

## EDITORS' COMMENTS: STYLES OF THEORIZING AND THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

There are many ways of theorizing (Swedberg, 2012: 2), yet we seem to observe comparatively few of these forms in management scholarship. Given the diverse phenomena of interest to us, it is striking that theorizing about them seems to be dominated by a rather limited subset of the range of approaches available. In this essay we seek to explore the context within which theory development and publication are taking place. We ask, "Why do so few styles of theorizing dominate current scholarship? What are the prospects and implications for creating a more diverse approach to theory development?" In doing so we pay attention to the politics of knowledge creation, including the issue of internationalizing theory, and the methodological causes of this limited diversity. Our key arguments here are as follows:

- There are structural and political aspects of the social organization of knowledge that limit the diversity of management theory. Making these aspects more transparent is a first step toward promoting greater diversity.
- The main issues in promoting diversity in management theory are not geographic or (inter)national but relate to the range of styles and approaches to theorizing that are viewed as legitimate, especially the widespread use of formal propositions.
- Greater reflexivity over the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the dominant approaches would create greater space for alternative approaches.
- Theorizing is inextricably tied to methodology. In particular, the dominance of correlational, net-effects analysis has led to a corresponding hegemony of correlational theorizing, stifling other forms of theorizing and leading to an impoverished understanding of our phenomena of interest.
- As part of this pattern, we have witnessed a decline in the development and refinement of typological theories.

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We acknowledge the helpful comments of Paul Adler, Joep Cornelissen, Tom Cummings, Frank Wijen, Hugh Willmott, and Scott Wiltermuth, along with those of editor Roy Suddaby and our fellow associate editors.

As a result, we believe there are opportunities but also some attendant problems with our current state of theory development, and we aim to articulate some key challenges for advancing more diverse, robust, and persuasive theorizing in the future.

### THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

In an email circulated during the week we started writing this essay, Academy of Management president Ming-Jer Chen announced that the Academy now has over 18,000 members from over 100 countries. The Academy has benefited greatly from this increasing internationalization. Few would dispute, for example, that the annual meeting is now a more diverse, interesting, and vibrant conference than has historically been the case. But what is the evidence on how this internationalization is influencing the creation of management theory?

In reflecting on the current state of management theory, it is important to begin with some consideration of what constitutes our academic field. Such reflections generally center on the field's leading journals and the key actors involved with them: authors, editors, reviewers, and publishers. Over the years considerable attention has been paid to the international makeup of journals. The prevailing discourse in these discussions has been that the dominance of North American journals, with their mostly North American editors and reviewers, has produced and sustained a dominant ("North American") approach in management and organization theory that is primarily practiced by North American (-trained) authors.

For us, the label *North American* is somewhat problematic since there is not a single theoretical approach across all American schools; nonetheless, there is some truth in the essence of this narrative. The further argument that typically follows is that this dominance and single prevailing paradigm is damaging to the production of knowledge and serves to reproduce the

power and influence of the established actors in the field. These dynamics are reproduced by a variety of structural features of the academic field, including tenure systems, elite journal lists, dominant publishers, and the production of citation indices, as well as the active gatekeeping of self-interested academic cliques (see Grey, 2010). There is also the fact that English is the dominant language used in writing management theory.<sup>1</sup> These features maintain the status quo and inhibit moves to promote greater diversity in the management research community. Concerns about promoting the increasing internationalization of the field of management theory inform the sustained attempts of the Academy of Management to widen its membership base, as noted above. But what is the evidence on whether the journals themselves have become more diverse in their characteristics?

A recent and very comprehensive study by Harzing and Metz (2013) provides some interesting evidence. These scholars studied the geographic diversity of editorial boards in management journals over a 20-year period, covering 57 journals and about 16,000 editorial board positions. Their line of argument is consistent with that reprised here: editorial board members and editors are gatekeepers of what is published and, thus, of theory development. Moreover, Harzing and Metz argue, "This gatekeeping role is the basis for suggesting that editorial boards should be sufficiently diverse in their backgrounds to facilitate the publication of manuscripts with a wide range of research paradigms and methods." Their findings show that while the geographic diversity of editorial boards increased, it remained low for most management journals. This was particularly the case for journals with U.S.-based editors that had the highest proportion of home country editorial board membership (on average 80 percent). If we consider the top-rated journals, including *AMR*,

Harzing and Metz report an increase in the proportion of non-U.S. board members but from a very low base:

The editorial boards of the three top journals in Management (*Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) and *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ)) were almost composed of only US American academics until 1999. . . . Since 1999 all three journals have increased their proportion of non-US board members, but AMR (1999: 12%, 2004: 20%, 2009: 25%) and AMJ (1999: 16%, 2004: 14%, 2009: 23%) more so than ASQ (1999: 5%, 2004: 10%, 2009: 11%).

If there is value in better reflecting globalization (e.g., DeNisi, 2010), it appears more needs to be done by key actors, including editors and professional associations, to promote greater diversity so that journal editorial boards better match the makeup of their constituencies. This, of course, begs the question of whether the currently dominant actors are so minded.

The nationalities of the key publications and actors are clearly significant to questions of internationalization and diversity, but we want to concentrate our attention on what we feel is potentially a more valuable and productive set of questions involved in promoting diversity in styles and approaches to theory and theorizing. In our view the central issue is the diversity and quality of theorizing and the knowledge that is produced. We are particularly mindful of Chris Grey's warning that "the constitution of journals as 'top journals' is clearly an accomplishment of power. There is a circularity, in which to publish in the 'best' journals, one must produce the 'right kind' of work" (2010: 683).

## GEOGRAPHIC AND STYLISTIC DIVISIONS

In the thirtieth anniversary special issue of the major European journal *Organization Studies* (OS), a number of leading organization and management scholars reflected on the journal's place in its field. Along with the conventional assessment of nationalities of authors and editorial boards such as that above, there were evaluations of the similarities and differences in scholarship between contributors to OS and other journals, including *AMR*. We feel these comparisons are of particular interest since the latest OS publisher's report (Sage, 2012) shows that *AMR* is the journal most cited by authors in OS and that, in the last two years, *AMR* is the journal that has cited OS articles most often.

<sup>1</sup> In an exploration of the "Europeanness" of organization research by Meyer and Boxenbaum, we were struck by their observation: "It is hard to believe that Jean-Claude Thoenig, who once held the position of European editor of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, offered to read manuscripts in French, Italian and German to advise authors on whether or not it was worthwhile to deliver an English version" (2010: 749). This perhaps reflects an approach to scholarship from another time, and it is hard to imagine editors having either the capacity or inclination to be so accommodating these days.

Of particular interest to us is the article by Meyer and Boxenbaum (2010) exploring some of the characterizations of "European" organization and management theory and its "other"—that emanating from North America. While warning against stereotypes and oversimplified generalizations, the authors suggest some manifestations of difference in methodological priorities: the strong emphasis on empirical testing of causal theory in North America means that quantitative methods are more prevalent, whereas a concern with *Verstehen* (understanding) and meaning may explain the more widespread use of interpretive approaches and qualitative methods among European scholars.

Their detailed content analysis of all of the papers published by five major journals (*Organization* and *OS* from Europe and *AMJ*, *AMR*, and *Organization Science* from North America) focuses specifically on the question of whether authors in some journals were more likely to build directly and explicitly on the work of leading philosophers and social theorists such as Durkheim, Foucault, Goffman, Habermas, Marx, Parsons, and Weber. The findings were quite stark: the two European journals had more than ten times as many articles that referred to these "grand thinkers" as the North American journals.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the authors who wrote these articles were much more likely to have European institutional affiliations. We concur with Meyer and Boxenbaum when they conclude, however, that this approach to theorizing is "less tied to the geographic institutional affiliation of authors than to a spirit of engaging with the grand thinkers of the present and past" (2010: 752). In other words, while we acknowledge that to some extent the ways in which theory is created is geographically concentrated, concerns with promoting diversity are centrally about the forms of theorizing, styles of writing, and different intellectual resources that are used. These are not new concerns, of course (Van Maanen, 1995).

What, then, are the dominant forms of theorizing? As noted by Ashkanasy (2013) and others before him, two approaches appear to be most prevalent in *AMR*. The first is usually crafted around the creation of a tight nomological net-

work, employing a style of writing that tends to pay close attention to causal linkages and pursues a formal-analytical approach. Much of the strength and persuasiveness of this approach rests on the grounding of its argumentation in prior literature and findings and on its ability to closely examine and detail the causal mechanisms at play. The second style of writing tends instead to emphasize narrative reasoning, aiming to show patterns and broad connections rather than specific causal mechanisms. In contrast to the first, this style draws its strength from its ability to "see the big picture" and to develop broad arguments that at times seed novel research programs; it is also better equipped to acknowledge the frequent intractability of our phenomena and social life, including paradox and complexity. Although not required, this style more often takes an essay form and tends to include formal propositions less often.

These two approaches further resonate with the kind of distinction observed by Meyer and Boxenbaum in that they reflect differences in both stylistic and methodological preferences. At a fundamental level these approaches are informed by different ontological and epistemological perspectives. Such differences are particularly evident in the use of propositions. As a form of theorizing, propositions are in some ways a double-edged sword. At their best, propositions allow us to distill the essence of an argument chain into a simple and memorable form, offering parsimony and precision in conveying the gist of a theoretical contribution. At the same time, and because of this very ability, they also tend to throw weaknesses in the argument chain into much stronger relief, forcing us to sharpen our thinking and clarify our arguments. For that very reason propositions are often the target of reviewers and editors. In addition, many authors in *AMR* appear to find propositions to be an essential part of their contribution, if only because they expect manuscripts with propositions to appear more legitimate in the eyes of reviewers and editors by conforming to expected norms—that is, the politics of the production (and publication) of knowledge.

To demonstrate the dominant use of propositions in *AMR*, we examined all articles published in the last three full calendar years. Excluding invited pieces and editorials, this gave

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<sup>2</sup> While *AMR* had more such articles than either *ASQ* or *AMJ*, the total was fewer than ten.

us a total of eighty-three articles published in *AMR* between January 2010 and December 2012. Of these eighty-three articles, fifty-eight, or just about 70 percent, use propositions to develop theory. If we exclude the special topic forum on theory development, which primarily deals with issues of theorizing itself, the percentage is even higher—76 percent. Either way, it is evident that propositions seem to be the dominant way of putting theoretical arguments into writing in *AMR*. We doubt the data would look different if we included additional years going back in time.

To be clear, we do believe that propositions have value in the process of crafting theory, and both of us have used formal propositions in our own published works. Yet we wonder whether this current situation represents too heavy a reliance on propositions. There are several reasons why this may be the case. First, it seems to us that propositions may not lend themselves to some forms of theorizing, either deterring authors unlikely to use propositions from submitting quality work to *AMR* or forcing them to distort their argument to adjust to either perceived or real expectations of editors and reviewers. Second, the perceived norm of using propositions may create a proliferation of propositions, many of which are perhaps not meant for empirical testing but purely to placate expectations. Surely, this cannot be a productive use of the time and resources of authors and reviewers or the pages of *AMR*. As such, we believe it is important to reemphasize *AMR*'s position as formulated in the Information for Contributors, which reads "Contributors will find *AMR* open to many different formats and styles of presentation. *Formal research propositions are not required*" (emphasis added). This, of course, has implications for reviewers too; both of us have written editorial letters to authors confirming that they need not follow reviewers' requests for formal propositions in order to be published in *AMR*.

#### THE ROLE OF METHODOLOGY IN WRITING THEORY

In considering styles of theorizing, there is another key aspect that deserves attention—namely, the strong interplay between theory and method (Sørensen, Van Maanen, & Mitchell, 2007). How we come to know social reality has

strong effects on how we theorize about this reality, and the underlying assumptions of our habituated methodologies tend to discourage us from examining phenomena and problems to which our familiar toolkits cannot be as easily applied (Meyer, Gaba, & Colwell, 2005). Considering the landscape of current management theory, what is perhaps most striking in this regard is the continued dominance—or perhaps hegemony—of what Abbott (1988) calls "general linear reality" and what Ragin (2008) refers to as correlational "net-effects thinking." This approach to theorizing tends to perceive the social world mainly in terms of linear relationships that take a correlational form of "the more of X, the more of Y." It focuses on the net effect of independent variables, assuming that, in general, each variable by itself would be capable of bringing about the outcome of interest, holding constant the effect of all other candidate variables. To be sure, the net-effects approach is attractive because it offers rigor and precision in estimating the unique contribution of different predictors, and, again, both of us have relied on it in our own published works. In addition, one might argue that the correlational approach to theorizing resonates with our basic cognitive structures that tend to be better aligned with linear relations and main effects and less capable of detecting nonlinear relationships and interactions (Hammond, 1996).

Yet it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the net-effects approach, which is not well equipped for dealing with some fundamental notions of causality, such as necessity and sufficiency or the notion of equifinality, where there may be several equally effective or efficient ways to achieve an outcome of interest. Our basic argument here is not that the correlational net-effects approach cannot be a powerful lens for studying social phenomena; rather, we argue that it is perhaps used too often and, on occasion, inappropriately. Scholars have frequently applied it to phenomena where the basic causal structure may be quite different—not at all correlational in nature but rather, for instance, marked by "multiple, conjunctural causation" (Ragin, 1987: 20), where causes combine rather than compete to bring about an outcome and where individual causes may be neither necessary nor sufficient by themselves. Similarly, the correlational approach, with its focus on explaining variance, is arguably less adept

at developing process theory, which tends to focus more on the "how" than the "why" of causal processes.

To demonstrate the dominance of the correlational form of theorizing, let us return to our analysis of articles published in *AMR* over the last three years, this time with a focus on the way in which propositions are created and used. Again, propositions are present in fifty-eight of the eighty-three articles, and of these fifty-eight articles, fifty-three, or about 91 percent, contain at least some correlational propositions. A similar picture emerges when we consider the propositions themselves. In total, the 58 articles offer some 444 propositions or, on average, slightly fewer than 8 propositions per article. Of these 444 propositions, 322, or about 73 percent, are based on a correlational relationship of "the greater (construct X), the higher (construct Y)." Only a relatively small subset of these propositions specifies nonlinear interaction effects. Other forms of formal theorizing that might lend themselves to propositions are markedly absent. For instance, only three articles, and less than 1 percent of all propositions, use language suggesting a relationship involving necessity and sufficiency, such as Lindenberg and Foss (2011), who in their first proposition argue that task and team designs of a certain nature are a necessary condition for establishing and maintaining a goal frame conducive to joint production motivation. The picture is thus quite striking regarding the influence of net-effects thinking on our theorizing. What concerns us is that this hegemony of correlational net-effects theorizing in *AMR* stifles other styles of theorizing, such as process, narrative, or essay forms, leading to a relatively (and inappropriately) homogeneous management research field and an impoverished understanding of our phenomena of interest.

### THE DECLINE OF TYPOLOGICAL THEORIES

There is another remarkable pattern that we would like to point out here—namely, the marked decline of typological theories in *AMR*. Typologies, as Doty and Glick (1994) note, are a special form of theorizing that offers a number of advantages. As these authors point out, typologies are a key way of organizing complex webs of causal relationships—they are "a form of social scientific shorthand" (Ragin, 1987: 149) and,

thus, provide useful tools for both researchers and practitioners. Since classification is a key intellectual strategy for developing theoretically meaningful categories, typologies are a key tool of the theorist interested in making distinctions between complex examples of phenomena (Biggart & Delbridge, 2004). Typologies furthermore lend themselves more readily to the development of configurational arguments that avoid simple correlations, instead incorporating notions of equifinality and asymmetric causal relations (Fiss, 2011). For these and other reasons, we believe typologies present a particularly attractive form of theorizing, and we would argue that some of the most memorable contributions in management are typologies—for instance, that of Miles and Snow (1978), which is one of the most widely tested, validated, and enduring contributions (e.g., Hambrick, 2003). Other powerful examples are those of Mintzberg (1979) and Porter (1980), to name but two.

Yet, for all these advantages, typologies are much less frequently proposed or discussed in *AMR* articles than used to be the case. To illustrate this point, a search of all *AMR* articles appearing in print between 1976 (when *AMR* was first published) and 2012 revealed a total of sixty-three articles that contained the terms *typology* or *typologies* in the abstract. Mapped over time, the decline of typological theorizing in *AMR* becomes quite evident. In the decade between 1976 and 1985, there were twenty-four such articles published. During the decade between 1986 and 1995, that number declined to eighteen, and between 1996 and 2005 it declined again to sixteen articles. In the seven years between 2006 and 2012, only five articles have so far been published that either propose or discuss typologies, suggesting a declining pattern of 2.4, 1.8, 1.6, and now about 0.7 articles per year during these four periods.

A possible explanation of this pattern would be that there are fewer new phenomena that could be addressed by means of a typology—in essence, the argument here would be that typologies have somewhat outlived their usefulness since there is nothing new to classify. This strikes us as unlikely. We continue to witness the emergence of new phenomena of interest in the management journals, and one might argue that this should provide enough impetus for either the proposal of novel typologies or the re-

vision of existing ones. Yet this does not seem to be the case.

There is, of course, the possibility that typological theorizing is alive and well and has moved to other journals—it is merely *AMR* where such theorizing is on the decline. Another perhaps more likely explanation relates back to our previous point regarding the dominance of correlational theorizing. By their very nature typological theories tend to be holistic and therefore do not lend themselves as easily to a focus on individual direct net effects. As interdependent webs of relationships, typologies more frequently involve complex causal relationships involving interaction, substitution, and bidirectional causality. This is not to say that typological theories cannot be tested using correlational methods. Instead, our point is that the methodological training and habits, as well as norms and expectations that come with correlational analysis, may subtly bias us against typological theorizing. This issue is likely to be most felt in management theory derived from economic and psychological underpinnings, as well as some more formalized domains of sociology. Insofar as these have come to dominate doctoral training programs, this may explain the lack of diversity of approaches. And, of course, these processes of socialization of early career researchers also serve to reproduce the power relations of the field, including patronage relations that work through appointment and promotion.

There may well be other causes that we have not considered here, such as a relative decline in phenomenon-based research problems and inductive reasoning that lend themselves to typology building. Nevertheless, we believe that the decline of typological theorizing in *AMR* represents a missed opportunity and contributes to a lack of diversity in theorizing and a failure for the range of approaches to be representative of the diversity of the phenomena we focus on. To be clear, we strongly believe that such typologies need to be theoretically rigorous and fully specified, in line with our view of typologies as complex systems of theoretical statements that will, in fact, frequently be more challenging to authors than traditional bivariate or interaction theories (e.g., Doty & Glick, 1994). Yet we believe that this additional effort will be worthwhile, since such complex theories are more likely to account for the configurational nature of many

of the management phenomena we are interested in and are perhaps more likely to result in potentially frame-breaking contributions.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: FOSTERING A DIVERSITY OF THEORETICAL STYLES

Our argument here has been that while there is still considerable diversity in the ways we create theory—based on aspects such as forms of theorizing, styles of writing, and schools of thought—this diversity is perhaps more limited than is desirable. What, then, might allow us to develop more diverse but robust and persuasive theorizing in the future?

A first step is for there to be greater transparency and attention to the power and politics in the processes and organization of knowledge. There are powerful forces of patronage, socialization, and exclusion at work that promote the reproduction of existing structures and power relations. While nationality and geography may act as proxies for the structural features of our discipline, more important are the roles of powerful actors in promoting change (or continuity). Taking advantage of the opportunities of plurality in theorizing will require more openness and engagement, on the part of key stakeholders, with the various approaches that might be taken. This places greater emphasis on editors and reviewers working at and across ontological rather than geographical boundaries. It also reinforces the points made earlier regarding the diversity (or otherwise) currently to be found on editorial boards and in reviewer pools of the leading journals.

A second step will be greater reflexivity on the part of all researchers and a willingness to engage constructively across the range of approaches to theorizing, rather than a defensive positioning of the established dominant paradigm. Explicitly acknowledging the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin a given approach is a key step in opening up the spaces for alternatives. It also increases the prospects for more robust and effective theorizing, helping to ensure that the appropriate approaches to theory and method are deployed given the nature of the phenomenon to be addressed. Achieving such greater reflexivity and openness would also be supported by broader doctoral training and interdisciplinary workshops that expose researchers to a wider range

of potentially valuable approaches to understanding management. One such example that we participated in, along with editor Roy Suddaby, was the 1st European Theory Development Workshop in OMT that took place in Grenoble, France, last year. This workshop brought together a number of international scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds to engage in debate on theory and theorizing and included working with junior colleagues on crafting papers. These are small steps in promoting change, which must, of course, be founded on our own willingness to engage broadly with different forms of theorizing.

Given the self-replicating nature of our system of knowledge production, the challenges seem daunting. Regarding the issue of gatekeeping and the role of editors, we want to emphasize again that *AMR* is open to many different formats and styles of presentation, and we see ourselves as committed to these principles. As for audiences, *AMR* has made considerable advances in increasing the diversity of its editorial board and reviewer pool, although challenges remain and changes are likely to be slow in coming. In addition, the *AMR* website now provides a number of resources intended to demystify and explain the theory-writing process. To conclude, we see encouraging signs in an increased blending of theories as observed by Ashkanasy (2013) and a growing diversity of methods that may lay the base for different forms of theorizing. We do hope that *AMR*'s authors and reviewers will take up this challenge of creating and taking advantage of more diversity in styles of theorizing.

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