

Call for Papers
Academy of Management Review Special Topic Forum

THE ROLE OF THEORY IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

Submission Date: July 20–August 20, 2019

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Why is theory important? Why do we need a special topic forum (STF) to address this question? It seems clear that for a research journal whose goal is “to publish theoretical insights that advance our understanding of management and organizations” (per *AMR*’s Information for Contributors), theory is important. However, there are several good reasons to consider this question in this journal at this time, and each reason resonates with trends in multiple subfields of management and organizational studies.

On the more macro side of management, researchers in entrepreneurship, organizational theory, strategic management, and management of technology and innovation—scholars closest to the disciplines of sociology and economics—are caught up in a mounting frenzy to identify causation. Alternatives to observational studies are becoming more common—notably, laboratory, field, and natural experiments (e.g., Castilla & Benard, 2010; Georgiadis & Pitelis, 2016; Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun, 2016)—and statistical techniques such as matching and regression discontinuity are increasingly being applied to observational data to improve causal inference (e.g., Ferguson, 2015; Haveman, Jia, Shi, & Wang, 2017).

On the more micro side of management, researchers in conflict management, human resources, managerial and organizational cognition, organizational communications, and organizational behavior—scholars closest to the discipline of psychology—are experiencing what has been called a crisis in the field (Starbuck, 2016) concerning replication, questionable research practices such as *p*-hacking and HARKing (hypothesizing after the results are known), and dissatisfaction with null hypothesis testing. These issues have all been the subject of conferences, academic papers (e.g., Shrout & Rodgers, 2018;

Spellman, 2015), and popular press articles (Dominus, 2017; Yong, 2016); they have also spurred the creation of centers (e.g., the Center for Open Science). As a result, we have seen a call for the reduction in “researcher degrees of freedom” (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011: 1360). Solutions to the crisis, such as metascience or the “science of science” (Schooler, 2014: 9), are invariably data driven—focused on research design or statistical analysis. Rarely is a solution offered that hinges on returning to theory.

Across the spectrum, the intensifying focus on research design and ever more elaborate empirical testing may suggest that theory has become less important, and research methods and statistical techniques more important. This suggestion is bolstered by the flourishing of big(ger) data and the use of computational statistics and techniques such as dictionary methods (Goldberg, Srivastava, Manian, Monroe, & Potts, 2016), word embeddings (Mikolov, Sutskever, Chen, Corrado, & Dean, 2013), and machine learning methods, including topic modeling (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003) and structured topic modeling (Lucas et al., 2015). These techniques, rather than using inferential statistics to test hypotheses on (mostly numerical) data, can induce hitherto unknown patterns in numerical, textual, audio, and visual data. But rather than obviating theory, these methods require us to interpret patterns induced from data, guided by theory. These inductive methods are similar to cluster, factor, and multidimensional scaling techniques in that the results require interpretation, which must be guided by theory because all observations are theory laden (Hanson, 1958).

This STF seeks to stimulate a deeper understanding of the role of theory in management research—for example, where more theory is

needed, where less theory would be better, how to overcome resistance to new theories and novel outcome variables, and how to develop more compelling theories. To that end, we invite submissions on a broad array of topics and research questions, including but not limited to the following:

- What do great theories outside management (e.g., in biology, linguistics, or political science) look like? What lessons do they offer for theory building in management?
- Can it be argued that there is a role for abductive reasoning in management theory building, and if so, what it is? Why do you observe the pattern you are observing in your data?
- Does Kuhn's (1970) theory of paradigm shifts, which predicts recurrent scientific revolutions and was based on observations of natural science, apply to social science research, including management research? Should we be comfortable that "old" theories are rarely overturned by evidence but, rather, continue to be represented alongside new ones?
- Should we stop trying to generate radically new theories until we are ready to risk testing them? Or should we nudge people to move away from incremental theory testing to embark on bigger and more revolutionary studies and radical theory development?
- How can we come up with entirely new questions, dependent variables, and/or independent variables? Moreover, how can we overcome resistance from those who have invested time and effort examining the old questions, dependent variables, and independent variables?
- Is there too much emphasis on causal inference? Is the search for identification and replicability driving out good research questions? Are there important research questions that are not being asked because they lack a good exogenous variable?
- Why do computational techniques like machine learning need theory? What opportunities for building new theories (or revising existing theories) do computational techniques afford us?
- What roles can the problem-formulation and problem-solving approach (Nickerson & Zenger, 2004), engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), collaborative research (Bartunek & Louis, 1996), and design science (Simon, 1996) play in theory building for management research?

- What substantively important questions are being ignored by management research?
- What can the open science movement teach us about returning to theory to understand the big questions in management? Can it help us connect our work across multiple subareas, areas, or even disciplines?
- Can a return to the importance of theory help us move to the next stage in our scientific evolution?
- What is the role of theory in Ph.D. programs? How is theory's role in Ph.D. education changing?
- What is the role of theory in management practice and education? How is theory's role in management practice and education changing?

TIMELINE AND SUBMISSIONS

The timeline for submissions is between July 20 and August 20, 2019. After August 20, 2019, submissions will not be accepted. In line with AMR's guidelines, a submission must advance management and organization theory and/or the theory development process. This includes developing new theory, significantly challenging existing theory, and demonstrating or challenging the importance of theory for management.

All submissions must be uploaded to the Manuscript Central/Scholar One website (<https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/amr>). Submissions must follow the guidelines for contributors and the AMR Style Guide for Authors. Submissions that do not adhere to the style guidelines will be returned to the author(s). Reviews will follow a double-blind process.

For questions about submissions, contact AMR's managing editor (amr@aom.org). For questions about the content of this STF, contact Heather Haveman (haveman@berkeley.edu), Joseph Mahoney (josephm@illinois.edu), or Elizabeth A. Mannix (eam33@cornell.edu).

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