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Should the Criteria for Evaluating an Organizational Theoretical Contribution be Universal, Distant from Cultural and Contextual Factors?

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the criteria used for evaluating theoretical contributions and whether these are universally applicable. Questions are raised regarding the impact of cultural and contextual variables in perceiving the value of a theoretical contribution especially in the field of organizational theory.

Keywords: falsifiability, generalisability, empiricism, transformation, connectivity

Introduction

Theorists, scholars and researchers are inevitably hoping to get their papers published in prestigious academic journals. Naturally, the criteria used by the editors indirectly affect the interests and the degree of motivation of academics towards certain topics, research designs and their degree of empirical orientation. Sometimes it happens that a very good article having perfect theory, austere fitting to the data is rejected by the editors because it goes in opposition to their conception (Sutton & Staw, 1995).

Defining a theory is not an easy task. More consensus was reached about what theory is not rather than what theory is. Various attempts at defining theory include notions such as falsifiability, the possibility of an empirical refutation and generalisability.

Several scholars are adopting post-modern ideas that are even sceptical of the importance of theories in practical fields. According to Shoter and Tsoukas (2011) representationalist view is theoretically impractical in applied sciences like Organization and Management Theory (OMT). It does not have the power to show the dependence of theory on life-world dynamics within which it has its 'currency'.

The main idea of this research paper is to draw attention to the importance of the cultural and contextual dimensions when judging the quality of a theoretical contribution. In spite of the "generalisability" of a theory, empirical studies are not conducted universally and thus judging their im-

portance should not ignore their surrounding circumstances and whether or not they are pioneers in the field or in a particular area of the world. The importance of novelty and the trade off with continuity were discussed by several authors such as McKinley et al. (1999) and were previously introduced as "Transformation" and "Connectivity" by Bacharach (1989).

2. Literature Review

Sutton and Staw's "What theory is not?" followed by De Maggio's comments and Weick's "What theory is not ... Theorizing is" revived the whole process of defining what a good theory is, what constitutes a theoretical contribution, the criteria for judging the quality of a theory. The series of articles simply enriched the debate that started by attempting to define what theory is by pin pointing what it is not leading to Weick's emphasis on Theorizing as an ongoing process and not a mere statement describing a phenomenon.

Sutton and Staw criticized the increased focus on empiricism. When theories are particularly interesting or important, there should be greater leeway in terms of empirical support. A small set of interviews, a demonstration experiment, a pilot survey, a bit of archival data may be all that is needed to show why a particular process might be true. Subsequent research will of course be necessary to sort out whether the theoretical statements hold up under scrutiny, or whether they will join the long list of theo-

ries that only deserve to be true. (Sutton & Staw, 1995).

Bacharach simply says that parsimoniously organizing and clearly communicating are the basis for theoretical statements. The article also sheds all the light on the theories' testability. It cannot be a theory until and unless it is not testable. (Bacharach, 1989).

Empirical orientation was also tackled by Weick (1995) presenting the theory's trade off between plausibility and accuracy raising the question if perhaps the degree of required accuracy is somewhat relaxed for sake of high plausibility.

The practical implications of a theory are not to be disregarded. Journals such as the infamous Harvard Business Review have an orientation towards "practical management". Specialized papers are suitable for discipline-based journal otherwise they should be linked to mainstay management concepts. (Whetten, 1989).

As previously mentioned the criteria used by top journals in their publishing choices somewhat create a trend. Scientific progress suggests unsolved problems that are left unexplained by existing theories. In contrast, we argue that scientists, to some extent, create and follow fashions. (Bort & Kieser, 2011).

Whetten's article "What constitutes a theoretical contribution?" introduced 7 questions that determine a publishable paper (What's new? So what? Why so? Well done? Done well? Who cares? Why now?) a simplified but enriching framework that helps evaluate a theoretical contribution (Whetten, 1989). Decades later Academy of Management Review published "Building Theory about Theory Building: What Constitutes a Theoretical Contribution?" Corley and Gioia (2011) attempted to distill the contribution theory prose into two scopes, originality/incremental/revelatory) and utility/scientific/practical. The article emphasizes that journal editors have to open to literature that has novelty and innovation and

support the same parameters for other authors and reviewers. Writers will then be compensated for designing rationally functional academic input to catch with the changing demands of journals. The notions of originality and scope were embedded in the literature via various academics and scholars. Corley and Gioia's addition was their urge to highlight the importance of bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Our performance will be lowered in society and our influence for organizational growth and management will be diminished, if authors won't change scholarly traditions in ways that enhance their theoretical relevance to training (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

3. New Perspective

Over viewing the literature of theory evaluation it is evident that a degree of subjectivity is inevitable. Editors do have a pre-existing cognitive schema and regardless of the widely agreed upon criteria, personal and cultural perspectives do interfere in the evaluation process.

However, this paper does not aim to discuss the subjectivity of the evaluation process. The aim is to question whether all theoretical contributions or even research papers, with an empirical orientation, presented from theorists, scholars or academics from all around the world should be evaluated in the same way without regards to cultural and contextual factors.

4. Taboos

Hofstede presented the Hofstede model having six dimensions of national cultures: Power distance, Uncertainty avoidance, Individualism/collectivism, Masculinity/femininity, Long/short term orientation and Indulgence/restraint. After various applications of the model in different countries, it was apparent that some of the proposed dimensions were considered as "taboos" in certain countries (Hofstede, 2011).

The Masculinity/femininity dimension would be considered as a taboo in more con-

servative cultures such as Saudi Arabia as compared to Sweden or Netherlands and the ease of researching the issue is incomparable. Our concern is the scholars who go the extra mile to break the taboo and research “difficult” topics in particular cultures, should their contribution be given credit for their efforts?

4.1. Proposition (1)

Contributions that break taboos and probe difficult research areas in their cultures ought to receive extra merit in the evaluation process yet given the quality of the proposed contribution and its accuracy

4.1.1. Novelty. The concept of Novelty/transformation was discussed intensively by several academics. But logically what may be new in a certain nation could be common knowledge in other nations, unless it is a revolutionary idea that was never presented in the past.

Social sciences in their pre paradigm state as some scholars call them may experience paradigm shifts but a “revolutionary” shift is quite unlikely compared to natural sciences. The notion of Novelty is thus quite relative and naturally differs from one place to another.

Studies of gender, racial and religious equality in organizations, in certain nations, may seem of mediocre value given the fact that they are regulated by law and have been studied extensively in the past. However, in some cultures a diverse work force is even a new concept let alone equality among them.

UK had work-life balance in late 1970s. It creates a balance between work life and personal verve of people. In Africa and Arabia the term is still new accompanying the increasing number of multinational companies in these regions. Studies regarding work-life balance would be considered a new territory, a “novelty” in some nations but a pioneering attempt in others.

4.2. Proposition (2)

The more novel the academic contribution to the nation where the study origi-

nated, the more weight should be given to its importance and the higher the probability of publishing, given the quality of the proposed contribution and its accuracy

5. Conclusion

The above discussion perhaps contradicts with the “generalisability” aspect of a theory. However, the aim is to question whether empirical research, studies and even theories are formulated in isolation from their nation of origin and its culture.

Our argument is that cultural and contextual factors cannot be over looked and accordingly they should be considered in judging the real value of a theoretical contribution. The idea may resound as if it is a call to add more subjectivity to the evaluation process letting personal and national factors into consideration.

In contrast, the evaluation process’s objectivity is already questionable as proposed by various authors. Response to any theory is determined by cultural assumptions and of the scientific viewers that utilize it. (DiMaggio, 1995)

To conclude, cultural and national factors do have an impact in the formulation and later the reception of theoretical contributions or research at large so it is only natural that the evaluation process should not focus on an unrealistic construct of objectivity in lieu of real objectivity that puts all factors into consideration in hope of a fair evaluation of academic work.

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