FROM THE EDITORS

PUBLISHING IN *AMJ*–PART 6: DISCUSSING THE IMPLICATIONS

This editorial continues a seven-part series, "Publishing in AMJ," *in which the editors give suggestions and advice for improving the quality of submissions to the* Journal. *The series offers "bumper to bumper" coverage, with installments ranging from topic choice to crafting a Discussion section. The series will conclude in June with "Part 7: Qualitative Distinctions." -J.A.C.*

Afterthought (*noun*):

1. a reflection after an act
2. something secondary or expedient
3. an action or thought not originally intended

By the time authors begin to craft a Discussion section, a long, sometimes arduous journey has been traveled. Study design and execution are normally well advanced, and the prospect of submission for publication consideration looms large. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising many authors view the Discussion as a perfunctory exercise—a final, obligatory hurdle to be overcome with dispatch so as not to delay a manuscript's transition to "under review" status. In approaching their Discussion as a technical formality (i.e., an afterthought in the mold of definitions 2 and 3) rather than as a forum in which to explore more deeply the significance of their work (definition 1), authors forego a number of valuable opportunities. Among them is the chance to strengthen their study's message, and in the process, convince readers of their manuscript's larger, underlying value. Another is the opportunity to embed their study more fully in the existing literature and thus engage like-minded scholars in a rich, robust theoretical conversation, perhaps even shape the future direction of that discourse.

These all-too-common lapses lead us to explore how authors might better approach the discussion of theoretical contributions. To be certain, Discussion sections encompass several dimensions, including practical implications, study limitations, and future research, each of distinct importance, and thus requisite components of any complete Discussion. That said, we restrict our attention to *theoretical implications*. In our experience as associate editors, we have found this aspect, which is both important and highly rewarding, often constitutes a major stumbling block. Thus, our aim is to outline some means of more plainly elucidating contributions to theory.

AN ENDING AND A BEGINNING

Our thoughts are shaped by the ideas of Whetten (1989) and Corley and Gioia (2011), who so very cogently answered the question, *what is a theoretical contribution*? We believe discussion of this important manuscript dimension can be enhanced through the use of a technique that treats the passage as a twofold, somewhat paradoxical entity—as both an ending and a new beginning, realized concurrently. It constitutes an ending in the sense that discussion of theoretical implications helps to bring closure to a study, illuminating its major inroads in a broad and reflective fashion. It also represents a new beginning in that it recasts contemporary theoretical understanding, bringing to light new and valuable ideas. In our experience, this approach has helped authors illuminate the two or three most critical theoretical insights afforded by their research investigation. We conclude with a summary of common pitfalls, or tendencies that compromise the effective summary of theoretical implications.

Theoretical Implications: An Ending

Why do scholars choose to undertake a particular study? In most instances, it is because they are captivated by a research question posing a novel and important challenge of broad consequence. The same is true of readers' interest. It is perhaps not surprising then that the most impactful studies are ones which explore larger questions of theoretical significance over issues of more incremental scope (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). Although the aim of resolving a grand puzzle plays a central role at the inception of any research study, its meaning, if not allure, is often lost on authors by the time they arrive at the Discussion. Intricacies of conceptual development, study design, and analysis often lead to losing sight of the broader theoretical challenge that started researchers on their path.

Yet an impactful Discussion section retains that focus. Better said, it makes a point of revisiting the study's original theoretical motivation, and it does so for a number of reasons: First, a return to the work's theoretical catalyst is a means of effecting orderly completion. Recap affords a basis on which to assess progress on the mission of resolving a theoretical puzzle. Of course, the original theoretical question need not be perfectly solved; the investigation may, for example, have uncovered some unanticipated issues or problematic assumptions. Nevertheless, revisiting theoretical motivation affords a valid reference point, one appreciated by authors and readers alike. In reaching a paper's Discussion section, most readers (as the paper's authors originally were) have been sustained by the tension inherent in the study's motivation. Revisiting ensures that authors deliver on their study's early promise—that is, they answer the underlying theoretical question(s)—and so fulfill their compact with readers.

Second, a return to the original theoretical motivation of a paper affords a means to cogently and succinctly address the *so what*? question. Among the more common reasons manuscripts are rejected at *AMJ* is their failure to offer a meaningful theoretical advance. Of course, the effort to do so begins months, if not years, before manuscript submission, with topic choice (see Colquitt and George, "From the Editors," *AMJ* 54: 432–435]) and its subsequent clear articulation in a manuscript's Introduction (see Grant and Pollock, "From the Editors," *AMJ* 54: 873–879). However, the Discussion section affords a venue in which to answer this question more robustly than before and to articulate in a richer fashion how the study changes, challenges or otherwise fundamentally refines understanding of extant theory (and/or its core concepts, principles, etc.). As experts in a given area, researchers often fail to appreciate that others may not share the same theoretical interests and/or see their underlying merit. Thus, an effective Discussion section not only reports the study's theoretical inroads, but also contextualizes them in a fashion that makes clear their larger utility for students of organization. Sherer and Lee (2002) offers an excellent demonstration. The authors both answer the theoretically grounded questions that gave rise to their research and frame those responses in a manner that casts light on some under-appreciated aspects of resource dependence and institutional perspectives—specifically, how their core processes conspire to drive innovation. Such elaboration shows how scholars and practitioners might better capitalize on these theories for purposes of understanding management and organization.

Finally, successful Discussion sections afford a synthesis of their studies' empirical findings. They examine results of hypothesis tests in an aggregate fashion, weaving them together to present a unified, theoretically grounded narrative of the studies' discoveries. Of course, some empirical findings may be unexpected, or even contrary to expectations. In that case, reconciliation is in order; so too is further examination of causal arguments to help readers, and indeed the field at large, to better understand the underlying phenomena. The end result, however, is always the same. Namely, integration not only fosters development of a single, coherent message—far more likely to resonate with readers than a mixed message—but also affords the chance to underscore the cohesive nature of a study's conceptual model, thus lending incremental credence to its design. Agarwal, Echambadi, Franco, and Sarkar (2004) demonstrate this skillfully. Their Discussion section synthesizes the results of individual hypothesis tests, integrating them in a manner that imparts a clear and parsimonious theoretical account of corporate spin-outs.

Theoretical Implications: A New Beginning

Perhaps the most straightforward implications are those derived from a logical interpretation of a study's findings. *What* do the results tell us about underlying theoretical constructs, principles, and their relationships? *When* do these patterns emerge, and in what context? *How* do they refine appreciation of the underlying theory? These are but a sampling of "first- order" theoretical implications that might be advanced. More interesting and valuable are insights that delve deeper into observed relationships to address the question *why*? In exploring this dimension, authors begin to examine more fully underlying mechanisms and processes—causal explanations that both enrich understanding of a given theory and allow readers to make greater sense of complex organizational phenomena (Whetten, 1989). Critical here is a bridge between a study's findings and the larger literature. It is only through a connection to broader understanding that the theoretical "value added" of a given study can be interpreted and, indeed, appreciated (see Rynes, "From the Editors," *AMJ* 45: 311–313 and Bergh, "From the Editors," *AMJ* 46: 135–136).

Of course, a study's objective findings are not the exclusive source of valuable insight. Their juxtaposition relative with earlier results often affords rich and meaningful theoretical nuance. This is apparent, for example, in the case of competing evidence. An exploration of departures from earlier findings

can reveal unexpected boundary conditions, or perhaps even questionable assumptions. It can also shed light on previously overlooked gaps in theoretical understanding, such as unanticipated contingencies and/or critical omissions in definitions of focal constructs. Such is the case in Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2003); those authors explain how their theoretical work brings reconciliation to seemingly divergent perspectives, and correspondingly, nuanced understanding of the role social capital plays in career success. Although divergence from earlier findings is quick to captivate reader interest (Weick, 1989), findings consistent with prior research can also help to hone more subtle dimensions of understanding (Hollenbeck, 2008). Siebert et al., for example, discuss how controlling for previously identified predictors of career success strengthens the contribution made by their primary focus on network structure and social resources. Whatever the particular pattern (i.e., consistency or divergence), again, it is the exploration of findings relative to earlier, related work that often illuminates previously unappreciated theoretical insights.

Finally, we find that authors also effectively inform theoretical understanding by exploring the path that led to discovery of their study's findings. Few research investigations follow a linear trajectory. The final draft is often a portrayal of the most refined ideas (i.e., what worked), yet less successful efforts may prove equally informative. This is especially true if and when other theoretical perspectives were explored and found wanting. In fact, one of the tests of any study's theoretical inferences is the extent to which they hold up to the challenge of "alternative explanations." A post hoc reflection attending to the plausibility of other accounts lends incremental support to a study's conclusions and also potentially illuminates important differences among theoretical perspectives. This is demonstrated, for example, in Faems, Janssens, Madhok, and Van Looy's (2008) Discussion section, which not only examines the merits of alternative perspectives on the governance of alliances, but also illuminates key differentiating aspects of structural and relational perspectives.

The same is true of unsupported hypotheses. They often constitute a rich, yet commonly foregone, way to inform theoretical understanding. Our experience as associate editors suggests there is reluctance among many scholars to attend to (much less retain) unsupported hypotheses. Yet the failure to find rigorous support for key theoretical arguments is in itself informative and rather thought-provoking, and such findings are certainly helpful to continued theoretical development. Thus, in re-

flecting upon the discoveries that have accrued over the course of their study, authors are well served by attending not only to anticipated (i.e., supported) findings, but also to prominent and unanticipated insights (e.g., nonfindings).

COMMON PITFALLS

If the above sections outline some guidelines and suggestions, it is equally important to recognize some of the common errors authors make in articulating their studies' theoretical contribution. Our experience suggests three are highly prevalent: rehashing results, meandering, and overreaching.

Rehashing Results

The transition from the Results to the Discussion marks a change in a narrative's focus, from reviewing what emerged in the study to explaining why the findings are important and how they change the conversation that the research joins. A common mistake authors make is to devote too much discussion to summarizing and resummarizing the results of their hypothesis tests while devoting too little attention to explaining what the results mean. In some cases, authors restate the findings in the first few paragraphs of the Discussion section and then move on to other subsections (practical implications, limitations, future research directions, and so on) without addressing the study's theoretical implications whatsoever. As readers transition to a Discussion section, the study's findings are fresh in their minds. Consequently, what's needed at this point is not a rehashing of the results, but a thoughtful interpretation of why the findings are important and worthy of dissemination (in the form of a published article). It is appropriate to remind readers of the paper's key findings, but only as the departure point for explaining how the results bring resolution to the puzzle that motivated the research to begin with and set the stage for new and promising lines of inquiry.

Meandering

The second kind of mistake authors make in their Discussion sections, meandering, occurs when a narrative references numerous theoretical implications, some or all of which seem disconnected from each other, the paper's "hook" (see Grant and Pollock, "From the Editors," 54: 873–879), and/or the paper's theoretical development (see Sparrowe and Mayer, "From the Editors," *AMJ* 54: 1098–1102). Meandering implications subsections lack focus and come across as superficial. A paper's discus-

sion of theoretical implications should cohere around a small number of important issues that are covered in great depth. The implications themselves will likely reside at a higher level of abstraction than the data and parsimoniously explain the results of the hypothesis tests, both supportive and unsupportive. What can authors do to avoid crafting an implications subsection that meanders? Instead of identifying implications for each result, they might follow the better strategy of focusing on what the findings mean collectively. When it comes to beefing up theoretical implications, authors should resist the temptation to simply slip in an extra implication or two. Having completed a draft of the implications, they might find it is worthwhile to go back and ask whether the subsection is as focused as it could be. Do the implications close the loop on the specific problems that are introduced in the paper's opening? In other words, do they cohere with the research questions and theoretical inroads identified in the Introduction? Are there opportunities to reduce the number of implications that are addressed, while deepening the coverage of those that remain? Attending to these matters will make for a more focused and persuasive presentation of a paper's contributions to theory.

Overreaching

A third mistake authors make in their Discussion sections involves deriving sweeping conclusions that outstrip the data. In an effort to convince readers that their work has important and wide-ranging theoretical implications, authors may overreach. Admittedly, there may be some subjectivity associated with this judgment, as one person's overreach may be another's grand implication. Reviewers are likely to conclude that an author has gone too far when a narrative drifts into domains that seem disconnected from the empirics and/or went unmentioned in the paper's opening or theoretical development. When authors experience a strong temptation to weave new (i.e., previously unmentioned) theory into the Discussion, they should give some thought to how they might introduce those ideas earlier in the paper—perhaps using them to strengthen the paper's hook.

Overreaching is also more likely to occur when authors treat their papers' theoretical implications as an afterthought in the mold of definitions 2 or 3, rather than definition 1. Having crafted a paper's Introduction, Theory, and Methods sections, authors may set out to write the Discussion, only to realize that the paper's theoretical implications are somewhat pedestrian after all. The shortage of strong implications to which authors may legitimately lay claim gives rise to claims that cannot plausibly derive from the results. One way of avoiding this pitfall is to think about what the implications subsection will look like before writing a paper's Introduction and Theory sections. If it seems difficult, if not impossible, to outline an implications subsection that feels meaty and persuasive, it is likely that the project lacks the depth and scope that aligns with *AMJ*'s mission.

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, publishing refereed journal articles is a means to the end of making a contribution to a specific body of knowledge. The variation in mission statements across journals reflects differences in the kinds of contribution(s) journals value and aim to publish. At *AMJ*, theoretical advance is a primary emphasis, and it is in their Discussions that authors can make plain their accomplishments on this dimension. Our experience shows that the best Discussions (in addition to outlining their studies' limitations, practical implications, and suggestions for future research) provide a clear and compelling answer to the original research question, cast in a theoretical light. Of course, this necessitates a meaningful connection to the broader, relevant theoretical literatures and, in the interest of advancement, illumination of new and important insights uniquely generated by the immediate investigation. In short, a Discussion section affords a venue in which to elucidate how a study changes, challenges, or otherwise fundamentally advances, existing theoretical understanding. The quality of this section, and of a paper more generally, is greatly enhanced by avoiding three mistakes, best summarized as not doing enough (rehashing), doing too much (meandering), and going too far (overreaching). We hope that with this knowledge in hand, authors may more willingly embrace not only the opportunity, but also the rewards of contributing more cogently to ongoing theoretical conversations.

Marta Geletkanycz
Boston College

Bennett J. Tepper
Georgia State University

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