The challenges of theory building through the combination of lenses.

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EDITORS’ COMMENTS:
The CHALLENGES OF BUILDING THEORY BY COMBINING LENSES

The Academy of Management Review publishes novel theories providing explanations for phenomena for which no good models exist. And management is a rich context in which to develop theory—a subject whose dimensions are amenable to examination through a variety of perspectives. As a field, we routinely use insights from sociology, psychology, economics, law, political science, communication, and many other disciplines to develop explanations that help us understand specific aspects of managerial issues. But we also regularly combine lenses, from within and outside the management discipline, to further our understanding. In these comments we highlight some of the great benefits and some of the challenges that stem from developing theories building on multiple lenses.

More than other “classical” disciplines in social science, management research uses combinations of ideas or blends of theories to advance new insights and develop novel hypotheses that can ultimately be tested empirically. As a practical field, management deserves attention from a multiple-lens perspective because the phenomena within it can often be explained using different theoretical approaches. And it is perhaps obvious to note that the complexity of management as a setting often requires explanations that are matched in complexity—explanations that can be built from combinations of perspectives to provide answers that are uniquely suited to management.

In our opinion, the need to develop multiple-lens explanations in the field of management continues to increase. One reason is that the ability to reflect the reality of management in our theorizing is important as we endeavor to become a more relevant field. Calls for “scholarship that matters” (Ozbilgin, 2010) and relevance to our field (Cummings, 2008) seem more important today as we witness how management decisions in private companies and government agencies have negatively affected millions of people around the world. If it is indeed true that using multiple perspectives to examine organizations allows us to sustain a healthy critique on the world and practice of management (Currie, Knights, & Starkey, 2010), the need to develop theoretical perspectives combining multiple lenses has become pressing.

A second reason multiple-lens explanations are increasing in importance is that they can respond to the tendency to create isolated silos of knowledge that reflect specialization. Scholars have drawn increasing attention to the danger, calling for an end to this “Tower of Babel” (Burrell, 1996), which may limit the development of management as a field (Pfeffer, 1993). Multiple-lens perspectives can help bridge silos within and across disciplines: by highlighting areas of overlap or complementarity, as well as sites of contradiction, a multiple-lens perspective can lead to their theoretical integration or resolution. Clearly, from this perspective theory development that builds on multiple lenses has an important role to play (Gioa & Pitre, 1990).

The results of approaches that combine multiple lenses within our field are also impressive: many rich and useful theories in our discipline account for multiple perspectives simultaneously. As an example, consider transaction cost explanations of vertical integration, strategic alliances, or firms’ internal organization. As described by Williamson (1985), transaction cost economics draws on various lenses, such as those developed by economists like Hayek (1945) interested in economic changes, on governance as described by theorists like Barnard (1938), on bounded rationality as defined and developed by Simon (1957), or on the institutionalist perspective of Commons (1932).

Areas of new relevance in management can also benefit from explanations that combine theoretical lenses. For instance, to understand how moral judgments can form or shift in organizations, researchers are combining knowledge from diverse areas like philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and sociology.
Knowledge from these disciplines on the role of emotion in cognition and reasoning, and social influences on emotion, is essential to understand moral judgment development (Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008). The result is that our understanding of a problem that has not traditionally received attention within management can be enhanced through the inclusion of these perspectives in our thinking.

Similarly, important areas of research inquiry have been opened by bridging different theoretical lenses. Behavioral economics and behavioral finance are a case in point. By using cognitive and emotional factors to understand individual decisions, these new fields combine theoretical insights from both economics and psychology to advance our understanding of individuals and collectives (Rabin, 1998). The development of these approaches has been extremely rapid over the last decade and has generated many new insights and new research projects (Subrahmanyam, 2007).

However, developing theories that build on multiple overarching approaches also presents some clear challenges, which we see repeatedly in submissions to AMR. In the remainder of this piece we address some of the common developmental challenges we see in manuscripts seeking to combine theoretical lenses. As we address these, we consider the simplest case: combining two perspectives to build theory. Moreover, we organize our thinking on the basis of two dimensions that describe the relationship between the lenses that are combined: their proximity in terms of the phenomena they address and the congruence of their underlying assumptions.

**TWO DIMENSIONS OF RELEVANCE FOR THE COMBINATION OF THEORETICAL LENSES**

In preparing these comments, we examined successful manuscripts that combine different theoretical lenses, seeking to identify some of their common characteristics. In our discussions we identified two dimensions underlying the relationship between theories that are central in the development of these manuscripts. One dimension we found is the proximity of the theoretical lenses that authors seek to combine. By “proximity” we mean the conceptual distance that exists between the phenomena that the lenses address in their original conception. For instance, microeconomics and psychology are both partly concerned with explaining how and why individuals act in particular ways. Their combination, then, might help enrich our understanding of individual behavior by increasing the complexity of our theories to match the empirical challenge. In another example, leader-member exchange (LMX) and resource theories of social exchange are typically used to explain more distant phenomena—namely, the impact of leadership on the members of an organization and outcomes such as business friendships (Ingram & Zou, 2008). For us this reflects a larger distance between these two lenses. A recent piece in AMR, however, has shown how they can be integrated to explain what leaders can obtain from their subordinates (Wilson, Sin, & Conlon, 2010).

A second dimension is the degree of compatibility between the underlying assumptions of the lenses being combined. By “compatibility of assumptions” we mean the degree to which theories that are brought together rely on similar or dissimilar individual decision-making processes, organizational mechanisms, or other properties in the development of their explanations. We consider this compatibility a continuum rather than a categorical statement. If two overarching theoretical lenses have common underlying assumptions, we consider them here as compatible; however, when assumptions are very different between the theoretical lenses, we consider them as rather incompatible. From the examples above, for instance, LMX and resource theories of social exchange share similar assumptions about individuals’ behavior. In contrast, the underlying assumptions about the behavior of individuals are quite different between microeconomics and psychology: one generally builds on assumptions of rationality whereas the other stresses the role of behavioral and cognitive explanations, indicating a more challenging task for researchers trying to bring them together (Caplan, 2003).

In manuscripts that we receive, these two underlying dimensions are typically elaborated with different depth. Authors occasionally have difficulty establishing the proximity or distance of the phenomena that the lenses explain. However, many of the papers we review do not go as far as necessary in stating the assumptions behind the different approaches or discussing the compatibility or incompatibility of these as-
assumptions. But deepening the discussion of assumptions is important because it can be the starting point of new conversations by making them more precise and searching for differences or compatibilities.

**FOUR MANUSCRIPT TYPES**

It is appropriate to explicitly note that proximity between the phenomena explained and compatibility in underlying assumptions are not requirements for the successful combination of theoretical lenses. Instead, these two dimensions define four different types of manuscripts, each of which presents particular types of challenges for authors in their development and generation of new theory. We examine each of these four types of manuscripts, highlighting critical aspects and articulating some of the challenges we have noted in our experience handling manuscripts that are submitted to *AMR*. We hope that identifying these challenges will guide authors on how to focus their attention to prevent or avoid missteps in the manuscript-crafting process.

**Close Areas of Research, Compatible Underlying Assumptions**

In our experience the most common combination in *AMR* manuscripts is one where the theories share compatible underlying assumptions and address substantially similar (or the same) phenomena. The combination of institutional and resource-dependence theories to advance a better understanding of stakeholder management is an example of this (Oliver, 1991). Because of the similarities between the theories being combined—they both build on assumptions regarding the strong influence of social pressures and power on individual decision making—the purpose for their combination is relatively straightforward to articulate. As a consequence, manuscripts of this type can offer an elegant approach to the development of original theory, and, perhaps not surprisingly, many of the manuscripts we see at *AMR* fit into this category.

Manuscripts such as these may also be valuable because they can capitalize strongly on existing knowledge, allowing authors to elaborate phenomena in greater depth. These combinations typically give greater nuance to theory by explicating combinations of variables or processes that have not been examined before. However, they face a particular type of challenge in the review process: articulating sufficient novelty and depth to constitute a significant theoretical contribution. Because of the closeness of the phenomena and underlying assumptions, we have seen that authors need to go “the extra mile” and be convincing about why combining the two theories is valuable. For instance, a manuscript that combines two theories that are already part of our canon into a new framework may be novel if the combination yields insights that each perspective alone cannot provide. However, if the manuscript is only the result of a straightforward combination, such as the prediction of simple interaction terms or the addition of one more variable to an already robust explanatory model, the theoretical advance may be more appropriate for empirical testing and for publication in a journal devoted to empirical development.

One way to address this challenge is to exploit the similarity in phenomena and underlying assumptions fully. Taking advantage of the close fit between theories in this situation may mean, for instance, expanding authors’ area of interest or concern. Enlarging the scope of a manuscript to encompass a broader slice of the phenomena and their assumptions can allow authors to more readily articulate a theoretical contribution, because a broadening of the phenomena can help identify larger gaps, allowing for a larger and more compelling question and contribution.

**Far Apart Areas of Research, Compatible Underlying Assumptions**

A second type of manuscript that combines perspectives to articulate new theory brings together theories that, while not addressing the same phenomenon, share compatible underlying assumptions, indicating a source of fit between them. Using resource theories of social exchange to enrich our understanding of LMX (Wilson et al., 2010), as in our earlier example, is an instance of this type of manuscript because the theories being combined share similar assumptions.

One challenge that we note in handling manuscripts such as these is the difficulty authors have in establishing a credible purpose for
the combination, leaving it ambiguous and uncertain. In these submissions our impression is that authors become seduced by the appeal of the combination and work hard to fully explore the joint perspective and its attributes. However, this exploration can lack a purpose or objective. Without a question to answer or a clear theoretical insight to deliver, a manuscript like this remains unfocused and has limited value. In extreme cases we see authors arguing that the combination of perspectives is novel on the grounds that such a combination has not been done before, but this is insufficient motivation. Here we recommend that authors explore different empirical questions that may be addressed by their approach. An empirical question in this case is valuable in two ways, helping authors ground their theoretical development while providing an appropriate justification for it.

Another challenge we sometimes observe in these submissions, where the underlying assumptions are compatible but the phenomena that the lenses address are distant, is related to the articulation of a broader theoretical contribution, one that goes beyond a motivating empirical question. Here we recommend that authors force a more detailed consideration of these assumptions—that they consider, for instance, the effects of relaxing a key assumption in the theory, in effect asking “what if” questions. Similarities across underlying assumptions can also be useful to develop and articulate the theoretical boundary conditions of their ideas. The degree of sharedness of underlying assumptions between theories gives guidance about where some of the limitations of new theory may emerge. For instance, a natural theoretical boundary condition occurs as that underlying assumption erodes or disappears, enabling ongoing discussion. In effect, scholarly conversations can emerge from discussing the plausibility of common assumptions, the potential relaxation of underlying assumptions, the extension to related phenomena, and so on.

**Close Areas of Research. Incompatible Underlying Assumptions**

A third type of manuscript that combines theoretical perspectives brings together explanations that share phenomena of interest, but the approach uses different underlying assumptions regarding the processes, mechanisms, or critical facets. New attempts to redefine agency theory—particularly by incorporating a legal perspective—are a good example of this type of theorizing, combining approaches in close areas but with many incompatible assumptions (Lan & Heracleous, 2010). Also, explanations of group behavior may typically focus on questions of temporality, group process, or the nature of the task. Uniting theoretical streams that may have incompatible underlying assumptions but that seek to consolidate our understanding of a common phenomenon is valuable to our field (see Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001, as an example). These examples show that these manuscripts are often motivated by the desire to develop more robust and comprehensive explanations for empirical questions that have traditionally been addressed from multiple but exclusive lenses.

The challenge that we most commonly see in handling these manuscripts is the difficulty authors have in bridging the theoretical perspectives in a way that forms a coherent explanation for the phenomenon under consideration. Because theoretical perspectives that address a particular question are sometimes in competition with one another and develop in an isolated manner, bridges between them may be especially hard to craft. But the integration of theories is a central element of these explanations, and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon relies on the resolution of inconsistencies between theoretical approaches. For authors, one path to take in the elaboration of these arguments is to recognize, initially, the strengths and limits of each perspective in isolation, which can depend on the realism of the underlying assumptions. Authors can also then identify those areas of the phenomenon where the theoretical approaches are not incompatible but, rather, support one another. Establishing the scope and boundaries of each theory can also give authors a sense of the places where explanations are lacking—where the development of isolated perspectives on a phenomenon is a particular weakness. It is in these places where the greatest theoretical leverage of a new approach can be found—where gaps in our understanding are filled through the combination of perspectives. These are also the places where a theoretical contribution is easier to identify, since it is possible to expand our understanding through
the combination in a way that each perspective alone is unable to do.

We also feel that this type of combination of theories demands that authors clearly identify and state their own ontological position and use it as a driver of the combination of the two theories. In other words, combining theories with less compatible underlying assumptions implies that the two approaches will not be placed “on equal footing” but, rather, that one will be in the foreground and will be enriched by the perspective provided by the other. In the example of behavioral economics cited before, for instance, the combination is based on the premise that economic models can be improved and be made more realistic by including psychological mechanisms and biases. But the overall approach remains focused on economic modeling. This is an important point because combining theories does not imply that all theoretical approaches have to be treated equally in the context of theory development.

Far Apart Areas of Research, Incompatible Underlying Assumptions

The last type of manuscript we consider is that where there is great distance between the phenomena the lenses examine and where the underlying assumptions appear incompatible. This is likely the most difficult type of manuscript to craft. However, such manuscripts are valuable because they deliberately connect unrelated areas of research through careful elaboration of arguments. They may also be particularly valuable in helping explain areas of management not explored previously, for which close theoretical antecedents may not be available. As mentioned earlier, transaction cost explanations of make-or-buy, vertical integration, strategic alliances, and other related organizational phenomena (Williamson, 1975) are good examples of this type of combination that build on various lenses, including microeconomics, bounded rationality, and law.

The main challenge with this type of combination is that it requires two simultaneous discussions: one occurs on the topic itself, but a second one is also needed at an epistemological level to determine how insights from one lens can fit with the other. For the first discussion, our experience is that developing an overarching conceptual framework that can accommodate this type of combination is a prerequisite. In the transaction cost example, for instance, what allowed Williamson to later develop what he called a “theory of contracts” (which incorporates different perspectives and which he saw as an alternative to theories of choice, such as standard microeconomics) was the framework originally developed by Ronald Coase (1937), in which markets and firms were seen as alternative institutional modes of organizing. Without this framework, incorporating law and various types of contracts in a theory of organizations may not have been possible. The lack of an integrative framework can prevent authors from pushing forward this type of theory development, one that incorporates areas of research that are far apart and for which assumptions are difficult to combine.

Of course, the second conversation—on the epistemological fit between the different lenses—is still required in these instances. This requires a deep discussion of how underlying assumptions can be combined, and especially whether this combination can really be achieved without straining against logical impossibilities. Moreover, the clear articulation of the fit between theories becomes important because readers and reviewers cannot be expected to draw the links that authors may observe, as might be the case in situations where either the phenomena or the underlying assumptions provide such an anchor or starting point. In this case the articulation of new theory hinges on the ability of authors to explain how seemingly disparate or unrelated theories fit together to form a coherent whole.

CONCLUSION

A slow revolution is currently underway in social sciences: conceptual boundaries, differences in assumptions, and separations between conversations, such as the ones between economics and psychology, are being questioned. Because of our focus on exploring real-life problems, we believe that management scholars have a key role to play in these developments. We have a formidable opportunity in front of us to contribute to our field by taking down walls and building bridges between perspectives. Many great theoretical developments and many new explanations for unexplained phenomena could follow, and we urge management scholars...
to take up this challenge. Combining multiple theoretical lenses to develop new explanations of management phenomena and solve managerial challenges will continue to be a critical aspect of how research is conducted in our field.

However, authors must also make special efforts in their attempts to combine theoretical lenses. The purpose of these comments has been not only to highlight the gains that this type of work has allowed but also to point out some of the common challenges that we observe through our work as editors when authors are trying to span the boundaries between different theories. We have stressed two dimensions that help define the relationships between lenses that scholars should keep in mind as they try to combine them: the degree of compatibility of the underlying assumptions and the distance between phenomena in the original theories. By drawing attention to the challenges that particular types of combinations of theories produce, we hope authors can more easily and clearly respond to them, enabling and enhancing the theory development work they embark on. We urge authors to clearly specify assumptions and discuss their integration as the work advances.

REFERENCES


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