

SPECIAL ISSUE CALL

Theory in leadership and management

The ultimate aim of scientific inquiry is to develop general theories that can explain and predict phenomena (Kerlinger, 1986). Theory is essential for the progression of science, whether social or natural. Theories set the frame through which we look at empirical phenomena, allowing researchers to put forward falsifiable hypotheses, clear predictions, and concrete explanations that guide empirical work (Popper, 1989). Such theories require describing and predicting the broadest class of phenomena with the least number of constructs, assumptions, and explanations possible. Despite the key role of theory, there is continuing doubt about whether theories of management and leadership are as useful as they could and should be. At least three issues have been identified by the literature.

First, scholars argue that our field suffers from theory proliferation, “theorrhea;” worse a large portion of the “theories” promulgated fall short of being proper theories (Antonakis, 2017). Because purely empirical contributions are often unacceptable for leading journals, researchers are often encouraged to develop novel theoretical propositions (Hambrick, 2007), leading to what Tourish (2020) has called an “unhealthy obsession” with “theory development” (p. 100). Moreover, many theoretical propositions end up being subjected to empirical test only rarely (Edwards et al., 2014; Kacmar & Whitfield, 2000). As a result, the landscape is littered with an abundance of “mini-theories” (Aronson, 1997) that are often overlapping yet disconnected, incoherent, and ultimately inconsequential (Antonakis, 2017; Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019).

Second, there is growing concern that these theoretical propositions tend to lack an overarching, integrative theoretical framework (Cronin et al., 2021), or that theoretical

propositions are rather loosely derived from multiple paradigms. Unlike other fields (e.g., biology, economics), management and leadership studies operate from a weak theoretical paradigm (Pfeffer, 1993); they are limited by a lack of theoretical integration, have few first principles of their own. Researchers thus rely on widely different assumptions about the functioning of individuals, organizations, and institutions. Whereas some theoretical heterogeneity is desirable, an overreliance on particularistic and piecemeal explanations without any connection to each other or to a broader, more general theoretical framework hinders communication between different literature streams, ultimately impeding the cumulative development of knowledge (Pfeffer, 1993).

Third, existing theories are sometimes said to lack precision, encompassing vague predictions (Edwards & Berry, 2010; Edwards & Christian, 2014), equivocal definitions (MacKenzie, 2003; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), and unclear nomological networks (Banks et al., 2020; Gottfredson et al., 2020). Relatedly, some leadership theories have been faulted for being tautological (e.g., Alvesson, 2019; Alvesson & Einola, 2019), or more generally for being causally indeterminate, in ways that question the entire evidence base for leadership research (Fischer & Sitkin, 2022). We see this problem across the organizational sciences.

Should the community of leadership and management scholars be disenchanted about the theoretical state of the field? We do not think so. Whereas there is much to do to reorient our theorizing, the current state of the field offers a great chance for improvement. Management and leadership studies have both the momentum and capability to move towards better theorizing for two reasons: first, the accumulation of conceptual critiques of leadership and management research has sensitized us to major problems in the field and has created momentum for addressing them; second, adjacent fields of research, such as economics and cultural evolution,

have tackled limitations in theorizing in ways that allow us to learn from these fields and build the capability for improving our own theories too.

The objective of this call for papers is therefore to encourage submissions that constitute novel attempts to bring necessary theoretical rigor to leadership and management. We see at least three options for doing this.

Theoretical integration with other scientific disciplines: The integration of different theories within the broad fields of management and leadership is beneficial. Yet, theoretical integration with other scientific disciplines is also desirable (cf. Cronin et al., 2021). Such unified theoretical frameworks (i.e., distinct—though conceptually inter-connected—set of theories, Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019) provide a core of broadly agreed-upon assumptions, notions, and vocabulary that can be used to generate novel, falsifiable, and context-specific hypotheses that respond to the same set of key principles (e.g., rationality or bounded-rationality in economics, gene-culture co-evolution in biology, Gintis, 2007). Examples of these integrative frameworks exist in economics, where behavioral economists have combined notions from economic and psychological theories (e.g., DellaVigna, 2009), as well as in psychology, where some scholars are pushing for unification with evolutionary sciences (e.g., Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019; Muthukrishna et al., 2021). Our field has only recently started to build similar bridges, incorporating notions from economics (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2021; Garretsen et al., 2020; Zehnder et al., 2017) and evolutionary thinking (e.g., Van Vugt et al., 2008; Van Vugt & Smith, 2019). The potential gains allowed by these integrations are clear, enabling researchers to study disparate phenomena with just a handful of common assumptions and notions (see, e.g., the case of signaling theory, Connelly et al., 2011).

Rigor of explanation: Theoretical integration is important, yet it necessitates rigorous theories to begin with. Here we mean being clear and precise about the theory in general, irrespective of the form of theorizing (e.g., whether in mathematical or verbal form), the content of the theory, or the specific theoretical framework used as a bedrock. Rigor of explanation presupposes: (a) properly defined constructs, (b) precise accounts of the theoretical mechanisms explaining links between constructs, including articulated boundary conditions, (c) spelling out clear predictions, including where possible the functional form and the magnitude of the relationship of interest (DeYoung & Krueger, 2020; Edwards & Berry, 2010; Fried, 2020a). Related, especially to point (b), we care to highlight the importance of explicating as openly and transparently as possible the central assumptions that underlie any theory. “Assumptions” are not only the broad philosophical tenets one relies on (e.g., methodological individualism giving primacy to individual action, critical theory giving primacy to social structures), but also the more specific premises within each theoretical framework (e.g., economic rationality vs. bounded rationality), as well as any type of simplification one makes to abstract from reality and make a theory tractable. The more explicit and precise the assumptions of a theory are, the easier it is for researchers to challenge the theory constructively, either conceptually or via empirical falsification. However, when assumptions are not clear, the cumulative development of science becomes difficult.

Formal modeling: A potential way to improve the rigor of explanation is formal modeling, that is, mathematical or simulation/computational theories. The advantages of formal models are clear. Mathematics is the *lingua franca* of science, and formal models force theorists to state assumptions clearly and derive their consequences in a rigid logical way, thereby increasing theoretical precision. Formal models are typical of natural sciences, and are the norm

in some social sciences, like economics (e.g., Aghion & Tirole, 1997; Bolton et al., 2013; Hermalin, 1998) or cultural evolution (e.g., Henrich et al., 2015; Rogers, 1988). Formal models are also starting to gain traction in psychology (see the discussions of, e.g., Fried, 2020b; Robinaugh et al., 2021; Schaller & Muthukrishna, 2021), which is a field that has not typically relied on them (Meehl, 1978). Mathematical modeling, notions of game theory, and computational models remain rare in leadership (e.g., Foss, 2001) and management studies (e.g., Adner et al., 2009), yet they are making inroads in our discipline too (e.g., Bendahan et al., 2015; Berger et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2019). Note, we are not suggesting that all rigorous theories need to be formal ones. For instance, Darwin's theory of natural selection was not articulated in formulae but expressed in words using simple, yet powerful principles, whose consequences have helped guide many discoveries. However, when done well, rigorous verbal theories can lay the foundations for later formalization, just as Darwin's theory of natural selection was later expressed—in combination with population genetics—in a single mathematical framework (Mayr, 1982).

In sum, this special issue seeks to advance leadership theory and reinvigorate how we theorize. The three trends we just presented represent exemplary avenues for doing so. In addition, contributions to the special issue might assess the strengths or weaknesses of existing theories, suggest new theories of leadership or leadership-related phenomena, or offer unified theoretical frameworks, even “meta-theories,” as well as criteria and tools for effective theorizing. Accordingly, we invite submissions from researchers in a range of academic fields, including management, psychology, economics (micro or behavioral), evolutionary human sciences, sociology, or political science. Contributions may include, but are not limited to, the following types of work:

1. New or refined theories that advance our understanding of leadership or leadership-related phenomena and that precisely outline their assumptions and boundary conditions. We welcome “directional theories” (i.e., an expected positive or negative effect of one variable on another), such as goal-setting theory (Locke, 1968), expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), or equity theory (Adams, 1965), but particularly welcome theories that make specific predictions that go beyond the directionality of effects (e.g., they theorize about plausible effect sizes, specify the expected functional form for the relationship between two variables, Edwards & Berry, 2010).
2. Newly derived formal models of known leadership-related phenomena and current verbal theories (see, e.g., Dur et al., 2022), which have the potential of illuminating overlooked features of otherwise familiar phenomena. These formal models may increase the precision of important existing theories related to, for instance, leader communication and behaviors such as charismatic leadership (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2021), path-goal theory as one of the most important contextual theories of leadership (House, 1996), or leadership emergence (Gavrillets et al., 2016).
3. Computational models focusing on relatively complex dynamics or processes related to leadership (cf. Zhou et al., 2019).
4. New theoretical accounts of well-known empirical phenomena or effects. An example is the reconsideration of the classical Milgram studies that explain immoral follower behavior based on identification with a person in a position of formal authority instead of mere obedience to authority (Haslam & Reicher, 2012).
5. Reviews and theoretical integrations recasting existing leadership theories or leadership-related phenomena within other theories or theoretical frameworks, such as evolutionary

theory (e.g., Van Vugt et al., 2008) or functional theorizing (Morgeson et al., 2010). We particularly welcome papers that review, discuss critically, or integrate different assumptions made by specific leadership theories.

6. Conceptual reviews that offer constructive criticism of existing leadership theories, prune existing nomological networks, or constructively assess the link between conceptual shortcomings (e.g., unclear definitions) and empirically grounded topics (e.g., measurement issues, causal inference, external validity, see Fischer et al., 2021; Gottfredson et al., 2020; Lonati & Antonakis, 2023; Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019; Turner, 1981). Decommissioning theories (and entire theoretical frameworks or “meta-theories”) that are still popular but serve no purposes is also fair game for submitters.
7. Theory-building tutorials or guidelines on how to build clear leadership theories, including formal and computational models or verbal theories (e.g., Borsboom et al., 2021; Smaldino, 2020; Vancouver et al., 2020; Varian, 2016).

Submission Process

Authors can submit their manuscripts starting from 15 February 2024 but no later than the submission deadline of 29 February 2024 (by 15h00 European Central Time), online via *The Leadership Quarterly*’s submission system at

<https://www.editorialmanager.com/leaqua/>

To ensure that all manuscripts are correctly identified for consideration for this Special Issue, it is important that authors select “SI: Theory” when they reach the “Article Type” step in the submission process. Manuscripts should be prepared in accordance with *The Leadership Quarterly*’s Guide for Authors:

<https://www.elsevier.com/journals/the-leadership-quarterly/1048-9843/guide-for-authors>

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