

EDITORS' COMMENTS: ON THE FUTURE OF PUBLISHING MANAGEMENT THEORY

In her end-of-term comments, previous *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) editor Amy Hillman (2011) expressed the concern that our discipline showed signs of moving toward a future without theory. At the heart of her concern were the following statistics:

From 2006 to 2010, new manuscript submissions at AMR ranged between 400 and 500 each year, while new manuscript submissions at our sister empirical journal, the *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ), increased from 622 in 2006 to 1,083 in 2010. During the same time period, membership in the Academy of Management grew by 3,000, to just below 20,000 members (2011: 606).

Reflecting on these figures, Hillman closed her comments with a call to revive the role of theory in our field and offered several meaningful ways scholars might attempt to do so.

As we approach the end of our term, we, too, find ourselves concerned about the state of theory building in our discipline. The impetus of these comments, therefore, is to take stock of this issue by reviewing the state of nonempirical theory¹ publishing in our field. As strategy scholars, we are particularly interested in the extent to which prominent journals in the field of management publish nonempirical articles aimed at advancing strategy theory. We therefore focus on the theory articles found in the following four prominent management journals in which strategy scholars seek to have such work published: *Academy of Management Review* (AMR), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), *Organization Science* (Org Sci), and *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ)—listed alpha-

betically. Our aim is to answer three questions: (1) To what extent did these journals publish articles aimed at advancing theory (relative to empirical studies) during the ten years 2003 through 2012? This ten-year horizon allowed for an examination of any trends in the data. (2) To what extent did these journals publish articles aimed at advancing strategy theory (relative to management and organization theory more generally) during those years? (3) Which of these journals published such theoretical work during that period and how often?

In the following section we discuss our key findings, which demonstrate that while, yes, strategy theory is being published on a regular basis in this set of journals, the degree to which it (and theory more generally) occupies space in these journals appears to be declining. We highlight some (perceived) challenges to theorizing and end with some thoughts on how our field may continue to advance work seeking to develop theory.

STRATEGY THEORY ARTICLES PUBLISHED DURING THE PERIOD 2003 THROUGH 2012

As briefly noted above, we examined all of the nonempirical theory articles published during the years 2003 through 2012 in AMR, ASQ, Org Sci, and SMJ and identified those that pertained to strategy. All of the articles were coded by one of us as to whether they should be classified as theory. We considered theory articles in this set of journals to be those with no empirical data or analysis. We excluded those articles that had not been part of the regular peer review process (e.g., introductions to special issues, responses/replies, etc.). Once this coding was completed, two of us independently coded each of the theory articles as strategy or not strategy. For those articles for which classification (either nonempirical theory or strategy theory) was unclear, all three of us reviewed them and reached a consensus. In a few cases we did not achieve consensus regarding whether an article was strategy theory. Those articles were not classified as strategy.

We acknowledge the helpful comments of editor Roy Suddaby and our fellow associate editors.

¹ In order to be published in the management journals we examine here, even empirical studies must clearly contribute to theory in some form. Our interest in the current inquiry is with articles that seek to develop or advance theory without empirical investigation—to be precise, we examined nonempirical theory articles and nonempirical strategy theory articles. Using such precise terminology throughout the essay would be cumbersome at best; therefore, hereafter we refer to such articles as simply theory articles and strategy theory articles.

Defining which articles constituted strategy theory was the real challenge, given that the field of strategy is somewhat fragmented and covers a diversity of subjects. Moreover, strategic management researchers draw on a variety of training backgrounds and disciplines (e.g., see Nag, Hambrick, & Chen, 2007). While we concur with Nag et al.'s consensual definition—that the “field of strategic management deals with the major intended and emergent initiatives taken by general managers on behalf of owners, involving utilization of resources, to enhance the performance of firms in their external environments” (2007: 944)—we also felt that requiring any particular piece of theoretical work to address each and every aspect of this definition in order to be classified as a strategy theory article would be overly restrictive. Thus, to decide which articles should be classified as theory pertaining to strategy, we assessed whether the article sought to advance thinking within at least one of the domains as defined by the twelve interest groups of the Strategic Management Society (SMS): competitive strategy, corporate strategy, global strategy, knowledge and innovation, strategy process, entrepreneurship and strategy, strategic human capital, strategy practice, cooperative strategy, stakeholder strategy, strategic leadership and governance, and behavioral strategy. All of these interest groups

inherently aim at different aspects of the general definition of strategic management as defined above. Each SMS interest group provides a summary statement of the issues and phenomena of interest that fall under the domain of that group, and several pose general questions that scholarship related to that group might seek to address. Our classification was guided by these statements and questions whenever possible. For those articles that fit into more than one of these interest group categories, we assigned each to the one primary group we agreed it most directly addressed. We recognize that any particular segment of the field may find our approach too broad—indeed, addressing what constitutes strategy is an undertaking in itself (see Nag et al., 2007)—and, thus, we have made the full list of articles (those classified as theory and strategy theory, specifically) available on the *AMR* website.

Table 1 presents an overview of the number of articles published in the four journals we reviewed during the examined time period. Approximately one-quarter of the 1,803 articles published were theory articles (438 theory articles). Of these theory articles, 202 sought to advance thinking on strategy (46 percent of the theory articles).

Figure 1 provides a graphic depiction of these data and shows that the number and proportion

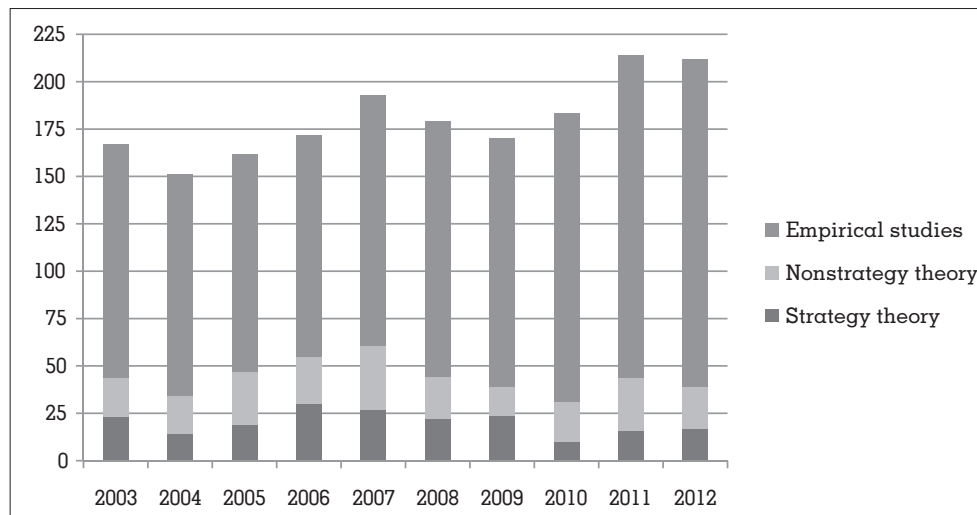
TABLE 1
Total Nonempirical Theory and Strategy Theory Articles Published Between 2003 and 2012^a

Year	All Theory Papers							Strategy Theory Papers				
	Total Articles	Empirical Studies	Total Theory	AMR	ASQ	Org Sci	SMJ	Total Strategy	AMR	ASQ	Org Sci	SMJ
2003	167	123	44	30	3	4	7	23	16	0	0	7
2004	151	117	34	24	0	7	3	14	9	0	2	3
2005	162	115	47	36	0	8	3	19	13	0	3	3
2006	172	117	55	46	0	5	4	30	25	0	1	4
2007	193	132	61	53	0	3	5	27	20	0	2	5
2008	179	135	44	36	0	4	4	22	17	0	1	4
2009	170	131	39	29	0	6	4	24	15	0	5	4
2010	183	152	31	27	0	1	3	10	7	0	0	3
2011	214	170	44	28	0	15	1	16	8	0	7	1
2012	212	173	39	28	0	8	3	17	8	0	6	3
Period total	1803	1365	438	337	3	61	37	202	138	0	27	37
Percent of period total		75.7%	24.2%	18.7%	0.2%	3.4%	2.1%	11.2%	7.7%	0.0%	1.5%	2.1%
Percent of total theory ^b								46.1%	40.9%	0.0%	44.3%	100.0%

^a The following journals were reviewed: *Academy of Management Review* (AMR), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), *Organization Science* (Org Sci), and *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ).

^b The percent for each journal is with respect to the total theory in the respective journal (e.g., AMR: 138/337 = 40.9 percent).

FIGURE 1
Management Articles Published in Each Year^a



^aThe following journals were reviewed: *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, and *Strategic Management Journal*.

of theory articles with a strategy focus varied by year. While 2006 and 2007 saw the highest number of theory articles published overall, the two years with the highest publication of strategy theory articles as a proportion of all theory articles were 2006 (thirty of fifty-five articles; 55 percent) and 2009 (twenty-four of thirty-nine; 62 percent). The two years with the lowest publication of strategy theory (in proportion and total) were 2010 (ten of thirty-one; 32 percent) and 2011 (sixteen of forty-four; 36 percent).

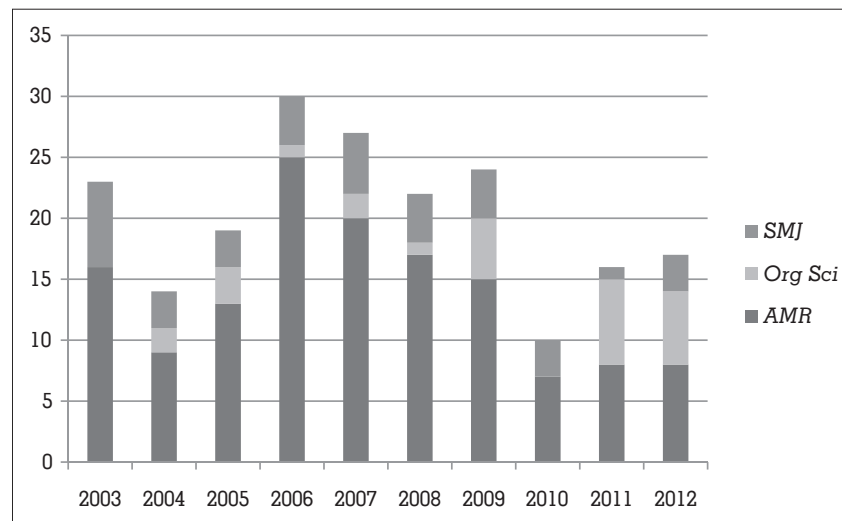
In reviewing the data by journal, we found the following: first, the total number of peer-reviewed theory articles published in each journal over this time period was 337 in *AMR* (100 percent of its total articles), 3 in *ASQ* (2 percent of its total articles), 61 in *Org Sci* (11 percent of its total articles), and 37 in *SMJ* (5 percent of its total articles). Second, of these theory articles, the following numbers involved strategy: 138 in *AMR* (41 percent of its theory articles), none in *ASQ* (0 percent of its theory articles), 27 in *Org Sci* (44 percent of its theory articles), and, given that *SMJ* is the flagship journal of strategy, we coded all 37 of the articles in *SMJ* as strategy. Third, with respect to the number of strategy theory articles published in each journal, as compared to all strategy theory published across the four journals, *AMR* published 68 percent of the strategy theory during this time pe-

riod (138 of 202), *Org Sci* published 13 percent of the strategy theory during this time period (27 of 202), and *SMJ* published 18 percent of the strategy theory during this time period (37 of 202). Figure 2 summarizes, in graphic form, the publication of strategy theory articles in each journal by year.

Our findings show that, over these ten years, strategy theory occupied just under half the space devoted to theory by the journals in our set. Approximately two-thirds of strategy theory appeared in *AMR*, with the remaining third split across *SMJ* and *Org Sci*. While we made no attempt to classify the nonstrategy theory articles published in these journals, the data clearly suggest that, proportionally, strategy theory is being published.

Another clear trend emerging from these data is that while the total number of articles published in these four journals increased over time (from 167 in 2003 to 212 in 2012), this increase was completely driven by empirical studies (which increased from 123 in 2003 to 173 in 2012). In other words, the number of articles aimed at advancing theory—regardless of whether they pertained to strategy or not—remained relatively steady over that ten-year period. Hence, although work aimed at advancing management and organization theory is being published—at least to the extent that the journals we reviewed

FIGURE 2
Nonempirical Strategy Theory Articles Published by Journal in Each Year^a



^aThe following journals were reviewed: *Academy of Management Review* (AMR), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), *Organization Science* (Org Sci), and *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ).

are representative of the broader population of management journals—its proportion is declining relative to that of total published work.

Given these findings, we compared the submission rates of *AMJ* and *AMR*. We found the trend that Hillman (2011) first noted continues unabated: submissions of empirical work to *AMJ* are increasing (*AMJ* submissions increased from 622 in 2006 to 1219 in 2013). *AMR* submissions, however, consistently ranged between 400 and 500 per year during this same period. In summary, our review suggests that, rather than reluctance on the part of editors to publish theoretical work, there appears to be a growing reluctance on the part of scholars to produce and submit theoretical work.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The impetus of our review was to examine the extent to which nonempirical work aimed at advancing theory, particularly work focused on strategy theory, is being published in the four management journals discussed. Our results indicate that it is, yet at the same time they confirm the concern that motivated our examination—we appear to be moving toward a future where theory is of less importance. Thus, it is worth revisiting the possible reasons for the

lack of growth in *AMR* submissions as raised by Hillman:

(1) a perception that fewer journals will publish theory articles, making writing one a riskier proposition given journal acceptance rates; (2) a perception that writing theory is “harder” than writing empirical papers; (3) explicit doctoral training in research methods and methodologies, but little to none in theory; and (4) the growing popularity of “three-paper” dissertations in lieu of one large project (2011: 606).

With regard to reason 1, indeed, most scholars likely have been cautioned that theory development in and of itself (i.e., with no supporting empirical study) is a costly, high-risk endeavor that scholars, particularly junior researchers, should avoid. This caveat is grounded in the common but, as we have demonstrated, not so supportable perception that other outlets for theoretical work are scarce, at best, if a theory manuscript is rejected from *AMR*. Indeed, as our analysis shows, three of the four journals that we reviewed regularly publish theory, including strategy theory. Therefore, any perception that work aimed at developing theory cannot be published is not founded on the evidence. However, we, like Hillman (2011), believe that this misconception is exacerbating the declining focus of attention to theoretical development in doctoral

training more generally. To be sure, given the management field's "devotion to theory" (Hambrick, 2007), Ph.D. students are wisely advised that any study targeted at being published in the prominent management journals must advance theory in some way. But the amount of resources and training devoted to theory development, per se, is lacking more often than not. Therefore, the belief that developing a theory manuscript is more difficult than developing an empirical manuscript (which also, of course, advances theory) is inevitable; it naturally becomes true. Furthermore, lack of theory training may also underlie, at least in part, the rise of the three-paper dissertation, which often does not require a theory development section.

We want to be clear that we are neither condemning empirical research/training nor suggesting that every manuscript should strictly contribute to theory. Indeed, we don't disagree with Don Hambrick's assertion that, as a field, we "should relax our requirement that facts be reported only with theories" (2007: 1349). But our read on his criticism of management research is that it was primarily aimed at the way in which empirical studies are being conducted in our field—that there currently is not enough uncovering of "interesting facts" or "identification of the phenomenon or pattern[s] that we need a theory to explain" (Hambrick, 2007: 1349)—and not aimed at reducing the production of new theory, and certainly not at our ability to produce it.

To conclude, we caution that the misconception that theory can't be published, coupled with the continued marginalization of theory development in doctoral training, may end up creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: management and organization theory won't get published for lack

of trying, or because scholars ultimately lack the competence to do so. Of course, this will only end up stifling management and organizational knowledge creation, thereby reducing the impact of our future work on managers and organizations. Thus, we emphasize that it is critically important for scholars to develop, and journal editors and reviewers to encourage and nurture, manuscripts that attempt to synthesize advances and ideas into fresh theory, produce impactful new theory, challenge current theory, initiate a search for new theory by pointing out and carefully delineating novel problems, or improve the theory development process, in and beyond the strategy area. We urge that as the field continues to grow and move forward, we remember Don Hambrick's suggestion—offered in the midst of his critique of the management field's lack of empirical inquisitiveness—that "theory is critically important for our field, and we should remain committed to it" (2007: 1351).

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