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FROM THE EDITORS

MAKING A THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION WITH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The *Academy of Management Journal's* (AMJ's) mission statement specifies making a theoretical contribution as a key criterion for publication.[1] Yet, this is probably the requirement that creates the most difficulty among qualitative researchers wishing to publish in the journal. Qualitative research tends to generate its theoretical provocations gradually through detailed data collection and analysis of a particular context. This inherent openness and contextual grounding can make it challenging to articulate a crisp, generalizable theoretical contribution.

The purpose of this editorial is to offer some practical suggestions about how to overcome the challenges of making a theoretical contribution with qualitative research. To develop the editorial, we began by organizing a freewheeling conversation, beginning with a discussion of mistakes authors typically make in attempting to claim a theoretical contribution. This led us to identify a variety of ways in which studies with ample data that are otherwise promising may miss the mark, and to suggest approaches to transcending these common difficulties. We begin this discussion with some basic definitions.

WHAT IS THEORY? WHAT IS A THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION?

Theory articulates concepts and the relationships between them, provides explanations of mechanisms, and specifies the conditions under which such claims are likely to hold (Cronin et al., 2025; Sutton & Staw, 1995). Theory moves beyond descriptions of any one context to explain why particular processes and relationships occur. As such, theory offers a "bridge" that enables conversations across different methods and contexts (Zilber, 2024).

A *theoretical contribution* is the articulation of the new theoretical knowledge generated via one's study where the study's new knowledge must be positioned in relation to existing theory. The significance of the theoretical contribution is represented by the change between what we knew before the study and what we know afterward—that is, the new knowledge claims generated. As expressed in prior editorials (Bansal & Corley, 2011: 235), and as noted in many decision letters, AMJ seeks to publish papers with theoretical contributions that "change, challenge, or fundamentally advance our understanding of a phenomenon." This is a tall order, especially when considering that the field of management has been in existence for more than a century.

In addition to the challenges of meeting the high bar for contribution at AMJ, there are specific challenges in establishing a theoretical contribution in qualitative research, partly because this approach is often associated with nascent perspectives and exploratory theory building (Daft, 1995; Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Consequently, reviewers of qualitative research often have elevated expectations for novelty; if we already knew about this phenomenon, why would we not use quantitative methods to test relationships? Incremental extensions to theory may therefore not be enough.

Moreover, in qualitative research, potential theoretical contributions are not always clear at the start of data collection and may evolve as a project unfolds, such that establishing a theoretical contribution is an ongoing accomplishment as data collection, data analysis, and theorizing occur iteratively. Qualitative research requires flexibility since unexpected insights often emerge during the process. The final contribution must weave together multiple elements, including data and their relationship to existing theories in the field. This flexibility is also potentially beneficial, as the theoretical contribution can be significantly developed and shaped in the review process with the aid of the review teams' collective insights.

In the following, we discuss six frequently encountered issues that hamper the ability of qualitative studies to make a compelling theoretical contribution, and suggest several pathways to address them. These pathways are summarized in Figure 1.

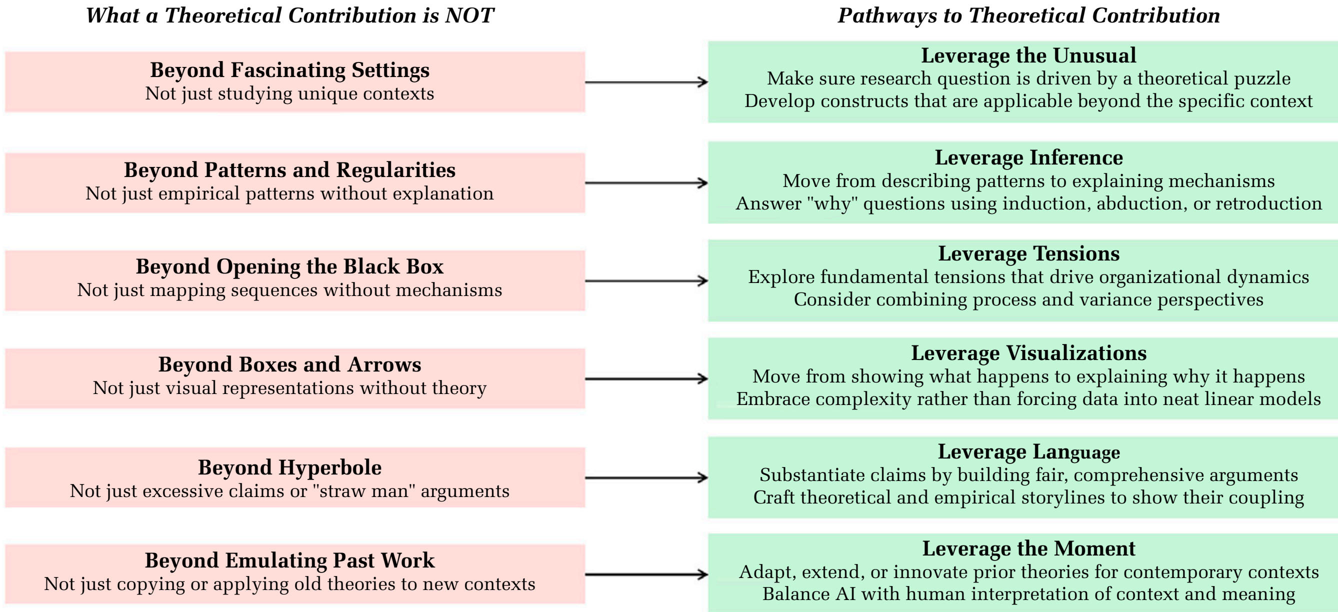
PATHWAYS TOWARD THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

Leverage the Unusual: Beyond Illuminating a Fascinating Setting or Group

A key design consideration in qualitative research is what sample or context to study. Some prevailing

[1] The mission statement can be found at https://aom.org/research/journals/journal.

FIGURE 1
Pathways to Making a Theoretical Contribution in Qualitative Research



advice suggests that studying an extreme or unconventional context can open space for novel theorizing or reveal insights about a phenomenon that might be poorly understood or inaccessible in other contexts (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010; Sharma, Toubiana, Lashley, Massa, Rogers & Ruebottom 2024; Siggelkow, 2007). This is of course true. Similarly, scholars have noted that phenomenon-based theorizing tends to produce more relevant and impactful theoretical insights. However, illuminating a fascinating setting or group is not enough on its own to establish a theoretical contribution. As Bamberger and Pratt (2010: 669) pointed out, scholars must "ensure that [their] context and sample serve [their] theory, rather than vice versa."

Focusing too much on the context or phenomenon and too little on theory can lead to several theoretical shortcomings. The first emerges when researchers fail to engage with theory throughout their data collection and analysis, inadvertently repackaging existing theoretical relationships under new labels—the "old wine in new bottles" problem, detailed more in the section on leveraging language. A second shortcoming is that the paper may apply existing theory, implicitly or explicitly, to a new sample or context without developing new theoretical insights. Readers end up learning a great deal about a particular sample or context, often with compelling, rich data, yet learning very little that is theoretically novel. Although these papers might engage in the important work of highlighting or giving voice to a marginalized, invisible, or as-yet unexamined group or setting, AMJ, as a journal focused on management theory, requires that authors engage in theoretical abstraction so that we can apply the generated insights beyond specific samples and contexts. To do that, not just the setting but the theoretical insight derived from it must offer novelty.

There are several pathways through which researchers can better leverage the unusual to establish strong theoretical contributions. A first pathway involves engaging with existing theory throughout the research process, such that throughout data collection and analysis scholars consider where their study offers something novel and how it might extend theory. Ensuring that one's research question is driven by a theoretical puzzle, not just the setting's uniqueness, can help. This also requires taking an honest approach to answering the question of why we need this study. What can we understand now that we could not understand before? Our goal is to generate new knowledge. If the findings primarily rehash existing knowledge, scholars might examine what unique characteristics of their setting could help answer questions that are relevant beyond the immediate context. A second pathway is to ensure that the model and theoretical claims are not context-specific, such that the "boxes" contain theoretical constructs that are potentially applicable to other settings. Finally, it is important to discuss the boundary conditions and transferability of findings. If findings only apply to a somewhat limited set of other contexts or samples, then the scope might not be broad enough to establish a strong theoretical contribution at the level AMJ is seeking. If the context is unconventional or particularly unique, the onus is on the authors to demonstrate how the findings are more broadly useful.

To illustrate, one of our team was involved in a study of modern dance groups (Harrison & Rouse, 2014). Although dance might appear to be an overly specialized context, its physical nature allowed for the observation of creative group processes that might be difficult to detect in other work environments (e.g., computer-based knowledge work). Nevertheless, it was essential to consider and explain how the theorizing about coordination, autonomy, and constraints could be applied to project groups across various domains. As Siggelkow (2007) vividly illustrates, it can happen that a single case study may make a contribution by revealing the existence of a possibility ("a talking pig") that might not normally have been expected. However, to turn this into a strong, theoretical contribution it would be important to both (a) ground the revelatory insight in deeply contextualized data so that readers can see how and why it might occur, and (b) to abstract its essence so that the insight resonates beyond the particular setting.

Leverage Inference: Beyond Patterns and Regularities

In qualitative research, theoretical contributions often build upon the interpretation of empirical patterns (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2018): systematic similarities or differences, co-occurrences, sequences, progressions, cycles, themes, or other consistencies and regularities observed in the data from an empirical setting. Indeed, most qualitative methods—from ethnography to comparative case analysis, from grounded theory to narrative analysis—rely on the identification of some form of empirical pattern to make initial sense of what is going on. By itself, however, the identification of a pattern or regularity is not enough to claim a theoretical contribution. Theorizing requires the attribution of meaning to empirical observations. Patterns need to be *interpreted* and *explained* before they acquire theoretical significance.

This raises critical questions: How do we account for the observed similarities or differences? What drives the sequence of events or the cyclical repetitions we observe? Are the patterns we observe empirical accidents or are they the reflection of deeper and more general social processes? Providing a more general explanation of these patterns—an explanation that we can transfer to comparable settings and use to illuminate them—is essential to claim a theoretical contribution. Theorizing, then, requires answering the question "Why?"

Moving from an observed empirical pattern to a transferable theoretical explanation requires an act of inference, which in qualitative research has usually been described as based on *induction* (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010) or *abduction* (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). By induction, we refer to the generalization of a pattern based on its abstraction from empirical observations. For instance, noticing a consistent association between the number of alternative options evaluated by top management teams in different companies and the amount of time it took each team to make a decision, Eisenhardt (1989b: 556) concludes that "the greater the number of alternatives considered simultaneously, the greater the speed of the strategic decision process." Generalization per se, however, is insufficient, unless it is associated with a compelling explanation. Producing this explanation requires us to systematically deepen induced generalizations by asking *why* we observe what we observe, and by digging into prior theory and our own data to seek reasons (often two or three) that might help explain empirical patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989a, 2021). Doing so contributes importantly to turning patterns into theoretical contributions, and this is something that is often missing in first-round submissions to AMJ.

In qualitative research, abduction is commonly conceptualized as inference-to-best-explanation (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013), as a researcher tentatively generates multiple explanations for a puzzling empirical pattern and settles on the most plausible one (Bamberger, 2019; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). This choice is often described as a relatively open creative and collaborative process (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021); others, however, have argued that abductive reasoning often involves the preliminary selection of a theoretical framework of interest, to be mobilized, corroborated, possibly challenged, problematized, and ultimately extended by its application to interpret empirical patterns (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

A third, less commonly cited but, perhaps, more commonly used inference approach is that of *retroduction*—a form of abductive reasoning informed by critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998) that aims at forming an understanding of the deeper structures and mechanisms that might explain the observed patterns. Retroduction can be described as a "mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating mechanisms which are capable of producing them" (Sayer, 1992: 107). In other words, we use retroduction when we propose a plausible explanation to account for observed facts (given some accepted premises)—a situation that actually resembles efforts to theorize from empirical patterns in case-based qualitative studies (Eisenhardt, 2021; Morais, 2011). Retroduction means invoking more general theoretical premises (commonly accepted understandings of how organizations function, how people think, act, and interact, etc.) to produce a non-idiosyncratic (and hence transferable) explanation for an empirical pattern by articulating the underlying mechanisms that enable the "analytical generalizability" of this explanation (Merton, 1967; Yin, 2018).

For example, one of our team was involved in a study of robotic surgery, aimed at explaining how new practices diffuse when there is still high uncertainty about their effectiveness and no institutional pressures to spur adoption (Compagni, Mele & Ravasi, 2015). This study observed that renowned surgeons adopted robotic surgery early but abandoned it after early failures; some young, ambitious surgeons, instead, actively shared even small wins with the rest of the community, ultimately driving diffusion at a very early stage (empirical pattern). To interpret this pattern, the authors used general assumptions in sociology (general theoretical premise) to postulate that the patterns they observed were driven by actors' desire to maintain or improve their social position (mechanism). Based on this assumption, they argued that they could interpret empirical patterns more generally as follows: Practices diffuse at an early stage, when their effectiveness is still uncertain, because peripheral actors who want to become central by claiming mastery of the new practice have an interest in sharing success, while central actors who want to maintain their position have an interest in hiding failure (transferable theoretical account). Note the shift from the past tense used to *describe* their observations to the present tense used to *explain* them in more general terms.

How can authors do this in practice? How can they move from description (patterns) to explanation (mechanisms) to transferrable theoretical account? The interpretations of observed actors or knowledgeable informants (as captured by our qualitative data anlysis) are always a good place to start, but ultimately scholars need to force themselves to look for general—not site-specific—explanations; and informants are often unable to account for their actions in general terms. Having solid theoretical foundations will be quite helpful here—enabling one to draw on a broad repertoire of organizational, economic, psychological, or social theories to make sense of empirical observations in more general terms. Applying the emerging account to comparable settings will also help scholars assess its transferability and often reveal important contextual conditions. In the case mentioned above, the authors were reassured that their emerging framework seemed applicable to understanding the diffusion of new qualitative methods in management studies; this application also suggested the importance of community-level status dynamics for the process they theorized.

This example reflects the use of retroduction to support a propositional or variance-oriented style of theorizing (Cornelissen, 2017) based on the statement of associations between constructs. However, working to *explain* observed empirical patterns is equally important for other styles as well, including process studies, which we now discuss in more depth.

Leverage Tensions: Beyond Opening Up the Black Box

Much qualitative research rests on the foundational proposition that complex organizational phenomena require a focus on dynamic processes—not merely an explanation of outcome variance. As Langley and Tsoukas (2010: 2–3) argue, "Seeing process as fundamental, such an approach does not deny the existence of events, states, or entities, but insists on unpacking them to reveal the complex activities and transactions that take place and contribute to their constitution." This encouragement for more process-focused research unpacking complex managerial and organizational phenomena has spurred a proliferation in qualitative research claiming contributions by "opening up the black box" of such phenomena. In practice, authors frequently call attention to the "black box" by highlighting the numerous articles explaining the antecedents of a given outcome of importance, yet the dearth of research deconstructing those antecedents and outcomes by drawing on a process perspective in a given context. They then proceed to "open up" that black box by descriptively mapping those processes—highlighting sequences of abstract, gerund-labeled practices—but without necessarily delving into the generative mechanisms or underlying tensions that drive them.

Although opening up the black boxes of managerial and organizational phenomena may be a starting point for publishing qualitative research in AMJ, doing so is rarely sufficient on its own. We suggest that to establish a theoretical contribution, authors might look for opportunities to transcend banal regularities by elucidating *tensions*. Mapping out ordinary, taken-for-granted sequences of activities that dominate conventional wisdom or everyday experience is unlikely to be enough. While these sequences of activities may not have been previously surfaced or theorized, researchers can add depth, relevance, and bite to the analysis by embedding the process within a broader theoretical puzzle or basing it on some deep-seated and commonly experienced practical tension.

Theoretical contributions often emerge when researchers identify contradictions, dialectics, paradoxes, or surprising relationships that challenge existing frameworks and prompt new ways of thinking about a phenomenon. This means moving beyond merely cataloguing practices to uncover their generative mechanisms and considering how those practices address or perpetuate underlying tensions. For instance, Kim, Bansal, and Haugh (2019) show that in East Africa, resource-constrained organizations often face challenges investing in long-term development, when such investment is likely to also risk short-term survival. The organizations address this tension by way of innovative triaging efforts to channel Fairtrade premium funds into initiatives like beekeeping projects that generated immediate income during dry seasons while cumulatively alleviating chronic poverty. By engaging with such processual complexities and surfacing insights from settings or time periods in which such tensions are amplified or suppressed, qualitative researchers can contribute to theory by illustrating how dynamic, recursive interactions shape organizational phenomena over time. Such development of theoretical contributions also increases the likelihood of relevance to practice, as the surfaced tensions and their respective mitigation become the basis for enriched implications for managers and their organizations.

Furthermore, while some have argued for keeping process and variance explanations separate (Mohr, 1982), we suggest that transcending the dichotomy between process-focused and variance-focused scholarship can sometimes enrich theoretical contributions. Researchers may not only document the tensions underlying a given process but also examine variation in how managers and organizations respond to these tensions, potentially even theorizing the contingencies that drive such differences. For example, one of our team was involved in conducting research on how, in the nascent market of impact investing, hype served both as cultural resource, compounding attention and excitement; and a relational liability, elevating and narrowing expectations of new ventures (Logue & Grimes, 2022). The study's theoretical contributions emerged by way of contrasting how and why three different ventures with similar business models and environments varied in the process by which they navigated that tension. Such variation led not only to the ventures' creation of different forms of "social proof" but ultimately differences in the long-term viability of those ventures and their original missions. Each approach, therefore, tackles the same fundamental tension related to hype but through distinct process pathways. By drawing attention to variations in how organizations navigate tensions, qualitative researchers not only illuminate the processual nature of organizing but also bolster our understanding of when and how certain responses may be more effective than others, ultimately contributing to more nuanced and practical theoretical insights.

Leverage Visualizations: Beyond Boxes and Arrows

As noted above, the construction of process models—depictions of sequential events, mechanisms, or relationships—has become a dominant way to theorize from empirical findings in qualitative research. However, there is a tendency to mistake visual representations for standalone theoretical contributions. Process models often attempt to show how elements interact over time, constituting a very useful starting point for theorization. However, they can be limited, for several reasons, and are insufficient on their own.

First, process models primarily show *what* happens and *how*, but not *why* events unfold as they do, which is the essence of theoretical explanation. As we have emphasized above, theorization in qualitative research is not just about organizing data into a coherent model but about making "conceptual leaps" (Klag & Langley, 2013) that push beyond empirical description toward explanatory insight. Qualitative researchers need to reach beyond simply mapping associations to identify and explain the underlying generative mechanisms that drive organizational processes. This means moving from "what happens" to "why it happens." Without explicit theorization of the "why," a visual model remains descriptive rather than explanatory.

Second, and relatedly, process models frequently use "arrows" to connect "boxes" (representing categories, stages, or themes), but these connections are often unlabeled and underspecified. What do the arrows signify? Is it causal relationships, correlations, enabling conditions, mediating mechanisms, or simply temporal sequences? The lack of clarity may result in models that remain conceptually vague. This often happens because data coding practices emphasize second-order categories that become the boxes for a process model, while the relationships between them (arrows) are uncoded for and remain underspecified. We urge authors to think carefully about what is going on in the arrows and to label them carefully. One might consider explicitly coding the data for the arrows. Alternatively, one may combine thematic analysis with process analysis to systematically identify and define the relationships (arrows) between the thematic constructs. The latter approach was employed by one of our team, who studied how social movements produce new collective action frames (Reinecke & Ansari, 2021). Through a combination of thematic (e.g., Gioia methodology) and processual techniques such as visual mapping and temporal bracketing, they identified theoretically significant relationships between interactions, mechanisms, and outcomes. This methodological integration facilitated precise labeling of the arrows in their process model. This can be useful to shift the focus to the mechanisms at play, how they operate and interact, and under what conditions they emerge. Explicitly defining and coding the arrows in process models can thus improve theoretical rigor and strengthen the explanatory power of such models. Indeed, Feldman (2017) urges scholars to pay much greater attention to the arrows in their visualizations (perhaps to the point of excluding boxes), not only to help articulate explanatory mechanisms but also to render process theorizing less static and to better capture the dynamics of temporally evolving phenomena.

The rise of the typical process model may also reflect the pressure to make qualitative research more like quantitative research, prioritizing replicable patterns and propositional generalizations over rich, context-specific theorization (Cornelissen, 2017). An artificial neatness in process modeling may force an explanation that implies linearity where none exists, while obscuring contradictions, paradoxes, and tensions within the data. Without a clear articulation of temporal flows, feedback loops, and contingencies, the depiction presented in process models may oversimplify complex interrelationships, failing to capture the fact that organizational processes are rarely unidirectional and emergent. Instead of forcing data into neat categories, scholars should engage deeply with organizational processes that are rarely linear, as they involve cycles, feedback loops, and emergent properties. For instance, a useful and relevant visualization method, rarely used within management studies (Dattée, Alexy & Autio, 2018), involves the modeling or mapping of systems dynamics, which help depict complex interdependencies and nonlinearities. In this respect, we see immense opportunities for qualitative scholars to expand their visual "tool kits" and creativity. It could even be that thick descriptions and narrative forms of explanation may be more appropriate to express the subtlety and nuance of theoretical insights—and, if so, this should be embraced.

In their well-known article on "What theory is not," Sutton and Staw (1995: 376) concluded that "Diagrams are not theory." Weick's (1995) comment on that original article was interestingly titled "What theory is not, theorizing is," Weick went on to suggest that while diagrams are not "theory," they are useful in reaching toward it. Most qualitative researchers we know use visualizations that way, as heuristic devices to help them think. Some of those visualizations make their way into published articles, but their value often lies beyond that as a way to stimulate theoretical reasoning, especially if one focuses on the arrows.

Leverage Language: Beyond Hyperbole

Rhetoric is fundamental to our scholarship, and it is through language that authors situate their theoretical contributions convincingly relative to existing work. As Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997: 1026) put it, "as soon as scientists frame ideas for presentation to an identified audience, they are engaging in rhetoric," where rhetoric is the art of persuasion through language, and is viewed (in a non-pejorative manner) "as honest argument intended for an audience."

However, some rhetorical claims to contribution are decidedly more persuasive than others. A first and most obvious issue occurs when writers appear to be trying to impress readers by using excessively superlative language to refer to their own work as making, for example, "a ground-breaking theoretical contribution" or "as fundamentally challenging previous theory" when a closer look suggests that this is questionable. In other words, just saying so does not make it so. Excessive claims come across as pretentious. The criteria for publication do indeed signal that making an important contribution and challenging prior work is critical, but this obviously needs to be *shown* through detail and substance, not simply declared.

Another form of superficial rhetorical claim that usually fails is framing through a "straw man" argument. This issue arises when authors situate the contributions of their study in relation to literature that is simply too far away from the underlying themes addressed in the paper. This practice results in reinventing the wheel, because relevant work has been missed. To take a banal example, recent research on organizations may not explicitly theorize about the emergence of "standard operating procedures"; however, to claim a theoretical contribution by introducing such a theory to the literature represents a rhetorical move that is likely to ignore longstanding work on routine dynamics and practice theory. Paradoxically, although it may sometimes feel uncomfortable and intimidating to do this, when seeking to make a theoretical contribution, one should look for the literature that has the greatest (rather than the least) possibility of making one's own initial ideas seem redundant. In other words, as a rule of thumb, authors should seek to be as comprehensive as possible, engaging literatures within management that speak to the relationships and processes they are exploring. Only then may it be possible to work toward identifying a theoretical puzzle within the broader literature that is genuine and that might create room for novel insight while building seriously on what came before.

A third way in which rhetorical claims to contribution can be unpersuasive arises when the constructs and findings come across as "old wine in new bottles." This occurs when authors invent or deploy new labels to signal novelty, but a deeper reading suggests that preexisting labels and constructs would have been entirely adequate to describe and explain the phenomenon, often in a simpler way. Now, inventing a new term or concept can indeed be a valuable rhetorical device to help an author pinpoint the nature of their theoretical contribution in an appealing and memorable way, and this should not be discouraged when it is warranted by the novelty of the insight. However, new labels will fail to convince if they obfuscate rather than illuminate, or contribute to unwarranted construct proliferation (Baer & Shaw, 2017).

In sum, language is the primary tool through which we make our theoretical arguments persuasive, but superficial claiming will not usually pass muster. A deep understanding of the literature combined with clarity about the findings' novelty provides the foundation for effective theoretical rhetoric—enabling language to genuinely illuminate contributions rather than merely create the illusion of significance. There is no shortcut to mastering the art of effective theoretical rhetoric. To develop such skills, we recommend reading and rereading prior qualitative papers in AMJ and paying particular attention to how arguments establish a theoretical contribution in convincing ways. We also recommend consulting resources such as Golden-Biddle and Locke's (2006) *Composing Qualitative Research* (see also Berends & Deken, 2021). These authors use a storytelling metaphor to depict how authors can artfully intertwine theoretical stories (explaining how and why a study adds to our understanding) with empirical stories (offering data that ground the theoretical story in concrete descriptions of specific actions and events).

Leverage the Moment: Beyond Emulating Past Work

We are living in transformational times that fundamentally affect how firms are managed, how employees are treated, and the relationship between organizations and the societies in which they are embedded (Gruber, 2023). Although some commentators perceive our times as chaotic, it is precisely this rapidly evolving research context that presents scholars with numerous new and important research questions. In effect, as our intellectual priorities shift and redefine what matters most in our field, what were once considered key research topics may now be replaced by more pressing questions and concerns. As a result, the emerging new realities can render existing theoretical insights incomplete, in need of revision, or even obsolete, and may require the development of entirely new theories—for instance, by integrating insights from multiple domains, reflecting the increasing complexity of real-world problems (Reinecke et al., 2024). Furthermore, the availability of new types of data, tools, and analytical techniques also give rise to novel ways in which theories can be advanced and tested (Grégoire, Ter Wal, Little, Bermiss, Kotha & Gruber 2024; Langley, Bell, Bliese, LeBaron & Gruber, 2023).

Considering this dynamic research context, simply emulating theoretical insights and models from past research, however excellent they may be, might offer a starting point but will probably be insufficient. Arriving at a meaningful theoretical contribution demands reinterpretation, adaptation, extension, synthesis, or innovation of prior theoretical knowledge. As scholars leverage prior theoretical work, a foundational theory can, for instance, become an important stepping stone for future insights. In the process, they may ask themselves: What are the enduring theoretical insights of past work? Where are the blind spots of classical theories, and what did they overlook at the time they were developed? How can they be reframed to illuminate emerging realities? How can prior theoretical insights be combined with contemporary insights to establish richer theoretical models?

Beyond affecting the content of our theorizing, our transformational times and especially the emergence of increasingly more powerful artificial intelligence (AI) tools raise intriguing questions about the very nature of the analysis and theorizing in qualitative research (Grimes, Von Krogh, Feuerriegel, Rink & Gruber, 2023; von Krogh, Roberson & Gruber, 2023). There are tasks within qualitative research where AI has particular strengths and where it can assist scholars in advancing their insights. For instance, as AI can process vast, unstructured qualitative datasets, it might identify patterns or surprising outliers that scholars overlook. Given the scope of data it can process, AI may also integrate insights across research fields and disciplines, thereby supporting the development of novel frameworks that human researchers may not have arrived at independently due to their specialization in science. Indeed, with now publicly available generative AI models, we believe that most qualitative scholars could augment the process by which they surface theoretical contributions while also avoiding the many obstacles we have laid out in this editorial. Current models have evident capabilities, which could be used to help identify and remove hyperbole; move from contextually specific patterns to multiple plausible theoretical accounts; discern critical underlying tensions within a given research setting and contrast case-based approaches to addressing those tensions; code and model concepts, relationships, and mechanisms found in the data; and expose ways to theoretically situate context-bounded anomalies. Such capabilities are also evolving rapidly.[2]

At the same time, however, contemporary AI tools have critical limitations when it comes to developing deep theoretical contributions in qualitative research. They have deficiencies in interpreting intentionality; contextualizing data within broader sociocultural settings, institutional contexts, and historical perspectives; and leveraging the situated field experience that human scholars benefit from when examining their data. Moreover, given the way in which AI operates, AI tools have strengths in "remixing" existing knowledge in novel ways, but may not generate truly original theoretical breakthroughs (Nadkarni, Gruber, DeCelles, Connelly & Baer, 2018). Thus, rather than replacing human theorizing, AI tools are likely to be most powerful when we utilize them as "co-theorists," augmenting the creative and analytical capacities of human researchers.

[2] We encourage authors to consult early on in their research process with AOM policies on AI usage in research and manuscript preparation to ensure compliance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As qualitative researchers ourselves, we know that AMJ's criteria for theoretical contribution can often appear demanding. However, these criteria express our belief that a deep understanding of the particular and the specific is critically important to developing novel understandings of the social world, and how management can contribute to that. This editorial offers a repertoire of practical pathways to making our research theoretically insightful and relevant beyond the specific settings we study. We hope scholars find it useful.

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