EDITORS' COMMENTS: "WHAT I KNOW NOW THAT I WISH I KNEW THEN"—TEACHING THEORY AND THEORY BUILDING

Doctoral students and junior faculty (and perhaps even senior faculty) face many daunting challenges in management research. In our own experience, one of the more daunting challenges we face is understanding theory and theory building. We both can reflect on moments when we were truly befuddled by questions related to these topics. As one of the experts we turned to for insights in writing this article pointed out, it is paradoxical that doctoral students are often asked to write theory early in their training. Such experiences may end up leaving students frustrated and perhaps even more confused than when they started!

We decided that providing some guidance on how to teach theory and theory building might be useful. Specifically, our aims are twofold. First, we aim to summarize what information about using and building theory should be included in an instructional (or even self-taught) course on these topics. Second, we aim to present some of the readings and instructional methods used to teach these topics.

In doing so, we hope to be helpful to several different constituents. For those involved in designing doctoral student curriculum, we hope we can provide some concrete ideas about what might be included in a course on theory and theory building. For doctoral students in programs that cannot offer such a course, we hope this piece provides some guidance about how to further your education on these topics with a faculty mentor, alone, or with other students. Last, for those whose doctoral education is in the rearview mirror, our hope is that we can offer some suggestions you can use to further your professional development. In fact, we learned a lot in putting together the information

for this article, and we hope that you can learn from it, too.[1]

We should also be clear about what we are *not* trying to accomplish here. This article is not meant to teach you all there is to know about theory and theory building, which is far beyond the scope of a short essay like this. Rather, we provide direction to you about what knowledge you should seek to acquire and suggest readings and activities meant to assist in the acquisition of knowledge related to theory and theory building. We are also not aiming to identify what specific theories should or should not be taught in a course or professional development endeavor related to organizational theory. Instead, we are squarely focused on the activity of how to teach and learn about theory and theory building.

With this focus in mind, we sought to find out what those we consider experts in management theory and theory building say and do.

FINDING OUT WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY AND DO

In an effort to discover how management faculty teach and transmit their understanding of theory and theory building, we undertook a two-part investigation. First, using our connections to leading scholars in the area of theory development, we conducted a search of syllabi used in Ph.D. classes in management programs. Finding relevant syllabi was actually more difficult than we thought, since few doctoral programs offer a course that focuses specifically on theory development. More commonly, professors offer a course on a specific topic (e.g., groups and group processes) and teach aspects of theory and development in the context of the specific topic. Hence, we quickly realized that we would need to read through each of the syllabi that we accessed to determine the facets of the pedagogical approach that were applicable to transmitting

[1] From this point forward, we use "students" to denote anyone at any stage in his or her academic career who wants to learn more about theory and theory building.

theory recognition, theory application, and theory development.

The second part of our investigation involved interviewing researchers who have been successful in publishing theory, both in the *Academy of Management Review* and in other outlets. To that end, we interviewed seven individuals from different fields of management, including strategic management, organizational theory, human resources, and organizational behavior. We asked these individuals for their views on and responses to a series of questions, such as "What do you know now about theory (or theory building) that you wish you had been taught as a doctoral student?" "In your experience and in regard to theory (or theory building), what do students particularly struggle with?" and "Are there certain readings that are particularly helpful to you when teaching theory?" Below we summarize what we learned from these investigations.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Recall that one of our aims is to try to make sense of the information that should be learned and communicated about theory and theory building. Fortunately, we found a tremendous amount of convergence about the learning objectives for new students of management theory and theory building. Specifically, we phrase these learning objectives in terms of five broad questions: (1) What is (and isn't) theory? (2) Should we care about theory? (3) Where do new theories come from? (4) How do you build a good theory? (5) How do you get your theory published?

In the next section we list suggested readings and activities that provide answers to these questions. The suggested readings can be used to guide the reading list for a doctoral seminar that is wholly or partially devoted to theory and theory building. Alternately, these readings can be used to guide your own learning at any stage in your career. We also present suggested learning activities that can be used as an assigned activity in a course, as a less structured activity perhaps in the context of a student-faculty mentoring relationship, or as a self-guided learning activity to be used alone or with peers.

HOW TO LEARN ABOUT THEORY AND THEORY BUILDING

All of our experts stated that reading is a "must" for those wanting to learn more about theory and theory building. We are fortunate in the management field that so much has been written about these topics. However, these readings should not be approached passively. One expert suggested that having students read these articles "confuses the hell out of them" and forces them to struggle with figuring it out. For each of the five questions associated with our learning objectives, we provide some exemplar readings; a more complete reading list is provided in the Appendix. This list can also be found on the *Academy of Management Review* website under "Teaching Resources." Consistent with our experts' advice, we hope that they are approached actively—with an open and inquisitive mind.

From the information gleaned from the syllabi and our interviews, learning about theory and theory building occurs through both structured and unstructured learning approaches. In terms of structured approaches, some doctoral programs offer a course or part of a course on these topics. However, our experts generally acknowledged that the development of theory and theory-building skills occurs in unstructured settings as well, such as in mentoring collaborations and professional development workshops (e.g., the Academy of Management's professional development workshop on theory writing). Most of the experts we interviewed engaged in some combination of structured and unstructured approaches when transmitting knowledge associated with theory; we believe that this dual approach is probably the most effective.

Guided by the learning objectives we described earlier, we identified several activities aimed at answering our questions concerning theory development. In addition to reading about theory and about topics that have a theoretical component, all of our experts believe that the most important learnings come from writing and communicating a theory-based idea. As one expert paraphrased, "We don't know what we think until we know what we write" (Forster, 1927). Hence, when engaging in theory creation and building, it is important to write, present, critique, and solicit feedback on your ideas. For this reason, here we provide some of the more potentially useful activities that help students answer questions around theory and theory building.

What Is (and Isn't) Theory?

The first set of questions concerns what theory is and what it isn't. We see these questions as

important building blocks because they help to define theory. The question "What is theory?" refers to what the characteristics of a good theory are (such as being interesting and relevant) and how authors can make a theoretical contribution (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Davis, 1971). It also refers to the building blocks of theory. For example, Whetten (1989) articulated theory as containing four essential elements: what (the factors in the theory); how (how the factors are related); why (explanation of underlying dynamics); and who, where, when (boundary conditions). The other part of the question, "What is not theory?" refers to common misconceptions about what theory is (e.g., Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995).

To help students understand what theory is and isn't, our experts suggested forcing students to identify theories used in papers describing a particular phenomenon (e.g., the relationship between personality attributes and entrepreneurial behaviors). Examples of focused questions using this approach are "What is the overarching theoretical framework?" "What are the differences between process and variance theories?" "How does this paper amend existing theory?" "What is the mechanism that links the constructs in this paper?" What are the strengths and weaknesses of the theory?" and "What (if anything) do you disagree with or find controversial?" Asking focused questions ensures that students pay attention to the theory that underlies the phenomenon, framework, or set of relationships they are reading about. Relatedly, students should be encouraged to identify the boundary conditions and assumptions that underlie any theoretical approach—going beyond those that the authors of the theory have identified. All theories have a set of assumptions that underlie them and boundary conditions that contain them, and it useful to explicitly consider what those assumptions and boundary conditions might be.

Another set of activities aimed at helping students learn what theory is (and isn't) is to ask them to generate one or two testable propositions that can be deduced from a specific theory. Because many of our experts noted the benefit of representing theories visually, students could present visual models implied by the propositions using boxes and arrows, where appropriate. Going further, students could be asked to generate ideas for ways these propositions could be tested. This set of activities is mainly geared toward the development of variance theories that presuppose a neopositivistic conception of theory.

Should We Care About Theory?

A second important question to address is whether we should care about theory. On the one hand, answering this question explains the role of theory in management research. For example, it explores how theory helps guide the research questions we ask and gives sense to our findings (e.g., Van de Ven, 1989). On the other hand, answering this question provides some insights into how an overemphasis on theory can constrain the accumulation of knowledge in management (e.g., Hambrick, 2007).

To help clarify why theory is important, students can be asked to identify different theoretical perspectives that address a research problem or area in which they are interested. After formally stating their research question, they should attempt to come up with a fairly exhaustive list of the different theoretical perspectives that might be used to answer this question and discuss the implications of each perspective, as well as identify the limits of their list. Another activity is to have students pick a formal statement of a theory and analyze how good a theory it really is. In doing these types of activities, students should begin to understand that theories are the mechanisms that help us explain why some part of the world works the way that it does.

To further clarify why theory is important, it is useful to consider why so many institutions value theory. Thus, another activity is to have students answer the question "Why do major research universities promote the development of theories by their faculty, rather than just asking faculty to rely on existing theory or work on solving problems related to existing theory?"

Where Do New Theories Come From?

Answering this question involves exploring the different places from which theories are derived and the ways in which theories come to be. For example, new management theories can be derived from case studies and other inductive methods (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989). Imaginary experiments (i.e., disciplined imagination; Weick, 1989) and thought experiments (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Folger & Turillo, 1999) have been lauded as approaches for developing theory.

Others have suggested borrowing theories from other disciplines, such as economics and psychology, while recognizing that there are limitations in doing so (e.g., Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011; Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009).

To address the question of where theories come from, a couple of our experts mentioned that theories also come from observing and attempting to solve real-world puzzles. In other words, theory building happens when you are trying to explain a phenomenon. This approach is particularly valuable in our field, where the desire is that our theories have some practical application in the area of management. This view supports the idea that theories come in all shapes and sizes and that they do not have to be big and grand to make an important contribution. A perusal of recent theoretical articles demonstrates this point: most are focused fairly narrowly on a single phenomenon or context. One way of driving home this point is to ask students to consider the nature of the problem that might have led to the theory's development: "What is the value of this theory or research stream?" Alternatively, identifying gaps and contradictions in a specific literature stream may enable an approach to understanding a particular phenomenon that results in theory development.

Acknowledging that theory building sometimes involves borrowing from other areas or integrating theoretical perspectives (Corley & Gioia, 2011), we suggest four activities. One activity is to try to apply a theory from another discipline or different subfield of management to a particular research topic in management. A second related activity is to consider how a particular theory relates to other topics. For example, a theory of self-regulation may be related to goal setting, counterproductive work behaviors, work-family conflict, and customer service encounters, among other topics. A third activity is to attempt to integrate two theoretical perspectives to provide a novel conceptual contribution. This activity can be done alone or with a group and can help students to consider how and why theories may be related to one another. Last, because another source of theories is one's own imagination, many of our experts espoused that engaging in thought experiments is a potential activity to aid theory development (see, for example, Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Folger & Turillo, 1999; Weick, 1989). Corley and Gioia's call for prescience, "the process of discerning or anticipating what we need to know" (2011: 13),

and the framing of this dialogue are important possibilities for theory development.

How Do You Build a Good Theory?

This fourth question, along with the earlier question "What is theory?" explores the criteria by which theory should be evaluated (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2011). This question is distinct from the earlier question, however, in that it also seeks to explore how management researchers can partake in the process of building theory. Answering this question requires practical advice about how to build theory, such as that found in books by Dubin (1969) and Smith and Hitt (2005).

The experts suggested a number of exercises to help students develop or extend a theoretical idea. Ideally, students would undertake all of these activities while working to reinforce and clarify a theoretical argument or view. The exercises are (1) writing a paragraph explaining the basic idea and why it is important; (2) creating a visual representation, where relevant, of what the model looks like (e.g., a flowchart, a process model, a 2×2 matrix); (3) explaining the idea verbally; (4) creating an annotated bibliography of approximately fifty articles that explains how each article relates to your idea; (5) developing a set of propositions; and (6) writing a "barebones" draft of the paper that outlines the basic logic of your model. Engaging in these activities multiple times is a prerequisite for developing a clear argument. It is also valuable for students to conduct peer reviews of others' work, since it is often easier to recognize conceptual gaps in logic in others' work than in one's own. Reasoning techniques, such as problematizing assumptions and considering the counterfactual, are also valuable in building theory. Whetten (2002) described a particular approach that uses a number of these exercises.

One expert described an annotated bibliography (which can be expanded as the paper develops) as the "data" from which authors derive their theory. Just as in writing an empirical paper, where authors should be intimately familiar with their data, authors building theory should have a very good understanding of the data that make up their theoretical model. Creating an annotated bibliography gives the student a sense of what it means to be part of the "conversation" associated with a particular body of literature. Being part of this conversation, or changing the direction of

a conversation, requires knowledge of the language of the conversation, the history of that conversation, and the boundary conditions of the conversation in which they are engaging. However, too much time spent on reviewing the existing literature and justifying the need for a theoretical perspective often results in manuscripts where the actual theoretical contribution is underdeveloped.

One expert suggested that there should be minimal instruction; students should just "go and do it [read and write]" and then receive developmental feedback. This expert suggests that, as part of the feedback process, students do postmortems on themselves by reflecting on what was more or less effective in facilitating the theorizing process. Another expert commented that much of theory building involves being willing to throw out a lot of something you really believed in based on feedback from others.

How Do You Get Your Theory Published?

Answering this fifth and final question involves considering factors that increase the chances your theory will end up being published in a scholarly outlet. For example, these suggested readings emphasize the importance of clear writing (Ragins, 2012), "selling" your idea (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Grant & Pollock, 2011), originality and utility (Corley & Gioia, 2011), and other practical considerations (Kilduff, 2006).

To help students understand how to publish a theoretical contribution, we suggest they read a wide range of conceptual articles or chapters with an eye toward finding ones they particularly like. Identifying what makes the article or chapter appealing provides a template that students can follow.

Additionally, to help students learn about what constitutes publishable theory, we suggest another set of structured activities associated with critiquing the ideas of others. It is often difficult for students to critique theory when it is already published. However, it is helpful for students to see how a paper, and its associated theoretical contribution, goes through the review process. Thus, one suggestion is to give students an initial draft of a paper that has subsequently been published. Have the students write a review of the paper and then show them the reviews that were actually received. Continue this process until the students have seen every iteration of the paper and the associated reviewer comments. As described earlier, another suggestion is for students to critique the papers of other students. This exercise forces students to think about the reader; engaging in new theory from the perspective of a reader gives students an appreciation for being able to communicate clearly.

ALWAYS MORE TO LEARN

We hope that these resources help you in course development, student mentoring, or your own professional development. We suspect that you have read many of the resources and have engaged in many of the activities we have mentioned—you just may not have realized that you were engaging in understanding the process of theory development and theory building. There seems to be an implicit assumption that students will learn the art of theory development through osmosis or by engaging in research projects. And, in fact, some eminent researchers do learn this way. For example, many of our experts mentioned that they learned how to develop theory through this ad hoc process. However, given the value placed on theoretical contributions, we believe that it is important to make the goal of theory development more explicit, and to that end we have provided you with some resources to help you reach this goal.

Regardless of what stage you are at in your career, we hope you get as much out of this essay as we did in developing it. We are certain that there are notable omissions—readings that we should have mentioned or activities we should have included—and we apologize for these oversights. In fact, we acknowledge that our five questions may only represent the foundation for other important questions that should be explored, such as "What constitutes a theoretical contribution in an empirical paper?" Most management scholars will not attempt to develop a wholly new theory during the course of their career, but it is important to understand what journal editors and reviewers mean when they urge you to make a theoretical contribution in empirical studies (see, for example, Corley & Gioia, 2011). Another important question might be "What constitutes a contribution in other theoretical traditions?" Our colleagues trained in institutions or disciplines that fall outside the accepted North American management paradigm may have additional insights into approaches for

making theoretical contributions. However, we have focused on providing readings and activities that address those questions most asked by readers of the *Academy of Management Review.*

COOKING UP GOOD THEORY

In conclusion, theory development is not easy. In fact, one of our experts stated, "Theory writing is one of the most difficult skills because the rules aren't clear. It is like cooking. You have to try different things, screw up, be creative, and burn a few things before you get it right." And, like cooking with different ingredients or tools, what results in a theoretical contribution in one instance may not work in other instances. However, we hope that by providing you with some insights from successful contributors to management theory, we have provided a basic recipe for making a theoretical contribution and theory building that you can adapt to your own taste.

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APPENDIX:
SUGGESTED READING LIST BY
LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Learning Objective 1: What Is (and Isn't) Theory?

Bacharach, S. 1989. Organizational theories: Some criteria for evaluation. *Academy of Management Review,* 14: 496–515.

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Learning Objective 2: Should We Care About Theory?

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Learning Objective 3: Where Do New Theories Come From?

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Learning Objective 4: How Do You Build a Good Theory?

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Learning Objective 5: How Do You Get Your Theory Published?

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