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# Book Review

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Ken G. Smith and Michael A. Hitt (Eds.) 2005  
*Great Minds in Management:  
The Process of Theory Development*,  
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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## REFLECTIONS ON THEORIZING

“Great Minds” tend to fascinate us. We wonder how they get their sparks, and how they manage to kindle and sustain the great fires that illuminate the nether regions of human inquiry. By bringing together some of the most influential management thinkers today, to reflect upon what they do, the editors seek to give us a glimpse of how researchers accomplish the mysterious act of theory creation.

The book is organized into three divisions. The first deals with “individuals and their environment” featuring theories such as upper echelons theory (Hambrick), psychological contract theory (Rousseau), and expectancy theory (Vroom). Examples from the second part on “behavior of organizations” include Weick’s theory on sensemaking, Nonaka’s theory of knowledge creation, Argyris’ work on learning, etc. The third section deals with “environmental contingencies and organizations”. This part features the work of Williamson (transaction cost economics), Winter (evolutionary theory), Pfeffer (resource dependence theory) and others.

Thus, what the book delivers is two-fold. First, it provides the reader with a vista of the current management landscape featuring some of the prominent theories that have evolved in the field. Secondly it provides insights into the process of theory development through original accounts by theory developers. On both scores the book is valuable.

Reflecting upon theory development has not been easy for many researchers. Henry Mintzberg (p. 355) quotes the following poem to illustrate this.

The centipede was happy quite

Until a toad in fun

Said, “Pray, which leg goes after which?”

That worked her mind to such a pitch,

She lay distracted in a ditch

Considering how to run.

(Mrs. Edward Craster, 1871)

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Contributors:

Chris Argyris, Albert Bandura, Jay B. Barney, Lee R. Beach, Kim Cameron, Michael R. Darby, Robert Folger, R. Edward Freeman, Michael Frese, J. Richard Hackman, Donald C. Hambrick, Michael A. Hitt, Anne S. Huff, Gary P. Latham, Edwin A. Locke, Henry Mintzberg, Terrence R. Mitchell, Richard T. Mowday, Ikujiro Nonaka, Greg R. Oldham, Jeffrey Pfeffer, Lyman W. Porter, Denise M. Rousseau, W. Richard Scott, Ken G. Smith, Barry M. Staw, Richard M. Steers, Victor H. Vroom, Karl E. Weick, Oliver E. Williamson, Sidney G. Winter, and Lynn Zucker

But even if the threat of “dysfunctionality” looms, researchers, by the very nature of what they do, are constantly called to examine their work closely, question their assumptions and the manner in which they proceed at theory creation. One is thus justified in looking at theory development also as a process of personal development. As Jay Barney observes: «It has been said that all writing is autobiographical. If true, then one’s research—because it is such an intense and focused form of writing—must be a particularly intimate form of autobiography. In this sense, all scholarship is self-revelatory.» (p. 280).

It is perhaps not surprising that the contributors to this volume feature a wide range of theory building images. For example, while Barney considers direct managerial implications of theories as a «happy accident» (p. 299), Donald C. Hambrick emphatically states that theories «don’t come from scholars struggling to find holes in the literature. (...) It is far better to start with a real-life, interesting puzzle; then develop a preliminary set of ideas for solving the puzzle; and *then* turn to the literature for guidance and insight.» (p. 124). Another image of theory building is highlighted by Oldham and Hackman when they say that theories do not emerge «all at once in a flash of insight [but as] an endless iterative process, moving back and forth between choice of variables and specification of the links among them, hoping that eventually the small, grudgingly achieved advances will outnumber the forced retreats.» (p. 161). On the other hand, Anne S. Huff emphasizes that «theorizing that can quickly change focus and direction» (p. 346) is more in tune with our times.

It is however, not difficult to pick out strands of common themes that run through these reflections. One of these prominent strands is exemplified by the call of Edwin Locke and Gary Latham—the proponents of goal-setting theory—for more inductive theorizing: «Our advice for scholars who want to build a theory: Do it inductively and be prepared to spend years doing it. We also believe that both the history of science and our own success has implications for the *Academy of Management Review*. We encourage the editorial staff to discourage hypothetico-deductive theorizing and to promote more inductive theorizing.» (p.147).

Henry Mintzberg observes that the checks and balances involved in theory development and testing can impede the process. He says that this is the reason «why we see so little induction in our field, the creation of so little interesting theory.» (p. 358).

There are also calls «to approach research questions with as much methodological flexibility as possible.» (Staw, p. 234). Vroom observes, «I no longer seek one lens or theory that will explain or unify it all. Pluralism and the interplay of conflicting modes of sense-making have replaced my need for order and convention.» (p. 256). Methodological rigidity and over-reliance on techniques and tools are cited as common factors that block creative theory development. In the words of Mintzberg: «We are altogether too hung up on fancy methods in our field, and in much of the social sciences in general. All too often they lead to banal results, significant only in the statistical sense of the word. Elegant means often get in the way of elegant ends. People

intent on being correct often go astray. What, for example, is the problem with a sample of one, at least for induction? Piaget studied his own children; a physicist once split a single atom. Who cares, if the results are insightful.» (p. 366).

Such assertions are encouraging for researchers who want to break new ground in the way research is done. On similar lines, Victor Vroom, reflecting back on the evolution of expectancy theory admits that he was «probably unduly influenced by the mathematical zeitgeist at Penn at the time.» He says that: «if I were to revise to today (...) I would certainly eliminate the mathematization and formalization of the theory.» (p. 254).

Another common experience is the resistance that creative theory builders almost always face from those who hold on to status quo. We get glimpses of the travails involved in getting a theory up and running. This included submissions to publications, responding to the reviewers' comments and the modifications that were sometimes done with much reluctance. Michael Frese says that academic success is not immediate for most theory builders: «As a matter of fact, it is my observation that some of the empirical articles that I am most proud of (probably because they are dearest to my theoretical approach), have been the most difficult to publish. My hunch is that they break with the typical approach to doing things and, therefore, invite criticism that reviewers are only too glad to provide.» (p. 105).

The theorists sometimes devised creative ways of getting around these hurdles. For example, Beach and Mitchell found that «American journal reviewers seemed particularly reluctant to publish our work, even the empirical studies. (...) To get the word out, we decided to put our ideas, and our research, in a book, but no American publisher was interested.» (p. 43). Fortunately, they found reviewers and publishers in Europe more receptive. Their book was published by Britain's Wiley Ltd.

It is therefore apt that the editors tout passion, persistence, discipline and possession of big ideas as characteristics of an effective researcher. The experiences of the authors suggest that one needs these qualities in ample measure.

In the epilogue of the volume, the editors attempt to synthesize the experiences of the authors and propose a set of stages involved in theory development. The first stage is characterized by the tension that researchers sense between their viewpoints and the nature of the world (as in the assumptions involved in existing theories or in observations of actual managerial situations). «Good research questions often start with wonderment and surprise», says Frese (p. 103). The second stage is the search for potential answers. The theorists' career paths and collegial relationships were major influences in this stage. The third stage involves the process of elaboration. The editors sense two types of elaborations; one oriented towards measurement through the use of quantitative techniques, the other oriented towards description and the use of qualitative methods. The fourth stage is that of proclamation and presentation. Normally this occurs as a series of incremental articles first and later summarized as book.

The editors affirm that the book resulted from their belief that «the best way to learn how to develop theory is by studying the masters who have developed important management theories.» (p. 572). What probably could have also been stressed a little more is the social, community oriented aspects of theorizing –evidence to which is abundant in the volume. It is often difficult to capture the story of theory development as the single narrative of its principal proponents. Individual efforts are better understood in the context of wider social, collective influences. From this perspective, the image of the “lonely researcher” is inaccurate.

This attention to personal credit can sometimes be hazardous. As Weick notes: «no one theorist can have it all, “all” being an explanation that is general, accurate, and simple. (...) [W]hat is impossible for one theorist is often possible for a collection of theorists. A set of people, each with a different pattern of tradeoffs, can spread the weaknesses among them and collectively triangulate a set of ideas that survives as a robust general, simple, accurate account.» (p. 399).

Researchers like Oldham and Hackman seem to have succeeded in passing on the baton effectively: «It has been three decades since we published our first paper on Job Characteristics Theory, and nearly every week we still receive letters, phone calls, and e-mails asking about the latest research on the model, requesting reprints that are no longer available, and seeking permission and technical advice about the use of the Job Diagnostic Survey. It is a bit awkward to have to acknowledge that we really do not know much about what is going on with the theory these days.» (p. 168).

Robert Folger proposes an interesting metaphor to show how theorizing is essentially a social enterprise. «Like the realtor’s “location, location, location” mantra, surely “colleagues, colleagues, colleagues” is key to research and theory building.» (p. 55). Forgetting this, and viewing oneself as the custodian of one’s theory can be perilous for researchers. Edwin Locke recalls how on one occasion «Herzberg reacted angrily to what seemed to be valid criticisms of his theory and/or method.» This tendency of «defending one’s position in defiance of the facts» (p. 132) is not uncommon in research practice.

The social forces that drive a theory are far too influential to be ignored. Theory building efforts in management and allied fields draw from varied traditions of inquiry and are often intentionally located within particular research programmes. Thus, the impact and survival of a theory are not determined solely by its ability to explain and predict phenomena. Jeffrey Pfeffer observes: «the philosophy of science notwithstanding, theories are quite capable of surviving disconfirming evidence. Behavioral decision theory and its numerous empirical tests have shown that many of the most fundamental axioms of choice and decision that underlie economics are demonstrably false (...), but economics is scarcely withering away. Nor are the specific portions of economic theory predicated on assumptions that have been shown to be false necessarily any less believed or used. A similar situation is true in finance, where assumptions of capital market efficiency and the instantaneous diffusion of relevant information, so that a security’s

market price presumably incorporates all relevant information available at the time, have withstood numerous empirical and theoretical attacks. To take a case closer to organization studies, the reliance on and belief in the efficacy of extrinsic incentives and monetary rewards persists not only in the lay community but in the scholarly literature as well.» (p. 453-454).

The social aspect of the enterprise of research is also illustrated by this very project that has brought together the “great minds” in a joint effort of reflection. This was probably not possible without their erstwhile positions at the interlinking hub of communities of researchers (as former editors of two prominent journals, *Academy of Management Review* and *Academy of Management Journal*).

Thus, it is not incidental that almost all the authors in this volume have their academic roots in the U.S. All except Michael Frese earned their PhDs in the U.S. All except Michael Frese, Anne S. Huff, and Ikujiro Nonaka are currently associated with North American universities. Given the value of the book, I sincerely hope that we would see similar efforts in the future, especially from outside North America.

I would recommend the book to anyone who is interested in theory building, especially to those who are keen to probe how it is accomplished in an interdisciplinary, applied field such as management. I anticipate that rather than seasoned researchers, those starting out on the long, winding road of theory development would particularly benefit from this effort.