

FROM THE EDITORS

NEW WAYS OF SEEING: ELABORATION ON A THEME

The theme that anchors the 21st editorial team of *Academy of Management Journal* is “new ways of seeing.” This theme serves as a challenge for researchers in our academic community and beyond to reconsider the theoretical bases of our common lines of inquiry, to contemplate unique sets of assumptions underlying our topics of interest, and to envisage engaging in meaningful cross-disciplinary collaborations that result in fundamental theoretical departures from those previously observed in the management literature. In the management research realm, there is a relatively heavy emphasis on theory. The prominence and promulgation of theorizing in our discipline has resulted in some academic handwringing over whether we may have, collectively, placed too much weight on theory being a “good thing” (Hambrick, 2007). The strength of management research is that it draws theoretical insight from other disciplines to gain insight into phenomena. However, the table of contents and abstracts in leading journals show that there are relatively few theories on which we draw, especially at a broader meta-theory level. In micro research, the evidence suggests a clustering of general theories of motivation (e.g., goal setting, expectancy, equity) and social information (e.g., social identity, social exchange, social learning, social information processing). On the macro side, much research is conducted under the umbrellas of major theories involving information asymmetry (e.g., agency, transaction cost), resources (e.g., resource dependence, the resource-based view), or institutional environments (e.g., institutional theory, population ecology) (see Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007, for a review). When grouped together, we see more commonalities than divergences.

The current situation can be viewed positively or negatively. For one, it is possible that the field is slowly moving toward greater paradigm development, a consensus not only in terms of technical issues, but also with respect to fundamental assumptions about major phenomena or topics of interest within and across management areas. As Pfeffer (1993) pointed out, nontrivial shifts toward consensus are many years in the making; it is possible that some amalgamating

has occurred since his innovating theorizing on the issue. Alternatively, these changes may *appear like* coalescence on a narrow set of theories, but in fact are merely significant stepwise extensions of the existing theoretical apparatus. For example, the proportion of papers published in *Academy of Management Journal* categorized as “theory expanders” increased dramatically between the early 1980s and the late 2000s (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). While valuable, the intended contribution of these papers is to evoke and add nuance or additional explanatory power to existing perspectives, rather than to offer a new standpoint.

A third possibility is that, as a field, we have fallen prey to a common observation or convenience-related bias known as the “streetlight effect.” In the popular parable, a police officer discovers a drunken man searching intently for his keys under a streetlight. After some time jointly hunting, the man reveals to the officer that the keys were actually lost in the park, but that he is looking under the post because there is illumination there. The origins of the story are debated and the proverbial takeaways have varied widely in their application in everyday life, but also in formal analysis of academic issues. Kaplan (1964: 11) was perhaps the first to incorporate the lessons from the streetlight effect into academic analysis, and he concluded that “much effort, not only in the logic of behavioral science, but also in behavioral science itself, is vitiated, in my opinion, by the principle of the drunkard’s search.”

In Kaplan’s (1964) parlance, commonly used theories or sets of assumptions serve as a field’s “logic-in-use.” Efforts to extend, advance, crystallize, and refine our current theories add variety to, extend, and reconstruct the logic-in-use. These efforts and refinements are certainly useful on some grounds, perhaps in particular with efforts to eliminate theories with a strong inference approach (Platt, 1964). But when used as the sole focus of advancement in management theory, the streetlight bias can certainly be a risk. With the metaphorical keys undetected in the dark park, the logic-in-use is promulgated and additional studies accrue; in effect, the search continues under an even more illuminated streetlight. The cautionary tale here is that there are likely things

to be found in the dark, but our current theorizing only illuminates a small, and perhaps biased, portion of these things.

Management is not the only field susceptible to these effects. Battaglia and Atkinson (2015), Newquist, DeLiema, and Wilber (2015), and Hendrix (2017) have recently cautioned researchers about the streetlight effect in treatment of individuals with type 1 diabetes, health care policy, and climate change, respectively. Our intention is not to throw stones at management research. As noted in a prior editorial (Shaw, 2017), there has been substantial forward-looking progress with significant practical value in many key areas of study in our domain. We laud the researchers and their efforts for these achievements. Our aim is to send a positive, encouraging message to those who may be interested in attempting to import, develop, or combine fundamentally new theoretical underpinnings for their topics of interest. Our academic community is broad, diverse, and talented enough to make meaningful progress on many fronts concurrently, including methodological advancement and rigor, theory refinement, replication or reproducibility, and even phenomenon-driven studies that give management researchers an important voice in solving the world's pressing problems. In evoking the imagery of "new ways of seeing," we are resisting what Dawkins (1998: 6–7) referred to as the "anaesthetic of familiarity, a sedative of ordinariness, which dulls the senses," and propose that "it is at least worthwhile from time to time making an effort to shake off the anaesthetic."

NEW WAYS OF SEEING: EXAMPLES FROM THE EXTANT LITERATURE

It may be useful to draw out a few specific examples from the extant literature, and also to highlight some general areas in which new ways of seeing are needed to move the literature forward. The literature provides many examples—within and outside of management, and across deductive and inductive approaches—that we believe illustrate the theme. Whiteman and Cooper (2000) advanced a theory of ecological embeddedness, rooted in notions and traditions of environmental knowledge from anthropology, and derived inductively from a study of indigenous people in remote areas of Canada's James Bay. In terms of importance for managing organizations and commitment to sustainable development, the paper infused management literature with a different set of assumptions about how and why sustainable development may be fostered—the theory argues persuasively that actual physical connections

(viz., rooting in the land) rather than cognitive or cost-benefit-based perspectives may be key.

Chua (2013) replaced common assumptions about cultural conflicts with a new cultural psychology-based theory that assumed that people are impacted primarily by intercultural conflicts *in which they are not directly involved*. His theory offered a new way of seeing intercultural relations by explaining that beliefs about cultural incompatibilities and subsequent creativity-based outcomes were impacted not by conflicts experienced or enacted by individuals, but by ambient, inert disharmony in the environment. Hannah, Balthazard, Waldman, Jennings, and Thatcher (2013) developed a neuroscience-based theory of leadership complexity and adaptive decision-making, comparing and contrasting its predictive ability with a more conventional psychology-based decision-making model. The theory and results provided a new way of seeing by "employing neuroscience to develop a deeper understanding of leaders' brain activity and therefore the 'black box' of effective leadership" (Hannah et al., 2013: 404). Although their approach has now become the norm, Ferrier, Smith, and Grimm's (1999) introduction of Austrian economics and the vivid imagery of a "perennial gale of creative destruction" (Kirzner, 1973: 20; Schumpeter, 1934) changed completely the assumptions underlying the competitive dynamics literature.

Exemplars from outside of the management domain are also readily available. Recently, historians were dazzled by a new treatise and evidence that the initial success of the German army in World War II (Ohler, 2017) could be traced not to technical or strategic superiority, but to a heavy reliance on illicit drugs. Echoing our theme, the historian Antony Beevor, in his comments on this discovery, observed, "It's one of the old problems of specialization. No historian knows a lot about drugs. When an outsider comes in with an open mind and different interests, the results can be fantastic and very illuminating" (Segal, 2016). We could offer an elongated list of other examples, but hopefully these few sufficiently make the point that perspectives and views from outside the management domain, with markedly different sets of assumptions and points of departure, can not only reinvigorate but also change the course of major streams of research within our field.

NEW WAYS OF SEEING: EXAMPLE HIGH-POTENTIAL RESEARCH AREAS

Now, we offer a few brief examples of areas in the literature where "new ways of seeing" appear to be

needed and/or where there seem to be ample opportunities for such advancements. These areas are simply used for illustrative purposes, as many other research domains may be well suited for a fresh infusion of theory as well.

The first is inequality, dispersion, or disparities in terms of income, benefits, and other pecuniary outcomes in organizations and in life. It has been nearly 25 years since Pfeffer and Langton (1993: 382) juxtaposed competing arguments about pay dispersion as a “theoretical dilemma.” Research on the topic burgeoned in the ensuing years, and, notably, dozens of later papers were framed with the same literary device, comparing and contrasting the two major schools of thought on dispersion effects within and across levels in organizations, as well as within and across societal strata. These alternative theories can be described simply: one presupposes that inequality yields positive outcomes because it serves as a motivational or aspirational tool. The other presumes that dispersion results in negative outcomes because it raises a host of detrimental issues associated with inequity or relative deprivation. Even formal theories (e.g., Shaw, Gupta, & Delery’s [2002] theory of explained dispersion) begin by contrasting the motivation- and justice-based views. The topic has also entered the political arena in full force with Nobel Laureates (e.g., Stiglitz, 2012) arguing persuasively that disparities are the result of wrong-headed policies and priorities, while others make the logical and empirical case that inequality is perhaps a healthy side effect of prosperity and a well-functioning economy (e.g., Tamny, 2015). Our point is that, after several decades of recycling motivation and injustice theory tradeoffs, it may be time for a new way of seeing inequality. Is this all there is?

For other reasons, we also believe the areas of sustainable development and individual and organizational well-being are prime candidates for innovating theorizing within the theme. Grounded in developmental economics, sustainable development argues that the purpose of industrial development is to meet the basic needs of all people, including food, clean water, and human dignity. Meeting these needs imposes a significant burden on the natural environment (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The focus of current research has been mainly at single levels of analysis, primarily organizational or institutional. At the organizational level of analysis, researchers aim to understand the drivers and consequences of organizations being green or responsible; at a more macro level, researchers describe the processes that inhibit

or accelerate institutional change. However, sustainable development is deeply rooted in systems thinking, which cuts across time, space, and levels of analysis (Bansal & Song, 2017). It calls for insights from both the social and natural sciences in an effort to improve societal well-being within natural resource constraints. There are considerable opportunities for new ways of seeing sustainable development through interdisciplinary, multilevel research.

A final example involves individual and organizational well-being. The importance of well-being research for organizations is clear and the literature on stress and well-being at work continues apace, but its presence in the organizational literature is too often focused on longstanding theoretical foundations related to job characteristics, support, resources, and psychological or physical depletion. After an exhaustive review, Ganster and Rosen (2013: 111) concluded that management researchers have been slow to adopt alternative theories and models, while epidemiological research has “focused on a relatively narrow set of work stressors and measures emanating from a small set of theories.” We concur with these authors, and note that the opportunities for “new ways of seeing” in stress and well-being research abound, especially when conducted in multidisciplinary partnerships. Sharma, Powers, Bradley, and Ressler (2016), for example, recently outlined conceptual and empirical approaches in the gene-by-environment literature, while Wood and Runger (2016) offered provocative ideas linking the neurobiology of habits to stress and well-being. Each of these lines of reasoning, as well as many others, could be brought to bear in the organizations literature. In introducing these new ways of seeing, organizational researchers could not only invigorate well-being research in our domain but contribute to foundational physiological literatures and society-level efforts to improve life quality as well.

CONCLUSION

The community of management scholars to which we belong prides itself on the ability to make theoretical contributions. We are encouraged to join and extend important research conversations, developing novel, bold, and meaningful contributions along the way. We have made much progress in terms of gaining deeper theoretical insights, understanding important phenomena, and building bridges across different bodies of literature. Together, we have illuminated ever more brightly our organizational and management landscape. Sometimes, however, we recycle reasoning

within our silos and reinforce common assumptions—reconstructing our logics-in-use (Kaplan, 1964)—failing to consider the possibility that other unique perspectives may hold explanatory power, perhaps even more than our current views. In essence, we sometimes operate within echo chambers of our own making, missing opportunities to draw on theory and expertise across broader disciplinary and field-of-interest divides.

Pursuing these goals will require some evaluation and thought on the issue of “newness.” We think of it as a continuum: a theory can be original or *de novo*; new to the management domain but informed from other domains (e.g., previously used in biology, history, or political science); novel to management but informed by management-related fields beforehand (e.g., marketing or information systems), or developed previously within in our discipline but holding unique insights across areas (e.g., the micro theoretical foundations of strategy). Our aim is to encourage theory development and application on the “newer” side of this continuum. Examples about the adoption or integration of theories that exist outside of our discipline do not obviate original theory development and authors’ own imaginative perspectives. As Schaubroeck (2013) pointed out, the reliance on prestigious theoretical frameworks places certain constraints on our own original theorizing. We strongly encourage *de novo* theory development, which, when paired with a rigorous empirical approach, can offer an impactful new way of seeing. For infusion of theory from outside of management, we refer to the innovation literature for guidance. The application or recombination of disparate ideas and artifacts is considered the “holy grail” of inventive work (Gruber, Harhoff, & Hoisl, 2013; Schumpeter, 1934), as it holds the potential for the greatest insights or course corrections. This encouragement may not yield a surfeit of such distant recombinations, but, if it results in some ambitious efforts in this direction, it will be a success.

To close, Dawkins (1998) cautioned against the “anaesthetic of familiarity” and the “sedative of ordinariness.” In his view, the key to recovery is to “recapture that sense of having just tumbled out to life on a new world by looking at our own world in unfamiliar ways” (Dawkins, 1998: 7). We hope to push theoretical boundaries via “new ways of seeing.” We aim to extend our theory, so that we can illuminate new phenomena or existing ones from new perspectives. In doing so, we may be able to see beyond the glow of our current lampposts. As an editorial team, we embrace and appreciate the value of the diversity of research approaches within our

discipline. We realize that this theme will not resonate with all researchers; resonance to all is not our intention. Rather, we aim to energize efforts among some members of our community to broaden our theoretical scope, to infuse stagnant or mature areas with new assumptions and perspectives, and to encourage our community to partner with the best researchers across the spectrum of science. In so doing, we hope to deepen insights and stimulate cross-disciplinary dialogue that extends the reach and impact of our field. We look forward to what the future holds in these efforts.

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