

FROM THE EDITORS

INTEGRATING THEORIES IN *AMJ* ARTICLES

Theories play an important role in management research. As management scholars, we utilize insights from many different theories as we engage in research to better understand many different aspects of management. But many research questions can't be fully addressed by drawing only upon a single theory. Just as two firms form alliances to accomplish more than either could individually, scholars may bring together two theories to address what neither theory could independently. Just as with alliances, however, many attempts to integrate theories fail to achieve the goals of those who brought them together. While some level of commonality is necessary for integrating two theories, it is how researchers handle the differences between the theories and what kind of filter is used to determine what to bring together from the theories that plays a significant role in determining the success of the endeavor. Our goal is to examine different approaches for integrating theories and discuss how to do it in a way that maximizes the chance that integration will provide novel insights that will influence future research and ultimately management practice.

We believe that there are four approaches to successfully integrating theory. First, two theories can speak to the same phenomenon but from different perspectives (i.e., same dependent variable but different explanatory variables). Second, two seemingly disparate streams of research can be shown to actually not be so disparate after all (e.g., they may share implicit assumptions or some other nonobvious link). Third, two theories may primarily address different phenomena, but applying one theory to the domain of the other can generate new insights. Finally, two theories may address related phenomena but draw on a related or common set of explanatory factors.

INTEGRATION APPROACHES

Single Phenomenon, Two Theoretical Perspectives

One way to integrate theories involves taking two perspectives that speak to the same phenomena but

from different vantage points. In this approach, sharing a common dependent variable is necessary to operationalize the integration of the two theories. The two theories don't need to be completely overlapping in the domains to which they apply, but they need to overlap to the extent that they both predict something specific in a given context. One example is Mayer and Salomon's (2006) examination of subcontracting, which integrated elements of the resource-based view (RBV) focusing on the role of capabilities and resources in the subcontracting decision, with transaction cost economics (TCE), which focuses on exchange hazards as a driver of the same decision. They provided evidence that firms subcontract when they lack relevant technological capabilities but also that, when the situation is reversed, firms do not necessarily internalize—despite possessing high levels of the relevant technological capabilities. The difference in responses was explained by incorporating capabilities with contractual hazards, which also led to subcontracting. Strong capabilities not only helped lower the cost of doing projects internally, but also helped lower the cost of subcontracting because the technological capabilities helped the firms find, evaluate, and monitor subcontractors more effectively than firms that lacked such capabilities. Thus, combining elements of the RBV and TCE allowed for a better understanding of subcontracting than either theory could provide in isolation.

A somewhat broader example, on a topic of considerable interest to organizational behavior researchers, involves research seeking to explain how and why some members of a group come to be seen as influential (i.e., emerge as informal leaders) by other members in a group. One theoretical framework used to give an account of this process is based in status characteristics theory (Bunderson, 2003). The status explanation holds that members look for cues of task-relevant expertise; those cues can be specific (closely related to the task at hand) or diffuse (stereotypical assumptions about observable characteristics [e.g., gender] and task-relevant expertise). These cues shape members' expectations about one another's potential contribution;

expectations, in turn, shape interaction, then interaction confirms expectations, and soon an informal hierarchy of who is expert (and therefore influential) takes hold. A second theoretical framework, self-categorization theory (Hogg & Terry, 2000), holds that members initially interact in ways that shape a shared prototype of the ideal group member. The more an individual member represents the ideal prototype, the greater her/his influence in the group. Both status characteristics and self-categorization speak to emergent influence, but their respective explanations for how influence emerges have both striking parallels and important differences as well—thus opening up opportunities for integrative questions: Are expertise and prototypicality additive? Or are they multiplicative: Does prototypicality enhance expertise? When does expertise matter, versus prototypicality? Does the nature of the group matter?

One impediment to successful theory integration of this type is addressing the assumptions of each theory in a way that enables scholars in each area to feel comfortable with the integrated outcome. One example of a problem in this area has been dialogue between the knowledge-based view of the firm (KBV) and transaction cost economics over TCE's assumption that some people will act opportunistically if given the chance, but who might do this cannot be known in advance. Some KBV scholars objected to Williamson's claim that opportunism is an important element in determining the boundaries of firms (e.g., Connor, 1991) and thus sought to move the KBV and TCE farther apart, while others (e.g., Foss, 1996) argued that the opportunism assumption did not pose an impediment to productive integration of the theories. Arguing about the opportunism assumption impeded efforts to productively integrate the theories and represents one big hurdle that theory integration must overcome—establishing a common foundation that researchers from both theories can agree upon.

There are different tactics for addressing the issue of conflicting assumptions, but the key is whether an assumption is important to the domain of the theory integration. If the integration can occur in such a way that the assumption is not really relevant, then the different assumptions can be set aside as the authors develop their integration. However, if the integration effort requires a strong stance one way or the other on one or more core assumptions, then this must be clearly developed into the integration effort, and likely right at the beginning. It may be that the assumption is context

dependent or simply needs to be weakened slightly; or perhaps a new assumption needs to be added. In any event, a clear rationale for the relevant assumption that the author will make is necessary to set the stage for a theory development effort. In some instances it may be necessary to work through part of the integration to fully set the stage for the assumption, so there is no one universally correct way to craft this process into a theory integration effort. The key, however, is to pick your battles carefully and only take issue with an assumption if it is critical to the theory development. And even then, it needs to be done in a way that is respectful to the theory—a way that creates a productive dialogue rather than a pitched battle over a perceived slight to a theory's underlying foundation.

We believe two conditions are helpful in enabling this type of theory integration to succeed. First, the effort needs to respect the foundational assumptions of each theory and resolve any disparities as they apply to the domain of the integration. Second, how each theory will be utilized and why each theory alone could not address the research question must be clearly articulated.

One Phenomenon, Seemingly Disparate Theoretical Perspectives

The second way to integrate theory involves bringing two seemingly disparate streams of research together by exposing how the implicit or rarely recognized assumptions of one stream complement the other, and vice versa. This approach is similar to the first approach to integration in that it involves two theoretical perspectives on the same organizational phenomenon that can be operationalized through a common dependent variable (or set of dependent variables). What sets this approach apart is the way in which the integration is structured: it begins by highlighting the evident disparities between two perspectives, but then shows the possibility of a synthesis. An example illustrates this dialectic. Social network research (Brass, 1984) has focused on how the informal structure of relationships lends influence to individuals, enabling them to be recognized as “players” (Burt, 1992) in organizations. A separate stream of research in the leadership domain, leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, also has focused on how members gain influence in organizations through relationships—but the emphasis in LMX research is on the quality of a member's relationship with his or her formally designated leader.

So, in terms of their differences, social network research explains influence as following from structural position in a network of relationships, whereas LMX theory sees similar benefits as resulting from the quality of a single relationship. These two approaches are brought together in the work of Sparrowe and Liden (2005). Their logic first frames the two perspectives as being in opposition but then finds in the underlying assumptions of each approach an opportunity for dialogue. Thus, although LMX research has focused on relationship quality, early formulations of the theory held that the resources leaders have at their disposal to exchange with members depend on their position within what Cashman et al. (1976) described as an “organizational understructure”—essentially, a network. Conversely, Burt’s (1992) structural holes theory holds that a member lacking legitimacy benefits through “sponsorship,” whereby the member “borrows the social capital” of a sponsor. Thus, the social network approach offers a more complete understanding of how leaders sponsor members, and LMX theory clarifies how the quality of the relationships members enjoy with their formal leaders bring legitimacy and influence.

Argyres and Zenger (2012) provide another example of integrating theories that are often positioned as orthogonal or conflicting in their work on TCE and the resource-based view of the firm. While prior research had separately focused on comparative capabilities or transaction cost factors in examining the boundaries of firms, Argyres and Zenger integrated these two streams of work to show that there is a strong intertemporal link between the two theories. Prior and current transaction costs may play a strong role in helping firms decide what to do internally, which may lead to the development of capabilities. One important element of integrating these two theories was Argyres and Zenger’s focus on the medium-to-long term. In the short term, TCE and the RBV do point to different factors that might influence firm boundaries; but if one shifts the focus to the medium-to-long term, those differences can be addressed by managerial action, and one then needs to consider why managers invest in developing certain capabilities rather than others, a question that Argyres and Zenger address with governance issues arising from TCE.

We are able to identify three conditions that appear to be necessary for this type of integration to be effective. First, both theories need to speak to the same—or highly similar—phenomena. Second, it must be possible to frame the relationship between

the two perspectives in terms of a meaningful opposition. To be persuasive, the opposition should not be forced or artificial but, instead, reflect genuine differences in emphasis. Third, within the opposition there need to be points of commonality between the two perspectives, and those points constitute the basis for productive dialogue. It’s not that one theory trumps the other; points of tension remain. But, in the integration, those differences lead to a more complete understanding of the complexity of the phenomena in question.

Applying One Theory to the Domain of Another Theory

A third way to integrate theories might involve two theoretical perspectives that speak to different phenomena, but the application of one theory to the domain of the other can lend novel insight. An example is Weber and Mayer (2011), who combined microlevel insights from regulatory focus theory and expectancy violation theory with transaction cost economics (TCE) to explore the impact of different ways of framing elements of a contract. In seeking to better understand how contracts may be used in practice and address tensions between TCE and the relational view of governance (e.g., Dyer & Singh, 1998), integrating TCE with social psychology allows for a better understanding of how people might respond to different contractual clauses, which shifts attention from what clauses to include, a main focus of the prior work on contractual governance, to how to frame the clauses that are included in a contract. Thus, the nature of the task changes, and sensitivity to a new issue is brought into the focal theory.

For this type of integration to be successful, two conditions appear to be especially important. First, there should be a clearly articulated link between the theory and the new domain that allows for productive dialogue. Second, the basic assumptions of the theory and the new domain either need to be compatible, or the integration effort must find a way to overcome any (apparently) incompatible assumptions.

Streams of Research Sharing a Similar Explanatory Account

A fourth way to drive productive integration involves two (or more) streams of research that draw upon similar explanatory accounts in explaining

distinct organizational phenomena. By “explanatory account,” we mean the processes or mechanisms through which antecedents are held to have their effects on outcomes. When multiple streams of research share a common explanatory account, there may be a basis for dialogue. The opportunity that beckons in this integrative approach is the development of a larger conceptual framework that brings together independent streams of research, thus lending greater parsimony.

A set of examples of this approach to integration is evident in research that draws from the framework of social exchange theory in explaining the discretionary attitudes and behaviors of members—and, in particular, organizational citizenship behaviors (Organ, 1990). The primary explanatory account in this work draws upon Blau’s (1964) distinction between social and economic exchange to illuminate the relationship of social exchange with discretionary attitudes and behaviors. It informs the distinction between transactional and relational psychological contracts (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1992), supports the literature on perceived organizational support (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-Lamastro, 1990), and is important to the leader-member exchange perspective on leadership (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997). It has become the primary theoretical perspective in understanding the effects of justice on employee outcomes (Colquitt et al., 2013). This shared use of a common explanatory account makes it possible to develop an integrative model, one that displays considerable conceptual coherence. An example is found in Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson, and Wayne (2008), in which social exchange theory serves as the overarching conceptual framework for a model in which perceived organizational support and leader-member exchange affect discretionary outcomes through psychological breach and violation.

Although Blau’s (1964) distinction between social and economic exchange has served as the explanatory account in much work seeking to explain discretionary outcomes, it is not by any means the sole theory that makes a similar distinction. In psychological contracts research, Clark and Mills’s (1979) distinction between communal and exchange relationships has informed research on interpersonal helping in organizations (e.g., Konovsky & Pugh, 1994). MacNeil’s (1985) distinction between relational and exchange contracts has been used in ways analogous to Blau’s (1964) distinction between social and economic exchange to

link psychological contract perceptions to discretionary attitudes and behaviors (Robinson & Morrison, 1995). Gouldner’s (1960) norm of reciprocity is also frequently invoked, often alongside Blau (1964), in providing warrants for hypotheses involving discretionary attitudes and behaviors. That multiple versions of an explanatory account appear to converge itself constitutes an opportunity for dialogue and integration at a meta-theoretical level; Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) have done precisely that in a thoughtful integration and critique of the use of social exchange theories in organizational research.

Three conditions appear important for this fourth type of integration to have promise of success. First, several streams of research need to share a single explanatory account. Second, those streams of work ideally fall within a single domain or focus on a common set of explanatory variables; Organ’s (1990) use of Blau’s (1964) distinction between social and economic exchange in explaining citizenship behavior did this for the LMX, POS (perceived organizational support), and psychological contracts literatures. Third, the integration needs to do more than show how distinct streams of research rest on the same foundations. The parsimony offered by a more general conceptual framework lends insight only if that framework has meaning on its own; in our example, understanding the employment relationship as an integrated whole rather than in a piecemeal fashion was the parsimonious insight.

CONCLUSION

Many phenomena and research questions cannot be adequately addressed by drawing on a single theory. It is important, however, to determine how to integrate elements from multiple theories in a way that sheds light on one or more issues that no theory could address individually. There are different ways to integrate theories; we don’t claim that the four we examine here comprise an exhaustive list.

In addition, some research questions utilize more than one theory, often very effectively, in a way that falls short of integrating them. For example, an article might have two hypotheses developed by drawing on transaction cost economics and two more than are grounded in the knowledge-based view of the firm. Simply entertaining hypotheses from multiple theories does not require integration. Integration occurs when the basic elements of two

or more theories are combined in such a way that novel insights are produced. Those novel insights could involve an application to a new domain or a richer understanding of something already in the domain of one or both theories. The key element is that the combination produces something novel and allows scholars to answer, or to better answer, one or more important research questions.

As with any worthwhile endeavor, however, integrating theories is not easy. One challenge is seeking the acceptance of those who regularly utilize each theory and may not see the need for the integration, especially if core assumptions are stretched or modified. Another challenge is determining exactly how to integrate the theories, and the specific research question or phenomenon of interest should be the filter that helps determine what to draw upon and what to modify from each theory and how they might then fit together in a new way. While the task is challenging, the potential rewards are significant.

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