EDITOR'S COMMENTS: WHY THEORY?

I can hardly believe that we have reached the end of my editorial team's term. Three years have passed with alarming celerity, but close with clear signs of the strength and influence of management theory. *AMR* ranks as the most influential and frequently cited journal in both business and management. We continue to attract a high number of carefully crafted and thoughtful manuscripts. Our dialogue section offers a lively forum for debate and intellectual exchange. The book review section, reinvented as a series of essays on contemporary management issues and thinking, has blossomed. All of this is the result of a collective effort of selfless and hardworking academics—associate editors and reviewers—who *volunteer* their valuable expertise and time in the spirit of (an increasingly challenged) tradition of peer review. *AMR* stands as an incredible testament to the tradition and craft of thoughtful, collective scholarship.

While I am immensely proud of the collective product of this journal, I am occasionally troubled by the disparate rumblings of dissatisfaction about the role of theory in management. These rumblings take various forms. Some say there is too much theory (Hambrick, 2007; Pfeffer, 2014), very little of which gets "tested" empirically (Davis & Marquis, 2005). Some suggest that we should declare a moratorium on theory and concentrate on the accumulation of "evidence" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999; Rousseau, 2006) or "knowledge" (Davis, 2010), like our colleagues in the physical sciences. And some claim that the overproduction of theory causes a variety of ills in our profession, including a lack of relevance to practitioners (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001), bad writing (Hambrick, 2007), and even academic cheating (Pfeffer, 2014).

To be fair, such existential hand-wringing over the role of theory in management is not new. As a profession, we seem to experience recurring bouts of doubt about what theory is (Bacharach, 1989) and is not (Sutton & Staw, 1995) and whether we should have a single unifying theory (Pfeffer, 1993) or many (Van Maanen, 1995). We debate the value of new (Suddaby, Hardy, & Huy, 2011) versus old (Hassard, Cox, &

Rowlinson, 2013) theories. And we agonize over the degree of theoretical abstraction needed to produce knowledge, arguing occasionally for a step back from highly abstract theorization to "middle-range" theories (Pinder & Moore, 1980) or the much less ambitious notion of "mechanisms" (Davis & Marquis, 2005).

While there is little consensus about the answers to these questions, it is apparent that, as a community of scholars, we are deeply engaged with and passionate about the role of theory in our profession. There is, perhaps surprisingly, considerable consensus on what theory is: theory is simply a way of imposing conceptual order on the empirical complexity of the phenomenal world. As Bacharach astutely observed, theory offers "a statement of relations between concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints" (1989: 496). Ultimately, theories reflect, in highly abstract terms, the organization of a discipline's knowledge base.

However, theory does much more than simply abstract and organize knowledge. It also signals the values upon which that knowledge is built. And it is in this somewhat shadowy connection between and among theory, knowledge, and values that cracks in our consensus about theory begin to appear. Although we might agree, broadly, about the substantive elements that constitute theory, we appear to disagree as a profession about why we need theory and what role it should play in creating, maintaining, and shaping what type of knowledge we value in the field. Fundamentally, we disagree about the value of theory.

Some see theory as a means of *knowledge accumulation*. These are the empiricists, who clearly constitute the dominant contemporary view. Informed by positivism, empiricists view management as a science and theory as the cumulative product of the progressive acquisition of knowledge. Empiricists value theory for its ability to capture and summarize the phenomenal world (Adams, 1975). They have a Darwinian understanding of the relationship between theories, seeing an implicit competition between theories in their ability to capture real-

ity. Over time, as theory progresses in its ability to proximate and predict reality, a single unified theory should emerge.

When a single theory fails to emerge (as is inevitable), empiricists tend to reject the value of theory entirely and focus energy exclusively on the collection of data. Declaring a moratorium on theory—Alfred North Whitehead's "dustbowl empiricism"—is a recurring phenomenon in the history of social science (Landy, 1997; Latham, 2012; Nisbet, 1962). Dustbowl empiricism is characterized by what Feyerabend (1975) described as the rhetorical bullying that is implicit in appeals to rationality and evidence.

Dustbowl empiricism is, of course, doomed to fail. Knowledge accumulation simply cannot occur without a conceptual framework. When explicit frameworks are pushed into the background, theory becomes implicit. Implicit theories are inherently dangerous because they discourage researchers from asking fundamental questions about the assumptions that underpin knowledge and the methods used to acquire knowledge. The random accumulation of evidence is also doomed because of the inherent tendency of humans to theorize. Theorization is an essential element of how we make sense of the world (Weick, 1995), and randomly accumulated data are, as Coase critically observed, nothing but "a mass of descriptive material, waiting for a theory, or a fire" (1988: 230).

Management researchers constituting an alternative subgroup value theory as a means of *knowledge abstraction*. These are the rationalists, and they serve as a useful and important counterbalance to the empiricists. Instead of seeing theory as the summation of empirical observation, rationalists see theory as occurring prior to empirical observation. That is, theory offers a perceptual lens that structures sensory experience. Without theoretically derived categories, rationalists argue, humans would be unable to cognitively organize or even recognize sensory experience (Quine, 1951).

Rationalists value theory for its logic (Aune, 1970). Because they favor deduction over induction, rationalists often prefer theories that offer internal coherence or elegant explanations of the world. For these scholars new theory is more likely to come from the interpretation of past masters, through parsing canonical texts (i.e., literature reviews), than from empirical observation.

The ultimate danger of an overemphasis on rationalism is theoretical "fetishism," where theory becomes an exercise in writing and interpretation but is detached from the empirical world. Taken to its extreme, rational theories tend to become self-absorbed—more attentive to naval-gazing efforts of deconstructing prior theory than to challenges from contradictory phenomena. Elsewhere I have written about the emergent fetishism in theory (Birkenshaw, Healy, Suddaby, & Weber, 2014) and the concomitant danger of increasing scientism in management theory (Suddaby, 2014). However, rationalists offer a critically important counterbalance to empiricists, and it is the effective union of induction and deduction, or empiricism and rationalism, that tends to produce new knowledge (Van de Ven, 2007).

A growing number of management scholars see a powerful *normative* value in theory. The highest and best use of theory, for this constituency, is not to represent the phenomenal world as it is but, rather, to fashion theoretical lenses that allow us to see the world as it might be. In contrast to both empiricists and rationalists, who see virtue in assuming an objective distance between research and practice and who believe that their research is largely free of political and moral assumptions, normative theorists embrace the notion that no theory is value free. They adopt McKenzie's (2006) argument that management theories are less a camera that captures reality and more an engine that produces it.

Normative scholars, thus, value theory for its ability to *create new reality*. They construct theories that contradict the (often dismal) view of the world given to us by both empiricists and rationalists and, instead, articulate new possibilities for organizational behavior and managerial action. Rather than attending to the deconstruction of the causes of action, normative theorists tend to focus on the motives and ethics of actors and the process by which they make choices for action.

So, for example, this community offers theories suggesting that not all humans act in bare self-interest (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998) and that work environments in organizations can be life enhancing, creative, and virtuous (Cameron, Dutton, Quinn, & Bernstein, 2003). Normative theories also attend to phenomena often masked or made invisible by the implicit

assumptions of rationalists and empiricists—that is, the poorest people in the world do, in fact, constitute a subject of economic interest (Pralahad, 2006) and for-profit organizations can be instruments of positive social change (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). Importantly, normative theorists challenge the assumptions of the role of the business corporation in society and offer an alternative understanding of a well-studied phenomenon (Freeman, 2010).

A final role for theory, perhaps less noble than the previous three but equally important, is its ability to *legitimate knowledge*. Abbott (1988) reminds us that theory, or "abstract knowledge," serves as a very effective means of protecting jurisdiction. Moreover, Abbott observes a direct correlation between the degree of theorization and its effectiveness as a barrier to entry. It was, Abbott remarks, the ability of physicists to abstract their knowledge base through theory, their "relentless abstract training," that enabled "physics graduates to assimilate new techniques and methods to a core of fundamental and largely unchanging abstractions" (1988: 181), making physics graduates continually in demand over engineers who were trained in techniques and mechanisms but lacked the ability to theorize. Abbott's work thus offers a clear historical warning to those who suggest we abandon theory in favor of more data and the creation of causal mechanisms. To cede theory means to give up legitimacy.

There are, however, dangers in overemphasizing the value of theory as a jurisdictional shield. Theory might be able to protect us from the jurisdictional assault of management consultants, but it can also be an effective barrier to the movement of knowledge across subgroups *within* management theory. That is, theory has the potential to balkanize the community. More problematic, I think, is that theory can and often does create excessive careerism within academia that, ultimately, thwarts the creation of knowledge. Paradigm wars are a blood sport draining resources and energy and reducing communication, ultimately failing to advance any of the values of theory described above. Excessive careerism leads to what Courpasson (2014) so eloquently describes as an emerging "culture of production," where we measure the quantity of publication while losing the value of passionate scholarship.

The question "Why theory?" thus has several potential answers. Theory represents a broad range of value propositions, and the current debate about the value of theory contains powerful illustrations of each of them. It is the tension that exists between these different value propositions that drives much of the rumblings and dissatisfaction about theory that inspired this editorial. In fact, the tension between these different value propositions for theory generates a series of observable and somewhat predictable dynamics in management scholarship.

So, for example, when Hirsch and Levin (1999) describe a recurrent dynamic between "umbrella advocates"—those who produce broad, all-encompassing theoretical categories—and "validity police"—those who produce studies that ultimately whittle the broad constructs into oblivion—they are simply describing the age-old battle between rationalists and empiricists. Abrahamson (1991, 1996) similarly describes the recurring cycles of "fads and fashions" in management theory, where management consultants, the business media, and some business schools construct a rhetoric of novelty around sets of management ideas that, eventually, fall into disuse but are replaced by a new set of even more novel management ideas. Abrahamson's life cycle model of management ideas effectively captures the tension that exists between theory as a device for knowledge production and its role in legitimating the jurisdiction of professional expertise.

I worry less about the dynamics generated by the tensions between the various value structures of theory because, over time and if kept in balance, these tensions are actually very productive in the broader project of knowledge production. Ultimately, I suspect that none of the rational, logical, normative, and jurisdictional motivations for theory will prevail. Rather, true knowledge emerges out of the competition and tension that exist between these different assumptions about the appropriate use of theory. Nor do I worry that theory will disappear. Abstraction and generalization are inherent human activities that have persisted throughout civilization, and abstract reasoning will always be valued as an elite form of knowledge construction.

I am concerned, however, about the lack of reflexivity with theory in our profession. The effectiveness of science is not in its attention to

method or its devotion to evidence or the powerful creativity and intelligence of individual scientists. Rather, effective science is the result of a collective and institutionalized commitment to a system of knowledge production that is organized around keeping each of those individual biases and value propositions in check. Kuhn (1970) reminds us that progress in science occurs not through the revolutionary findings of any one particular scientist or even one particular paradigm. Rather, it is the division of labor existing across a scientific community, the voluntary commitment of individuals and groups to the larger project of knowledge production, and, perhaps most important, the ongoing awareness of participating in what is essentially a flawed and human activity requiring constant correction and validation that produce understanding and knowledge. Theory is simply a reflection of this profound but often fragile system of knowledge production. To ensure its validity we must be in constant reflection not just about the knowledge it produces but also the reliability of the system itself.

While I wish that we, as a profession, devoted more space and resources to this degree of reflexivity (should we have more Ph.D. courses devoted to the history of management theory?), I find much to be optimistic about. We have a very diverse research community, and I hope that our readers can see the ontological and epistemological diversity of that community reflected in this journal.

While it is impossible to thank this entire community by name, I do want to extend a heartfelt thank you to the most immediate members of my editorial team, who have made these past three years so rewarding. First, a deep thank you to my associate editors—Neal Ashkanasy, Rick Delbridge, Cindy Devers, Peer Fiss, Ingrid Fulmer, Vilmos Misangyi, Belle Ragins, and Chris Quinn Trank—who managed excruciating workloads and the stresses attached to the inherently judgmental nature of their work with professionalism, dedication, and large doses of good humor. Second, a thank you to Susan Zaid, assistant director of publishing, Tiffiney Johnson, managing editor, and Sandra Tamburrino-Hinz, production editor, who quietly and often invisibly keep us academics on task, maintain the continuity of this journal, and make us look more efficient than we are really are.

Finally, and perhaps most important, I thank our Editorial Board and our large cadre of exceptional reviewers, who are simply outstanding. Not only are they clear experts in their fields, but they constantly demonstrate a high commitment to the craft of providing constructive and developmental reviews. They have a crucial understanding of the importance of maintaining the tensions created by the different value propositions inherent in management theory. None, I suspect, would have any difficulty whatsoever in answering the question "Why theory?"

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