

EDITOR'S COMMENTS: PUBLISHING THEORY

I have read hundreds of submissions to *AMR* and have written hundreds of decision letters. Recently, I was asked to talk to groups of people about how to publish in *AMR*. This led me to extrapolate some observations on the theory publishing process in the hope of reducing the mystery surrounding theory development and publication. We already have useful discussions of what theory is (e.g., Weick, 1989) and what theory is not (e.g., *Administrative Science Quarterly* Forum, 1995). My aims are more modest—to provide suggestions for how to enhance the theory value of submissions and to offer recommendations concerning mistakes to avoid. Like one of my distinguished predecessors (Whetten, 1989), I emphasize that my comments should not be interpreted as official rules or exhaustive criteria. My hope is to prompt authors to continually improve their theory-writing endeavors. Too many of the papers I've seen could have benefited from a more careful developmental process prior to submission. Good theory papers are difficult to come by—they require nurturing, development, and revision before submission to *AMR*.

THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

Offer Big Ideas

Theory papers succeed if they offer important and original ideas. As you sit down to write a theory paper and as you reflect on a theory paper you've written, ask yourself, "What is my big idea?" This requires you to understand your own expertise, to reflect on your own experiences, and to work from your own strong motivations in the context of the prevailing landscape of theory in the field. Einstein suggested that new theory can be intuited through "an intellectual love of the objects of experience" (quoted in Popper, 1959: 9). Theory—in the form of big ideas that can lead to new research questions—has an

autonomy of its own and is not the summation of existing empirical research.

One of the important criteria for evaluating theory is the extent to which it runs ahead of existing empirical research in terms of alerting us to research opportunities hitherto unanticipated (Lakatos, 1970). Ronald Coase (1937) formalized his influential ideas on the nature of the firm when, at the age of twenty-one, he had to teach a course on the organization of the business unit—a topic about which he knew very little. He later reported, "I made it all up myself" (Coase, 1993: 35), on the basis of his eclectic training, visits to industrial plants, and his curiosity concerning business firm organization. Only after he had formulated his basic ideas did he examine the prevailing literature on the topic.

The route to good theory leads not through gaps in the literature but through an engagement with problems in the world that you find personally interesting. Donald Hambrick, reflecting on the origins of upper echelons theory (published in *AMR* as Hambrick & Mason, 1984), noted that influential theories derive from the observation of real-life phenomena, not from "scholars struggling to find holes in the literature" (2005: 124). This is not to say that an *AMR* submission can ignore existing literature—a careful explication of relevant prior theory and research helps build causal arguments and signal the value added of your work—but, as Hambrick (2005: 124) states, it is best to start with real-life experience, develop your preliminary ideas, and then turn to the relevant literature to see what has been said and done.

Once you have articulated your main theoretical idea, in however preliminary a form, it is time to discuss, debate, and argue with both your supportive and skeptical colleagues. Fledgling ideas need a sympathetic hearing if they are to take flight (Lakatos, 1970). Journal editors and reviewers should not be the first audience to whom your developing thoughts are exposed. To improve the effectiveness of your theory publishing activity, you can organize an ongoing circle of developmental colleagues at

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your institution so that new ideas from the members of the group undergo sympathetic evaluation, modification, and winnowing.

Give Your Ideas Structure

Before you write your theory article, plan to invest time in outlining your argument and its relationship to existing ideas in the field. It is much easier to alter an outline than to throw away pages of writing. Present your ideas to colleagues in outline form initially so that difficulties in logic, extravagant claims, and sheer irrelevancies are exposed and corrected before such problems are shrouded in complicated prose.

A good theory paper should have a beginning, a middle, and an end; should contribute to theory and research relevant to management and organizations; and should encompass a seamless flow of ideas. A good theory paper should also utilize existing literature to highlight what is interesting and different (Davis, 1971). If you find yourself having to repetitively spell out for the reader what it is you have argued, what you are going to argue, and why it is important, then you need to go back to the drawing board and rethink both the sequencing of how one idea leads to another and the relationship of your work to existing theory and evidence.

Critique and Revise

Your success in actually getting your paper under review (rather than having it politely declined by the editor) and in achieving favorable reviews from the handling editor and the reviewers is directly linked to how much effort you invest in revising your paper prior to submission. Once you have organized the logic of your ideas and have written a first draft, it is then time to find expert reviewers to give you preliminary comments on the paper. There are many conferences and other formal audiences to which you can submit your early drafts. The aim should be to sharpen the clarity, logic, vividness, precision, succinctness, and surprise of your writing. Remember Daryl Bem's (1995) advice: begin and end the paper with a strong statement of the relevance of your ideas to important problems that human beings care about.

The paper you send to *AMR* should be, in your view, publishable. It should have benefited from

peer review through conference submission or comments from expert colleagues. The claims it makes should have been tested against the knowledge of others active in the relevant domain. In short, the paper should be written to be published, not rejected. And remember the importance of the abstract, especially in this era of electronic submission, when this is the first extract from your paper that the reviewer sees in his or her invitation to review your paper. Again, see the advice of Daryl Bem (1995) on how to write and rewrite until the abstract catches the excitement of your argument.

Before submitting to *AMR*, make sure you have consulted the Information for Contributors, the Style Guide for Authors, and past issues. Check out who is on the editorial team and who serves on the Editorial Board. Don't rely on stereotypes of what people think *AMR* wants, or how it operates. You are a scientist (Kelly, 1955)—investigate the phenomena for yourself.

FIVE CAUTIONS

Don't Copy

Most people in the field understand that it is wrong to plagiarize the work of others. But it is perhaps less well understood that you should not plagiarize yourself: do not send to *AMR* a paper expounding precisely the same ideas you've published elsewhere. Similarly, it is not well understood that *AMR* does not publish summaries of research for the uninformed. We do not publish popular science articles introducing esoteric ideas published elsewhere. Each paper must contain an original theoretical contribution. One indication of papers that lack original content is the tendency to include extensive quotations from famous thinkers.

Don't Lengthen

In developing your ideas, there is no need to provide an encyclopedic survey of existing research on every possible relevant aspect. *AMR* is not the place to send the literature review from your dissertation. Piling up extraneous citations does not improve the theory value of your paper. Your paper should build original theory, add value to existing ideas, push forward hitherto unexplored questions, or chal-

lenge conventional thinking. You should do all of this succinctly. It is especially important not to respond to critiques by adding more and more pages to address every possible problem.

Don't Follow a Recipe

A theory paper is expected to articulate implications for empirical research, but authors too often interpret this expectation as a demand to sprinkle propositions throughout the paper. Despite *AMR* Best Article Awards to articles that contain no formal propositions (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2002; Biggart & Delbridge, 2004; Mitchell & James, 2001), superstitious learning persists concerning the alleged necessity to include such propositions. Based on erroneous beliefs, some authors cram in unnecessary propositions (and other supposedly necessary elements, such as figures) despite their obvious irrelevance, thus inviting reviewers to focus on these extraneous elements in formulating their negative reviews.

Propositions are important aspects of formal approaches to theory involving mathematical and logical derivation. If you are developing theory within a logical positivist framework (Blumberg & Feigl, 1931), for example, it is important to articulate propositions that are demonstrably testable. But there are other approaches to theory development articulated in philosophies of science quite distinct from logical positivism. From the perspective of Imre Lakatos (1970), theory involves drawing from core concepts new ideas that offer the promise of new empirical questions within an ongoing research program. From the perspective of Thomas Kuhn (1996), theory involves articulating puzzle-solving ideas within a well-understood paradigmatic framework. For Karl Popper (1959), theory development is a revolutionary activity involving constant challenges to existing knowledge.

One rule of thumb concerning whether or not to add a specific proposition (or a figure) is to omit it unless it adds value to your theory development effort. Don't include extraneous elements based on a superstitious belief that the journal requires them. Far from helping clarify your theory contribution, such extraneous elements can detract from the value of your work.

Don't Personalize Your Critique

Theories are associated with particular individuals in many cases, but it is unacceptable to mistake the people for the theories. It is important, in critiquing a theory, not to appear to be mounting a personal attack on specific people. Further, we learn from the philosophy of science (e.g., Feyerabend, 1970; Lakatos, 1970; Popper, 1959) that critiquing theory is, in itself, insufficient to count as a scientific advance. It is always necessary to offer an alternative, given that any specific theory tends to be accompanied by anomalies and outright refutations (Lakatos, 1970). If your big idea is that a particular theory needs replacing, then you have to take the next step and formulate an alternative.

Don't Mistake Your Audience

AMR does not publish papers that focus primarily or exclusively on practitioner advice, empirical research, or management education. Other Academy journals—*AME*, *AMJ*, and *AMLE*—are dedicated to these kinds of papers. Thus, there is no point in sending such papers for review to *AMR*. Furthermore, the editors and reviewers at *AMR* are expecting you as the author to explain the theory contribution of your paper. Papers that contain no theory contribution or that have no specific relevance to research in our field should not be sent to *AMR*.

CONCLUSION

The theory development process can be seen in evolutionary terms as starting with initial inspirations, some of which make it to the next stage of discussion and debate with congenial colleagues. From these interactions a few ideas proceed to formal discussion with peer groups; fewer still are those ideas that are written up to be critiqued and revised on the basis of reviews from conferences and faculty experts. An *AMR* submission that is likely to succeed is a paper that has made it through all these different stages, gaining clarity and coherence as it has moved through the competitive market for ideas.

I hope these comments encourage more authors to nurture their fledgling best ideas through a process of discussion and critique prior to submission to the formal journal review

process. The more carefully you guide your ideas through a developmental process, the more likely you are to succeed in publishing theory.

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