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## Contributing to theory: opportunities and challenges

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### Abstract

Scholars looking to make original theoretical contributions typically must address at least three challenges: Defining what constitutes an original theoretical contribution, positioning a paper in ongoing theoretical conversations, and critiquing prior published work. Based on experiences at the Academy of Management Review, approaches for addressing these challenges are discussed.

**Keywords** Theory development · Theoretical contributions · Positioning papers

The *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) was founded by the Academy of Management in 1975 with the mission to advance management theory. Initially, it published both literature reviews and original theory contributions. However, with the 2014 creation of the *Academy of Management Annals*—another Academy of Management Journal focused only on publishing literature reviews—AMR no longer publishes such reviews.<sup>1</sup>

Successive editors at AMR have developed a perspective about what constitutes a contribution to management theory worthy of publication in AMR, an approach to positioning these contributions in AMR articles, and a way of thinking about the debates and dialogues that these papers often generate. While in no way suggesting that original theory papers published in the *Academy of Marketing Science Review* (AMS Review) will, or ought to be, patterned after papers published in AMR, editorial experiences with these three topics at AMR may nevertheless be instructive to potential AMS Review authors.

<sup>1</sup> The Academy of Management also publishes two journals that focus on empirical papers—the *Academy of Management Journal* and the *Academy of Management Discoveries*—and one journal that focuses on academic essays—the *Academy of Management Perspectives*. Editorial statements for each of the Academy of Management journals can be found on the Academy of Management website.

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### What constitutes a theoretical contribution?<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Kuhn's (1962) influential analysis of the evolution of scientific disciplines distinguishes between normal science—designed to examine the empirical implications of received theoretical paradigms—and revolutionary science—designed to develop and test new theoretical paradigms. While originally developed to describe the evolution of science, generally, the distinction between normal and revolutionary science can also be applied to the evolution of purely theoretical contributions to a research discipline, including the field of management theory and, perhaps, marketing theory.

On the one hand, some of this theoretical work is designed to extend received theory in new and creative directions—what Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) call “gap spotting” theory. This work takes its assumptions and basic logic from prior theory and explores how these can be applied in new ways, to new phenomena, or to new questions. While this work can be described as “normal science,” in that it takes the received view as largely given, this does not imply that it is uninteresting, not creative, or not important. Indeed, Kuhn (1962) would argue that most science is of this normal variety, and is extremely important to the evolution of a field of work.

However, as will be discussed later, that a theory has not been extended in a particular way—that is, there is a gap in this theory—does not, by itself constitute a reason to extend this theory. There are literally thousands and thousands of unstudied theory gaps. However, most of these are not studied because they are not interesting—they do not develop new insights about a theory or a phenomena. In this sense, normal

<sup>2</sup> Parts of this section were originally published in Barney (2018a).

science theorizing cannot be understood as just “filling a gap,” but rather, as “filling an important gap.”

On the other hand, other work is designed to develop new theory that explicitly rejects the assumptions and logic of prior work, and replaces these with different assumptions and a new logic—what Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) call “problematization theory.” This new theory may address old questions in new ways. More fundamentally, it often identifies new questions and explains why they are important. Kuhn would probably describe this kind of theory work as “revolutionary science.” While it is relatively rare—compared to normal science—it too can have an important impact on the evolution of a field.<sup>3</sup>

*AMR* seeks to publish both kinds of papers in the field of management. *AMR* is interested in papers that significantly extend received theory in new and creative ways. It is also interested in papers that create altogether new theory and apply that theory to understand previously under-examined questions. However, the goal of publishing both “normal” and “revolutionary” theory papers creates a challenge for the editorial process. In particular, the best examples of each of these kinds of papers will typically be very different from each other, and thus difficult to edit within a single process.

For example, where “normal science” theory papers adopt their major assumptions from prior theory, “revolutionary science” theory papers explicitly reject those assumptions. Where “normal science” papers adopt the logical structure of prior theory, “revolutionary science” papers look to replace that logic. And where “normal science” papers attempt to thoroughly explore the theoretical and empirical implications of applying received theory in new ways, “revolutionary science” papers often ask more questions than they answer, and ask new questions that have been largely ignored.

If reviewers are expecting to read a “revolutionary science” paper, and instead read a “normal science” paper, they will often be disappointed—even though the “normal science” paper in question is of very high quality. If, on the other hand, reviewers are expecting to read a “normal science” paper and, instead, read a “revolutionary science” paper, they can sometimes be confused and even enraged—even if the “revolutionary science” paper in question is of very high quality. In both cases, reviewers could end up recommending the rejection of what is, in fact, a high-quality paper.

As the *AMS Review* evolves as a journal, the relative importance of “normal” and “revolutionary” theory papers will likely need to be examined, along with editorial processes that address the tensions that are likely to exist in a journal that encourages

the submission of both types of papers. One approach to addressing these tensions is described in Barney (2018a).

Of course, extending existing theory and creating new theory can happen in many ways, through the application of many different theory building tools. Work in management theory has progressed through the application of verbal theory, formal models, and simulations—and *AMR* is open to all these approaches, as long as they are accessible to a broad scholarly audience, and as long as they meet the fundamental criteria for contributions to theory: Does a paper significantly extend received theory or build new theory? Specific criteria that can be used to evaluate whether or not a paper with formal models and/or simulations is likely to be seen as accessible to a broad scholarly audience are discussed on the *AMR* website.

### Positioning theories for publication<sup>4</sup>

There is continuing interest in how to write and publish papers in top journals (Wright et al. 2020). Some authors have focused on how the content of papers affects their publication (Corley and Gioia 2011)—are they creative (Weick 1989) and interesting (Davis 1971), with well-defined constructs (Suddaby 2010), clear boundary conditions (Busse et al. 2017), and provocative implications (Whetten 1989)? Others have focused on how theories and results are presented in a paper—is the paper written clearly (Ragins 2012), is its macrostructure logical (Fulmer 2012), and is its style consistent with a particular journal (Fulmer 2012)? Finally, yet other authors (Smith and Hitt 2005) have focused on the processes that scholars have used to develop influential bodies of work. Taken as a whole, this work—whether focused on content, presentation, or process—has generated important insights into writing and publishing papers in top journals.

However, many of these insights remain somewhat abstract and difficult to implement. It is clear that a paper must be creative and interesting, but it is less clear how to develop such papers. A paper must also be written in a clear and understandable way, but so often what is clear and understandable to an author may turn out to be opaque and incomprehensible to at least some readers. And while some commonalities in the process of developing influential bodies of work have been identified (Hitt and Smith 2005), there are almost as many ways to develop this kind of work as there are examples of it—results that provide young scholars little guidance in identifying processes likely to work for them. Thus, while informative about publishing papers, in principle, much of this prior work remains difficult to apply when writing actual papers.

This section presents one approach to writing one part of a paper—the introduction—that is somewhat less abstract and,

<sup>3</sup> How the “problematization” process has unfolded, and is continuing to unfold, in the field of strategic management is discussed by Mahoney and Qian (2013). A survey reported in Bartunek et al. (2006) identifies 17 articles that were nominated as “interesting” by two or more AMJ review board members in a survey conducted in the fall of 2004. These 17 articles may be examples of “revolutionary science.”

<sup>4</sup> Parts of this section were published in Barney (2018b) and Barney (2020a).

thus, more applicable than prior work. This approach is not an algorithm for writing an introduction; its application still takes creativity, a commitment to clarity, and enormous work. Nevertheless, its application can help authors accomplish one of the most important tasks in writing a publishable paper: positioning a paper in a way that makes its contribution to theory clear to readers (Huff 1999).

### First sentence: Introducing the paper to the reader

Whether a paper is designed to significantly extend a received theory or to develop a new theory (Barney 2018a), the ideas developed in it are part of an ongoing conversation in the literature (Huff 1999). Before attempting to make a contribution to that conversation, an author must make it clear to the reader what conversation their paper proposes to join. Thus, the first sentence of the paper must tell the reader the broad conversation it proposes to join.

Of course, choosing the conversation a paper wants to join is often not straightforward. And yet its consequences can be profound—especially in terms of the reviewers that are chosen for a paper. For example, in the field of strategic management, a paper that seeks to join the “strategic alliances” conversation is likely to get different reviewers than a paper that seeks to join the “governance choice” conversation, which is likely to get different reviewers than a paper that seeks to join the “theory of the firm” conversation—even though all three conversations are closely linked and build on similar theoretical concepts. Thus, writing the first sentence of a paper is also about choosing the kinds of scholars that will review the paper.

Given its importance, it is not unusual for authors to write several different “first sentences,” examining the implications of how joining different conversations in the literature affect the evolution of the rest of the introduction, as well as the rest of the paper. Stephen King, the noted novelist, recognized the importance of this kind of experimentation in beginning his books:

When I'm starting a book, I compose in bed before I go to sleep. I will lie there in the dark and think. I'll try to write a paragraph. An opening paragraph. And over a period of weeks and months and even years, I'll word it and reword it until I'm happy with what I've got. If I can get the first paragraph right, I'll know I can do the book. Because of this, I think, my first sentences stick with me. They were a doorway I went through [to write a novel].<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07-why-stephen-king-spends-months-or-even-years-writing-opening-sentences/278043/](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07-why-stephen-king-spends-months-or-even-years-writing-opening-sentences/278043/) accessed March 19, 2019.

### The rest of the first paragraph

After making it clear what conversation their paper proposes to join, authors must convince the reader—especially a reader with expertise in this conversation—that they have been paying attention to this conversation's main findings and conclusions. This does not require a literature review. Rather, it requires two or three sentences that summarize a conversation's main research traditions, along with the most important results associated with those traditions.

Armed with a computer and a reasonable bibliographic database, almost anyone can generate a long list of papers that address a particular research topic. This is different from knowing the literature well enough to distill its essential features into two or three sentences in the first paragraph of the introduction. This distillation will typically be enough to make it clear what at least one unresolved theoretical issue in the literature is, why this issue is important, and how this paper is going to resolve it—elements of the introduction discussed below.

### First word, second paragraph

The purpose of the second paragraph in the introduction is to identify an unresolved theoretical issue in the received literature and then to demonstrate why this unresolved issue is important. This purpose is signaled by the first word in the second paragraph. Often, the word “However” is sufficient.

### The rest of the second paragraph

While not denying the importance of the work cited in the first paragraph, the second paragraph must establish a legitimate theoretical reason for writing a new paper. Usually, that reason is to resolve a theoretical issue that has not been resolved in the received literature. Thus, the rest of the second paragraph must first identify this issue and then explain why it is important.

There are a variety of reasons why addressing a previously unresolved theoretical issue may be important. For example, sometimes important empirical implications of a theory may have not yet been articulated. Other times the implications of a theory's boundary conditions may not have been fully identified, nor how relaxing some of its underlying assumptions may fundamentally change the implications of a theory. Also, the implications of one theory for another theory (or theories) may have not yet been discussed in the literature. All these, and many others, are reasons why a particular unresolved theoretical or empirical issue needs to be resolved (Davis 1971).

One unacceptable reason why a theoretical issue is important is simply that it has not been addressed in previous literature. This is the problematic “gap spotting” mentioned

earlier. This second paragraph must explain why, from among all the possible gaps in a particular theoretical conversation, a particular unresolved theoretical issue is especially important.

### First sentence, third paragraph

The first sentence of the third paragraph starts with, “The purpose of this paper is...” This is where authors present the central research question their paper seeks to answer. This is done without subtlety, using a simple, short, declarative sentence that tells the reader what question the paper is going to answer. Of course, the answer to this question—to be developed in the paper—must resolve the important theoretical issue identified in the second paragraph.

Some authors may find it difficult to summarize their research question in a single, simple, declarative sentence. Usually, this is because these authors do not fully understand what their research question is. Other authors may find it difficult to identify just one research question in their paper.<sup>6</sup> This is usually because they are not clear about the specific theoretical issue they are trying to resolve. In general, papers that are about two or more research questions are usually about no research questions.<sup>7</sup> Finally, some authors believe that they cannot introduce a research question until after an exhaustive literature review.<sup>8</sup> This is usually because these authors are not sufficiently familiar with a body of literature to identify its central elements in two or three sentences in the first paragraph.

### The rest of the third paragraph

The rest of the third paragraph provides a preview of how the paper answers its research question and some of the critical implications of this answer. It is important that this preview not attempt to summarize, in detail, the paper's entire theoretical or empirical argument. If this argument could be summarized in a single paragraph, it probably is not much of an argument.

Rather, the preview in the third paragraph begins by simply stating the answer to the paper's research question—for example, “The purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of X for Y. It concludes that X has an important impact on Y.” The rest of the third paragraph highlights a small

<sup>6</sup> That a paper should have only one main research question does not mean that a paper can have only one research proposition. It does mean that the multiple propositions in a paper must all speak to multiple dimensions of a single research question. Also, a single research question may have multiple parts that must be addressed if the implications of answering that question are to be fully resolved.

<sup>7</sup> Sometimes it is possible to introduce a second or even third research question in the discussion section of the paper. However, typically, the main purpose of including these research questions in the discussion is to call for additional research.

<sup>8</sup> “Exhaustive” can also be read as “exhausting.”

number of important implications of the answer to this research question. These implications further help clarify the importance of a paper's theoretical or empirical argument.

At this point in the introduction, many authors feel compelled to use several paragraphs to explain their paper's numerous contributions. In general, if the introduction is written correctly, the central contribution of the paper—that it resolves an important theoretical issue—will be obvious. Listing several other contributions—to other research questions, to practice, to teaching—simply draws attention away from a paper's central contribution which will be self-evident if the introduction is written correctly.

Of course, a paper may have other implications. It is acceptable to mention—typically in a series of short sentences—these other implications in the third paragraph of the introduction. However, these implications will typically not be explored in a paper's introduction, but in the paper's discussion section.

### The length of an introduction

In well-written papers the full introduction is approximately 1.5 manuscript pages.<sup>9</sup> This length reflects both style and practical considerations.

From the perspective of style, shorter is almost always better than longer. Constraining oneself to 1.5 manuscript pages will almost always generate clearer and more precise writing than writing introductions that go on for two or three manuscript pages. Indeed, in writing papers, authors should generally write a first draft, cut it by 20%, and then cut it by 20% again. The results of this draconian editing are almost always positive. Always keep in mind the quote attributed to French Philosopher Blaise Pascal in 1657: “If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.”

Practically speaking, authors only have a page or a page and a half to convince readers that their paper is worth the time and effort to read in detail. Readers have little patience with papers that force them to wade through page after page of prose, only to find the paper's research question on page seven—if at all. In these settings it would not be surprising for readers to ask themselves, “Why am I doing all the work to try to understand what this paper is about? Wasn't it the author's responsibility to explain the importance of this paper to me?”

### Common mistakes in writing an introduction

Over decades of reviewing papers and editing journals, I have developed a taxonomy of common mistakes authors make in writing introductions. This taxonomy is discussed here. I do not claim that this taxonomy is complete—I am constantly

<sup>9</sup> There should be no cheating—no micro-fonts and no quarter-inch margins.

surprised by the new ways that authors can write bad introductions. However, this taxonomy does include many of the most common mistakes made in writing introductions—mistakes that reduce the probability that a paper will ultimately get published.

**First paragraph literature reviews** One of these most common mistakes in writing introductions is trying to put an entire literature review in the first paragraph of the introduction. Recall that the purposes of the first paragraph are, first, to let the reader know (in the first sentence) what conversation a paper is joining, and second, to show those that have been part of this conversation that the authors have been listening. The point here is not to demonstrate that the authors have read every important paper that has ever contributed to this conversation—although this should have occurred—by citing and summarizing the findings of all these papers. Rather, the point in the first paragraph is to abstract above these numerous papers to describe the important elements of the broader conversation.

Practically speaking, putting the entire literature review in the first paragraph almost guarantees that an introduction will be longer than 1.5 pages. It also will be completely redundant of the actual literature review later in the paper.

**Second paragraph summaries of theoretical arguments** A second common error in writing introductions is to try to summarize the entire theoretical arguments in the second paragraph. Recall, the purpose of the second paragraph is to identify an unresolved theoretical issue in the received literature and explain why it is important. Readers need to understand what this issue is and why it is important before they are willing to spend the time needed to understand a paper's entire theoretical arguments. Explaining how you resolve an issue in the literature before explaining what it is and why it is important is putting the “cart before the horse.”

There are two clear indicators that a paper is prematurely summarizing its theoretical arguments in the second paragraph. First, this paragraph will get very long, often well over a page—an innovative style of prose for William Faulkner, but not acceptable in an academic publication. Second, most of the content of this paragraph will be repeated in the actual theory development section of the paper.

**Third paragraph summaries of theoretical arguments** The third error is related to the second—trying to summarize the entire theoretical or empirical arguments of the paper in the third paragraph. Authors often “fall in love” with their theoretical or empirical analyses, and can't wait to share the details of their complex and subtle reasoning with readers. However, by the third paragraph, readers are still deciding whether or not they are going to continue reading the paper. What they are looking for is a reason to do so—or not. Detailed

argumentation, whether it is conceptual or empirical, does not draw readers into the paper as effectively as a higher level, and short, statement of the research question, the paper's answer to that question, and a brief discussion of how the paper's conclusions changes the received literature. At the end of the third paragraph, readers should want to read more, to work through the details of a paper's theoretical arguments.

### **Disconnecting radical new theories from prior conversations**

Sometimes, as part of an effort to present a revolutionary theoretical idea, authors start by dismissing the received view as irredeemably misguided, and offer a new set of concepts, assumptions, and propositions that—they assert—will change the way we all think about the research area in question.

Rarely are these papers convincing.

The problem with these papers is not their new, revolutionary arguments—some of these arguments may be logical, well-articulated, and may have the potential to generate important new insights. The problem with these papers is that they often fail to position their revolutionary new ideas vis a vis the received literature. Until a reader understands the weaknesses of a received approach to theorizing and what the theoretical, empirical, and policy implications of those weaknesses are—at least from the point of view of a revolutionary critique—it is difficult to evaluate the advantages (and disadvantages) of a revolutionary new approach. Without this theoretical context, these papers fail to explain why their theoretical arguments are important and instead devolve into “denunciations” of the received view and “pronouncements” about the new approach.

Thus, while at first glance it may appear that the “three paragraph model” of writing introductions presented here is designed mostly for “normal science” theoretical contributions to established research conversations, the same model can be applied to writing papers that call for revolutionary changes in current research. If, for example, a paper briefly summarizes the received literature (in paragraph one), identifies one or two critical weaknesses of this literature, and why these weaknesses are important (in paragraph two), and then identifies the research question of trying to understand the implications of addressing these weaknesses (in paragraph three), it is set up to introduce a revolutionary new approach to theorizing. But this new approach does not dismiss the prior literature; it shows how addressing limitations of the prior literature opens a new way of thinking about a class of research questions.

### **Introductions longer than one and one-half pages**

Over the years, I have heard many authors complain about the one and one-half page requirement for “good introductions.” And clearly, there are probably—a few—examples of excellent introductions that go beyond this limit.

But the page and one half is more than just an arbitrary constraint. It represents an intellectual discipline—a discipline that forces authors to be very clear about the main findings in a literature (paragraph one), important limitations of that literature (paragraph two), and how they intend to address these limitations through answering their research question (paragraph three). If there is no way to accomplish these tasks in one and a half pages, try again. If absolutely necessary, take two pages, or maybe even four paragraphs. But don't put the research question on page seven and expect anyone to read the paper.

## Debates and DIALOGUES<sup>10</sup>

Interesting theory contributions often generate debates and dialogues. Indeed, it could be argued that one indicator of an important theory paper is that it has generated such debates and dialogues. However, not all such responses to a paper actually make a contribution to the literature.

For example, manuscripts that are *only* critical of accepted papers are usually less attractive than manuscripts that criticize a paper and then show the implications of these criticisms for how the theory presented in the original paper could be developed. Thus, the best dialogue and debate papers do not just criticize, they also contribute to theory.

The theoretical impact of criticizing a published paper can be demonstrated in at least three ways: (1) by showing how addressing issues identified in a paper can extend and broaden the implications of that paper, (2) by showing how addressing issues identified in a paper invalidate the major implications of that paper, and (3) by showing the inherent limitations of the line of reasoning adopted in a paper. The first type of criticism suggests that a paper is not as impactful as it could have been; the second, that a paper is, in some sense, incorrect; and the third, that the approach in a paper has reached a logical dead end.

While these kinds of comments on papers are generally useful, there are other types of criticism that are less useful. For example, sometimes papers are criticized for not incorporating all the theoretical variables that might be important in explaining a particular phenomenon—the theoretical equivalent of criticizing an empirical paper for not including all the relevant explanatory variables in a regression. However, since all papers—theoretical or empirical—are by necessity incomplete, noting this incompleteness—by itself—does not constitute a theoretical contribution. Rather, the critical omitted concepts in a theoretical (and empirical) paper are those that affect the relationship between the included concepts and the dependent variable in the paper. Identifying these omitted concepts, and their inter-relationships with included concepts, and the

dependent variable in a paper, is likely to generate one or both of the first two attributes of an attractive commentary mentioned previously.

In addition, papers that criticize a theory for incorporating unrealistic assumptions are generally not that interesting because all theoretical assumptions are, to some extent, unrealistic. Indeed, the point of these assumptions is to identify certain aspects of reality that are thought to be more important so that the complexity of reality can be ignored. In this sense, theoretical assumptions should be evaluated, not on the basis of how realistic they are, but on the basis of the insights they generate—what philosophers call their theoretical fruitfulness.

This instrumental view of assumptions does not suggest that a paper's underlying assumptions are not subject to criticism. Indeed, some of the best critiques focus on the limitations in papers created by adopting a particular set of assumptions. To make a contribution, these critiques often suggest a different set of assumptions, and explore the theoretical implications of these new assumptions.

However, while these new assumptions may differ in critical ways from the original paper, they always have one thing in common: They are unrealistic, in the sense that they also focus on some aspects of reality and ignore others.

Similar comments can be made about papers that criticize the definitions used in a published paper. Definitions are—by construction—neither true nor false; they are fruitful or unfruitful. It is legitimate to criticize a paper for adopting unfruitful definitions, but not for adopting incorrect definitions.

Finally, while fostering debate requires disagreement, it does not imply disrespect. Indeed, good debate requires just the opposite—for debate to unfold, disagreeing parties must respect each other enough to create logical arguments explaining why the other person is wrong. Any manuscripts that are disrespectful of the authors or the ideas of an accepted paper should not be published. While identifying disrespect will always involve editorial judgement, at its core, critiques are disrespectful to the extent that they fail to take the logic and conclusions of a published paper seriously and, instead, dismiss this logic and its conclusions on any but rigorous logical, theoretical, or scientific grounds.

## Conclusion

Without assuming that *AMS Review's* experience will be, or should be, similar to *AMR's* experiences publishing theory work, this essay has identified three issues that would-be theorists—and their journals—will likely need to address: what constitutes a theoretical contribution? what is an appropriate critique of a published paper? and how to position a paper for publication. As the *AMS Review* evolves as a scholarly outlet, it will be interesting to see how it develops its own unique approaches to these issues.

<sup>10</sup> Parts of this section are published in Barney (2020b).



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