

Conceiving *Perfectible* Theories in Management Through Adaptive Framing

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ABSTRACT

Extant studies of theory evaluation rely on hindsight even though editors' entreaties are meant to be studied *ex ante* and applied in real time. The authors elaborate on the definitional requirements of theory and ways to appraise it. The authors present a synoptic chronology of the main trends in management theory evaluation, and discuss the methodological differences between formal theories and actual management schemes. This discussion leads us to adopt a *constructivist* perspective and replace "Popperian falsifiability" when inapplicable to management. The authors then introduce the concept of *adaptive framing* as a tripartite process subsuming the criteria of novelty, practicability and extendibility through consistency, which the authors argue to be the necessary requirements for perfectible theory-building in management.

KEYWORDS

Adaptive Framing, Falsifiability, Ideal Theories, Management Theories, Real-Time Theorizing, Theory Building, Theory Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

The formal study of management continues to expand worldwide. It is also expanding academically as relatively newer subfields (such as Entrepreneurship, Knowledge Management and Cognitive Neuroscience) are being added to its already rich panoply and pertinent academic societies continue to form. The extant plethora of schemes, principles, models and theories has become baffling. Scholars and practitioner jokingly remark: "It's a jungle out there!" At various times, academic societies have prodded research aimed at taking stock of the knowledge already acquired in its several domains and assessing their respective contributions. This conceptual inquiry aims at taking a critical look at the way theory evaluation and development issues are usually approached.

While the domains of management are becoming more sophisticated, they do exhibit different shades of scientific rigor. According to the degree of multi-dimensional complexity of the respective domains, they can still be grouped into the two clusters described by Snow's (1959) fabled contrast of the *two cultures*, the mathematically oriented one and the more holistically driven generalist one. This differentiation of the subfields of management is not contested; yet management theory evaluators very often succumb to the fallacy of treating the field as homogeneous – and as an integral part of the pure scientific domain. Thus, flattering themselves as formal scientists, management authors often turn for guidance to big-S science's logician Popper rather than more pragmatic philosophers (e.g., Ackoff, 1962; Churchman, 1979).

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Another concern is that, beside editorial advice, most of what budding authors find in the extant literature are dated evaluations of the impact of past intellectual contributions (e.g., Miner, 2003; Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). This certainly is a worthwhile part of the beginners' panoply of knowledge elements; but more in line with their present needs would be some indication of how to initiate theory building, as well as the prerequisites for being able to venture into it from a beneficial angle. So, our second concern is the common tendency to provide, for what is basically an *ex ante* or real-time decision process, guidelines fitting mostly *ex post* evaluation. The more beneficial question to pose should rather be: Can sensible methodological advice be provided to help the budding management researcher in his or her quest to devise "good and lasting" theories?

In the first two parts of the following development, we will elaborate on the ideal definitional requirements of theory and ways to appraise it, contrasting the hard and softer sciences, and emphasizing the important role of consistency with a clear axiomatic foundation or, at least, an explicit assumptional basis. In its third part, we will discuss the methodological differences between assessing an extant theory and developing a new one. This will lead us to proposing, in its fourth part, three criteria that would embody *adaptive framing* as a conceptual device that can guide the process of theory building in real time, as opposed to being mainly useful in hindsight appraisals of past theoretical work (e.g., as in Bacharach, 1989; or Miner, 1984, 2003).

HARD-SCIENCE THEORIES & MANAGEMENT THEORIES

The Ideal Concept of Scientific Theory

According to an impactful article in the millennial issue of the AMJ (Carson et al., 2000), management schemes abound, and it behooves researchers to clear a path through them. Which benchmark to use?

The successful probing of the universe's constituents by Einstein, Hawking and other hard-science luminaries has had a trickle-down effect on more mundane research domains. Hard science's capacity to connect and thus explain, by means of *consistent* broad-reaching theories, an ever-expanding range of phenomena (Einstein, 1951; Hawking, 1988), has demonstrated that the general laws of the physical universe (and possibly biology and psychology) can sometimes be discovered. As a result of this stunning progress, the methods of the hard sciences have been deemed exemplary by social scientists, who have tended to define desirable requisites for their theories, and the processes for the betterment of such theories, so as to mimic those used by their natural-sciences brethren.

Philosopher of science Campbell (1953), for example, speaks of a theory as the means by which science explains phenomena, extracts laws from them and, most importantly, predict events from them – thus assuring that laws can be verified. Popper (1959), in turn, emphasizes falsifiability (i.e., potential refutation) as a key element of a theory, which is only tentatively confirmed whilst repeated attempts at falsifiability *fail* to invalidate. Similarly, drawing from these and other philosophers of science, classic management theorist Bacharach (1989) then offers generalizable utility and explanatory validity as the two main criteria for theory construction and evaluation in organization science and management. Utility provides for a theory's combined functions of both explanation and deduced prediction. Explanation establishes the substantial meaning of constructs and variables, as well as the justification for the known or assumed linkages among them. Prediction, in turn, provides for a deductive tie-in to newly proposed relationships, which are to be contrasted to empirical evidence as a test of the theory's explanation.

However, there are problems for social scientists with treading too close to the physical sciences. The major theoretical breakthroughs in the physical sciences do not necessarily originate from collecting data or observations that represent anomalies to current theories, as implicit in most of the editorials of management journals (e.g., Bettis et al., 2014), but from *synthesizing* already established partial models or results by proposing a novel more encompassing logic. The abundant science popularization literature (e.g., Tyson, 2017) attests to this difference, and the management

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