging for a few reasons. First, the distinction between a traditional theoretically grounded paper and a pre-theory one is a matter of degree, and hence open to some degree of interpretation. As those familiar with any review process can attest, reviewers and scholars do not always agree on whether a paper has “enough theory” or not. Moreover, we are not all necessarily in agreement as to what is a theory (Shapira, 2011), hence our need for so many writings on the subject. The same subjective judgment applies to pre-theory as well. Is a paper sufficiently “pre-theory”? Although the extremes may be easily recognized—papers strong in theory, papers without theory—most of the papers are more likely to fall into a gray area between these extremes.

Second, just as one cannot prove a null hypothesis, one cannot so easily “prove” with logic that there is no extant theory for a particular paper’s focus. Indeed, as an editor, I have on occasion encountered a paper for which I believed the topic did not lend itself to existing theoretical explanations, only to learn from a reviewer that there is indeed a relevant and useful theory that could and should have been used. In this sense, recognizing a pre-theory paper means being aware of and capable to discount potential theories in our field, and to be confident there is not an existing well-suited theory despite the adequate search. It is up to the author to anticipate such reviewer responses and make a compelling case as to why extant theories or models are inappropriate or inadequate for your research question.

A third challenge to identifying pre-theory papers is that, as an interdisciplinary field, we have always borrowed and adapted theories from a variety of disciplines, so the question becomes to what extent could and should we stretch to find theories outside our field. The challenge here of course is to what extent the author can go beyond the immediate domain within which the phenomenon is embedded, to find applicable theories in other domains or even other fields. Indeed, some would argue that somewhere in the universe of knowledge, there is a theory

for everything. To illustrate this point, we can consider the article by Salge and Karahanna (2018) that examines the role of bots in online twitter protests, emphasizing the need to take bots into account in future research contexts. With a focus on a relatively newly existing phenomenon, the authors were rightfully unable to rely on existing theory to generate *a priori* predictions about the extent and role of bots in online political movements. One might argue, however, that perhaps in the realm of scholarship within the fields of communications, political science, or criminology, a theoretical perspective may have been found. If such a theory is readily applicable to the topic at hand in an organizational context, one could argue it is not pre-theory.

With the aforementioned, it is important to keep in mind that theories outside our field are not always readily applicable to work contexts and are less likely to offer comprehensive and parsimonious explanations for our phenomenon of interest. In such cases, one may find a theory in another field, and yet we can still consider the paper pre-theory for our purposes if the theory is not a straightforward fit. In such a case, one may start with a general principle, then use empirical means to lay out the basis for applying a theory from another field to the organizational context. This more *inductive* approach would certainly be a suitable match for an *AMD* submission, as *AMD* also publishes studies grounded on classic induction.

So what is an AMD author to do? Given these challenges, there are several things authors can do to overcome them. First, it is useful for you to share your work with colleagues for suggestions on potential theories that may be useful. This will help to avoid overlooking a very suitable theory and erroneously assume you have a pre-theory paper. Moreover, if you find the same unsuitable theories are raised by others as potential candidates, you can anticipate that reviewers may think so as well. This offers you the opportunity to address this issue head on, by explaining to readers why those potential theories are not easily applied to your research question.

Second, related to the aforementioned point, it is almost always valuable to explain to readers why your paper is pre-theory. Although the nature of some papers speak for themselves—such as a paper embracing grounded theory or one that offers competing theories—others may benefit from a formal defense in the front end of their manuscript. There is no set formula for how this may be accomplished, and you should look to other *AMD* papers for inspiration. One approach is to briefly explain how the dominant theories relevant to the topic of your paper are insufficient to explain your research question or unexpected findings. A good example of this can be found in the front end of Klein, Brinsfeld, Cooper,

and Molloy (2017) paper on quondam commitments, commitments we no longer have. They explain how dominant commitment theories, such as consistency theory and social exchange theory actually fall short in being able to address quondam commitments. Another approach, especially for papers addressing a known phenomenon in a new context, is to explain at the outset how and why the known go-to dominant theories for this phenomenon are inadequate for the context you are focused on. A good example of this is found in the study of Reilly (2017) on the layered careers of comedians. He addresses how the existing frameworks for explaining project-based creative workers' careers cannot adequately be used to explain career progressions of creative content producers.

WHAT DOES A PRE-THEORY PAPER LOOK LIKE?

Pre-theory papers in *AMD*, both quantitative and qualitative, can take a wide variety of forms, depending on their goals. It may be useful to further understand pre-theory by looking at some of these forms and explicating what makes them pre-theory. These are illustrative forms, and by no means the only ones found in *AMD*.

Papers with Unexpected Findings

Suppose you have a paper for which you developed hypotheses using the go-to, dominant, or expected theory to make your predictions, but your findings were not supported. Such studies may work well when framed as pre-theoretical if the following two conditions are met. First, the study must offer *consistent* evidence that the results diverge from what would have expected on the basis of the dominant theory and that such divergence is not simply a methodological or statistical artifact. Second, you are able to offer plausible explanations for why such divergence occurs and/or when one would expect it to occur. To the extent that there is consistent evidence of results that are unexpected on the basis of extant theory, the results themselves reveal that the dominant explanation for the focal question is, at least in the focal case, inappropriate or insufficient. As such, one can confidently view the inferences drawn from the results as pre-theoretical.

Most researchers have encountered findings that do not fit their prior predictions. Often, such an experience leads us to engaging in abductive reasoning: we empirically uncover the fact that our prior theory is inadequate for the question at hand, and we ponder alternative plausible explanations and possibly new analyses to untangle the puzzle. This process can lead us to revise the existing theory, combine an existing

theory with another, or adopt a new theoretical explanation for our findings. Unfortunately, because most of our journals require an *a priori* deductive approach, such a process may be invisible and implicitly require authors to resort to “harking”—making up new hypotheses after the results are known—so as to appear to have been entirely deductive from the outset.

An alternative to “harking” is to submit your paper to *AMD*, where you will be transparent about your research journey and the abductive process you relied on. In other words, you will be forthright in presenting your original theoretical perspective using the dominant theory for a given area, showing how your results consistently failed to support your predictions, and in sharing with readers the abductive reasoning that led you to uncover plausible alternative theoretical explanations for your findings.

Papers Focused on Emergent Phenomena and New Relationships

Our papers sometimes address phenomena or relationships that are so new, or at least so poorly understood thus far, that we simply do not have existing theory that can help us to understand them. Perhaps, in the course of doing your research, your dataset reveals an intriguing, surprising, or unusual relationship. Or perhaps you observe a potentially important phenomena in organizations that our scholarship has largely overlooked or that has only recently come into existence. You may search around to find a way to theoretically explain it but you come up short. Perhaps, you attempt to jury-rig a theory onto the front end of your paper to make your results look *a priori*, but as is often the case, it feels a bit like pushing round pegs into square holes. Rather than engage in this questionable practice, consider being forthright and submitting your work in a manner that shows the abductive road actually taken. If your findings are not adequately or parsimoniously supported by theory, they may suit a pre-theory orientation, and thus fit the mission of *AMD*. This will enable you to be transparent about your research journey and how the results came to be found, with no need to do theoretical cartwheels to justify it. You may have to collect additional data to provide confidence that your surprising observations were not anomalous or some statistical artifact, but you will have room to explore plausible explanations for your findings, and in doing so, enhance our theoretical understanding of that which you found.

Papers Focused on New Contexts and Samples

You may have a paper that involves a distinct, unusual, or unconventional context or sample.

There are so many scholarly benefits to studying unusual contexts or samples (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010), yet doing so is a challenge if you find that existing theories are not sufficient or adequate, given the uniqueness of your context or sample. Fortunately, this is the kind of pre-theory paper that suits the goals of *AMD*. To illustrate with an example, Elsbach and Bechky (2018) examine how observers assess women who cry in professional settings. Although some empirical studies have examined perceptions and attributions of crying in a laboratory setting, these authors point out that our existing knowledge from these studies may not be applicable to a professional context.

Papers that Develop New Constructs

AMD is also a potential outlet for papers that introduce, define, and develop measurement tools of new constructs. Emergent phenomena not yet identified or understudied are those most likely to be poorly understood and under theorized. If it is a potentially important phenomenon to organizations and it is relatively unknown (i.e., we do not understand its nature, its conceptual structure, or its psychometric properties), it is quite likely that current theoretical frameworks are insufficient for its development (Bamberger, 2017). A good example to look at regarding an *AMD* paper focused on new construct development is one by Adair, Buchan, Chen, and Dong (2016). They developed and validated an instrument to assess context-dependent communicators, the extent to which a communicator relies on and pays attention to message context when communicating. Another example of a new construct paper is by Lee, Koopman, Hollenbeck, Wang, and Lanaj (2015), who introduce a measure of a team description index, a standardized and rigorous way to assess teams along three dimensions simultaneously.

Keep in mind, we are looking for not just new constructs, but ones that also matter. As such, it becomes important to clarify why we need this new construct, as well as its discriminant validity and/or its unique nomological net. Being unique means not only being different from existing constructs by name and definition but also empirically distinct in terms of antecedents, consequences, content, and the unique variance it can explain.

Papers That Offer Competing Predictions

Another type of pre-theory paper is one that pits two competing theories against one another to make differing predictions about a relationship. To the extent that existing theory or theories suggest different predictions about the actual direction of a

relationship, we can say that it is indeed pre-theory. An excellent exemplar paper is one by Silberzahn and Menges (2016), who examine whether people prefer women as leaders who have feminine or masculine faces. On one hand, more masculine faces are more aligned with implicit theories about strong leadership. On the other hand, women with feminine faces are seen as more attractive and, therefore, more likely to attaining higher occupational status, and prior simulated political elections studies show a preference for female candidates with more feminine faces. As another good example, Doyle, Lount, Wilk, and Pettit (2016) offer competing theories to explain how status distance impacts helping behavior at work. The similarity-attraction hypothesis contends that one would be more likely to help those closer in status, whereas self-expansion models suggest that great status differences mean greater amount of new information gained from a relationship; thus, one is incented to help more distant others.

You may have been drawn to a research question that is interesting because its answer varies depending on which theory you apply. In other cases, you may inadvertently discover you have competing theories. For example, perhaps you have shared your work in some way with your colleagues, and they have offered different opinions about what they expect you should find/should have found. Or perhaps when you have presented your work, some in the audience offer alternative theoretical explanations for the opposite of what you observed. Such papers can be a terrific fit for *AMD*.

Replications and Meta-Analyses

Both replication studies and meta-analyses sit at the boundary of pre-and extant theory. They are both grounded on prior work that is typically theory driven. Yet both types of inquiries aim to push the boundaries and, on the basis of empirical observation, lay the groundwork for revised or redirecting theorizing. A replication study can be an especially useful fit for *AMD* if the reasons for your replication are because you have some hunches or logical expectations, beyond theoretical ones, to expect the results may not hold or may be different in a replication (Miller & Bamberger, 2016). For example, you may believe that the previously reported results will be absent or different if studied in a different context or with a different sample, or if you repair prior flaws in a research design, or adjust for certain assumptions previously overlooked. The results of such a replication study could provide insights into boundary conditions on existing theory or suggest how the existing theory may need to be extended or modified to capture a change in assumptions.

Many meta-analyses papers can also fall under the pre-theory umbrella, depending on its focus (Miller & Bamberger, 2016). If the focus of the meta-analysis is on testing theoretically established relationships in the aggregate, then it is unlikely to be suitable. However, meta-analysis that fit well with *AMD* would be those able to uncover previously unexplored moderators, for which one has to rely on a hunch or a simple logic to explain them. This would be especially valuable if such moderators could account for existing mixed findings or paradoxes in the literature. For example, the research findings on the relationship between ostracism and performance are mixed. It could be that this effect is due to demographic differences, such as gender, in the samples across prior studies, and the puzzle may be solved if those demographic differences are examined as moderators in a meta-analysis study.

CLUES THAT YOU HAVE A PRE-THEORY PAPER

Based on the aforementioned discussion, here are some questions you might consider to determine the likelihood that your paper meets *AMD*'s pre-theory criteria.

Do You Find Yourself Engaging in *post hoc* Theorizing?

Have you attempted to concoct a theory (or contort extant theory) for your paper after seeing your results do not come out as you predicted? Are you trying to pass off accidental findings as if they were *a priori*? Consider instead being straightforward, and transparent by sharing your actual path of discovery with *AMD*.

New Phenomena or New Context without a Theory?

Have you been attempting to study something new in our field, or something more established but in a new context, but for which you believe existing theories are inadequate for generating *a priori* hypotheses? If despite searching and asking around, you have not been able to find a suitable theory to use, you probably have a paper suitable for *AMD*.

Has Your Work Been Criticized for Lacking Theory?

Do you have a paper that has been criticized for being atheoretical or too weak on the theory front? This might be a fit for *AMD* if you can clearly make the case that this deficiency is due to a lack of existing theory. Look at the feedback received on your work to make sure that what you view as limitations in

theory does not stem from the failure to thoroughly master and review the relevant literatures.

Do You Have Interesting Results That are in Need of a Theory?

If you have uncovered unexpected but consistent relationship(s) in your data, for which *a priori* predictions would have been unreasonable, this may have the potential to be a pre-theory paper. Be cautious, however, to the possibility that these unexpected relationships may be simply unfamiliar to you. As an author, you need to fully understand the relevant “conversation” in the relevant domain and ensure that you understand the extant theory governing what you may have found. What may be new to you may be well understood by others.

Are You Seeking to Develop a New Construct?

If you have come up with a new construct that is interesting and important, and you found a way to measure it and show it is distinct in important ways from existing constructs, this is a paper that *AMD* wants to consider.

Do You Have a Paper with Competing Theories?

Do you have a research question for which you could use different theories that result in somewhat different predictions? Have you found that when presenting or sharing your work, colleagues come up with alternative theories you should consider that would suggest different results than the ones you predict? Competing theory papers are ideal for *AMD* as long as the empirically observed patterns point to and are used to suggest a plausible resolution.

Are You Conducting a Replication?

If you are conducting replication research, it may fit *AMD*. If your arguments in such a paper are centered on the basis of theory, it is not a good fit. However, if your arguments are focused around simple logic, such that you expect, e.g., different or null results because of a change in context, an improvement in methodology, or a change in some assumptions, send it in to us.

Are You Conducting a Meta-Analysis?

If you have a meta-analytic paper that is focused not on fundamental theoretical differences, but is instead testing some previously unexplored moderators, ones that may alter the boundary conditions of existing theory or help to fill gaps in knowledge or

potential paradoxes across findings, it may be a good fit for *AMD*.

CONCLUSION

AMD is unique in that it seeks to be an outlet for pre-theory empirical papers that are either quantitative or qualitative. It is home for papers exploring emergent and/or poorly understood phenomena, for which observations and data lead, and for which extant theory is inadequate for providing *a priori* hypotheses. Although *AMD* publishes a wide range of papers, applying a diverse range of methodological approaches and analytical methods, they all share in common one characteristic: they are all pre-theory in nature.

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