

FROM THE EDITORS
THEORIZING FOR POSITIVE IMPACT

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Calls for management theory to have greater societal relevance abound. From editorial efforts to encourage research that can influence regulation and policy decisions (e.g., Haley et al., 2022), to regulatory practices that have incentivized scholarly impact on audiences outside of academia (e.g., Bryant, 2021), to grant-bestowing agencies that expect their funded research to benefit the public good (e.g., NSF's broader impacts), the relationship between theory and practice has been and continues to be of great concern for management scholars (cf. Haley & Jack, 2023; Gray, 2023). Collectively, these efforts reflect our belief as management scholars that the influence of management theory on policy makers remains underwhelming. Framed differently, it is our belief as a profession that management theory has unrealized power to have a positive impact on society and the broader environment.

While calls for increased positive impact on policy have grown louder since the early 2000's, a cursory analysis in Web of Science reveals that only 3.23% of *AMR* articles published since the founding of the journal in 1977 mention policy in their title or abstract. At other journals in general management, there are similarly low values, including the *Academy of Management Journal* (3.25%), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (2.52%), *Strategic Management Journal* (5.23%), and *Organization Science* (5.75%) since their founding.¹ This trend exists across more specialized domains of management research. For instance, only 1.5% of articles in OB/HR field between 2010-2019 included policy implications (i.e., Aguinis, Jensen, & Kraus, 2022). A more comprehensive analysis of article content across all our journals is needed to draw definitive conclusions; yet, given the Academy of Management's vision to "inspire and enable a better world," it seems our field has placed relatively little attention on applying our collective knowledge to improve public policy.

Following Aguinis and colleagues, we define *policy* as "governance principles that guide courses of action and behavior in organizations and societies" (2022: 858). The term *public policy* reflects the goal of generating such governance principles to promote societally desirable outcomes (i.e., the public good). The way management scholars at *AMR* have approached public policy differs significantly. Approaches range from works that emphasize the practical implications of a particular theory for policy (e.g., Chen et al., 2022), articles that make policy itself the subject of theorizing (e.g., Bourdeau, Ollier-Malaterre, & Houlfort, 2019; Funk & Hirschmann, 2017), to those that treat policy(-making) or regulation as the context for theory development (e.g., Aguilera, Judge, & Terjesen, 2018; Matten & Moon, 2020). Moreover, in discussing the theory-practice relationship, management scholars tend to direct the implication(s)

¹ Calculation available upon request.

of theory to wide-ranging practice domains. They might include public policy, but more often, refer generally to managers, or a mix of internal and external stakeholders of the firm (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010). This is challenging because certain domains of practice, such as the public policy context, are significantly different from the business and competitive market contexts. By implication, the management theory-public policy relationship, potentially, is also distinct.

As a result, while management scholars continue to increase their attention to the theory-practice relationship, management theory as it refers specifically to public policy remains limited in its relevance and applicability. Without personal and direct experience in public sector contexts, authors have little professional guidance on how to craft, expand, or deepen management theory to apply directly to the practice of policy making. A superficial or incomplete understanding of public policy might also hamper the identification of boundary conditions that can explain in which circumstances management theory and policy practice can be construed as analytically intertwined (versus largely separated). This gap stalls cumulation of knowledge as well as the impact aspiration of theory.

In this editorial we seek to help address this fundamental concern. Rather than developing a comprehensive conceptual framework to guide the management theory-public policy relationship, our goal is to begin making explicit the underlying assumptions management scholars often hold implicit regarding the relationship between management theory and public policy. We recognize our arguments are in some ways bold, if not, provocative; this is intentional to encourage spirited debate and thoughtful exchanges across our scholarship siloes. We hope the resulting conversations fuel ongoing theory development that can positively contribute to the public good. To this end, we start by examining the possible disconnects that exist between our business education and experiences, and the domains of policy making and public sector

organizing. These gaps in our understanding have direct implications to how we construe (or misconstrue) our underlying assumptions regarding policy practice, which in turn constrain the extent to which management theory can help advance the public good.

BUSINESS-PUBLIC POLICY DISCONNECTS

Despite our good intentions, for many across our field, a nuanced understanding of how public policy is created, evolved, and implemented is limited. By and large, for most management scholars, their work experiences prior to academia have been in private organizations, they have completed their doctorate degrees and/or post-doctorates in business schools and interacted mainly with business managers through their classes and consulting engagements. Given much of our time has been spent in business contexts, it should come as no surprise that our research mainly speaks to those who operate within and across for-profit organizations. Thus, when asked by journal editors and the like to apply our theory to policy, to help inform the decisions of public sector managers, government agencies, and non-profit organizations, our theory falls short. In our “implications for practice” sections we engage in an almost ceremonial exercise to explain what policy makers should do as a result of our theorizing. Yet we provide such recommendations while holding different underlying assumptions than colleagues whose disciplines exist outside for-profit contexts.

Personally, as Associate Editors at *AMR*, we come to the topic of this commentary from a place of realization and exploration. Realization of the large gap that persists between our intentions to develop management theory that can improve the state of policy making, and the realities of public policy. Exploration of a new approach to begin closing this gap by addressing the roots of the disconnects; mainly, our underlying assumptions. Indeed, our exposure to public policy has come at different times in our careers. Hernandez spent two decades teaching

leadership and diversity topics in business schools before moving to the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. Her aim: To introduce and adapt our core management and leadership training practices to better equip the next generation of policy makers. In turn, Haack was introduced to public policy earlier in his career. Before doing his doctoral work on the legitimation of the United Nations Global Compact (a global governance framework in the realm of sustainability), he completed his undergraduate and graduate studies in public management and advised a leading global public relations firm in Berlin on public and government affairs. He started to teach strategy and management topics only when he moved to HEC Lausanne as an Assistant Professor.

The exposure we have had to public policy has underlined and reinforced several fundamental insights: Whereas disagreements regarding the purpose of the firm as purely financial or whether it involves social welfare continues to be the topic of heated debates (cf. *AMR Special Topic Forum on Social Welfare*, Jones et al., 2016), the purpose of public policy is to protect and promote the public good. Some of our colleagues might debate this point, too. We argue, however, that though public goods can be provided in different ways by public or private enterprises, or both in partnership, public policy involves a measurable and positive result for the general public. Consistent with the aim to serve the public good, it follows that public policy cannot be value-free.

Management scholars have proposed that our desire to adopt value-free theorizing to develop "scientific" descriptive explanations (cf. Bailey & Ford, 1996; Hayek, 1989) has led to "propagating ideologically inspired amoral theories" (Ghoshal, 2005: 76). In response, we have seen the emergence of critical-emancipatory styles of theorizing that question existing taken-for-granted assumptions, infuse theory development with normative ideals and values, as well as

generate provocations of existing social practices and routines (Cornelissen, Höllerer, & Seidl, 2021). Notably, since the United Nations outlined its 17 goals for sustainable development in 2015, many in our field have directed their attention to finding solutions to these Grand Challenges and focused their study on phenomena of societal concern, such as inequality, poverty, climate change, or peace, among others (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; George et al., 2016). At *AMR*, we have even incentivized a concern for the public good through the development of new theory that can facilitate “a positive new normal out of an age of disruption” (Special Topic Forum on the New Normal, Bundy et al., 2021).

Management theory, therefore, is increasingly used to not merely inform but engage in public debate. This public debate is not constrained to the business domain. Whereas businesses form going concerns that produce financial stability and economic growth within our economic systems, public policies form the rules and guidelines that ensure the smooth functioning of society—economically, politically, and culturally (cf. Kallhoff, 2014). Accordingly, public policy applies to multiple systems that scaffold our society. Though we might opine about the high degree of complexity within the firm—and lament about the applicability of our theories given this complexity—we offer that this complexity is quite different to the activities of public sector entities. Complexity might involve, for instance, accountability to different populations (e.g., owners versus voters), different personnel practices (e.g., opaque executive compensation with few constraints versus rigid and transparent pay structures), environmental disruptions (market versus election cycles), change horizons (e.g., quarterly earnings versus decades-long legal reform), or scale of impact (relatively bounded to internal operations with exceptions for first movers or first in class, but even then, limited to one or a few products, versus a vast swath of stakeholders affected in their day to day lives).

Taken together, we argue that if we fail to recognize that management theory remains (mostly) value-free, bound by financial obligations to its stakeholders, the applicability of theory to value-laden, complex cross-domain structures of society will remain limited. The implication is that, as it applies to public policy, scholars cannot rely on the function of management theory for only description, but also, that, to some degree, management theory will facilitate ideation for a preferred future. A second implication is that management theory must also account for the distinct complexity of public policy. For instance, scholars should consider constituencies that are not confined to an organization's social system, or even exist as contemporary actors, but are substantial and interdependent, nonetheless. Whether considering what some management scholars would term internal or external stakeholders, or refer to as the use of different logics, the distinct domains of complexity in public policy should be made explicit if we are to fully leverage the benefits of applying novel theory to practice.

Drawing on existing conversations, we translate our concerns into two initial dimensions of the relationship between management theory and public policy—performativity and permeability—to highlight the opportunities and challenges involved in utilizing management theory to shape and/or inform policy practice. We posit that management scholars need to both consider the potential influence of their theories on reality (and thus, reflect on the performativity of their theorizing) and anticipate the applicability of their theoretical insights to public policy (and thus, reflect on the permeability of their theorizing). The performativity and permeability labels are necessarily imperfect as they likely capture multiple facets of the concerns and implications we describe above. Accordingly, we encourage our colleagues to consider these terms and concepts as imperfect starting points. We hope this exercise sets in motion new pathways to increasing the societal relevance of management theory that scholars will expand,

adapt, debate, and advance.

Performativity

Though the performativity concept has multiple meanings (Gond et al., 2016), in the context of this editorial, we refer to “performativity” as the degree to which theory not only represents but also shapes social reality up to a point where it becomes self-fulfilling (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Marti & Gond, 2018). If we assume high performativity in our theorizing, we recognize that theory can become self-fulfilling by creating the behavior it predicts. As such, our theory has the potential to change the interactions that constitute social reality and domains of policy practice (Gergen, 1973); for instance, by shaping language and social norms, molding existing practices and institutional designs, and creating conditions and feedback loops that perpetuate or modify the reality it seeks to explain (Ferraro et al., 2005). A well-known example of high performativity theory is the Black–Scholes theory, whereby theory usage made option prices more accurate and pushed them closer toward the prices that the theory predicted (MacKenzie & Millo, 2003). Another intriguing case is the performative link between corporate social performance and corporate financial performance. Marti and Gond (2018) demonstrated that the notion of a positive relationship between social and financial performance can shift the behavior of market participants toward socially responsible investing, rendering the positive relationship to be true, even if research was initially biased toward finding a positive link (cf. Rost & Ehrmann, 2017).

Many other publications in *AMR*, however, operate under a different assumption; one of low performativity where theory largely manifests reality and conceptualizes relationships between empirical phenomena in a simplified and parsimonious form (Whetten, 1989). This reflective (versus performative) understanding of theory is premised on an explanatory mode of

theorizing, foregrounds causality (Cronin, Stouten, & van Knippenberg, 2021; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2020), and advances an empirical positivism approach that assumes that social reality is structured around a set of probabilistic relationships and contingencies which can be objectively studied (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). To be clear, reflective theory can have a significant positive impact on public policy through its “transfer” of knowledge to the world of practice (Reinecke, Boxenbaum, & Gehman, 2022; Wickert et al., 2021); for instance, by developing recommendations on how to foster entrepreneurship for poverty alleviation (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006), promote organizational and upper echelons diversity (Tasheva & Hillman, 2019), or regulate corporate social responsibility (Haack, Martignoni, & Schoeneborn, 2021; Terlaak, 2007). Still, although theory can point to unanticipated, useful, and novel research directions (Kilduff, 2006), the insight that theory can be performative or even self-fulfilling is rarely articulated.

Even though a significant body of research has explained how social science theories shape social reality, few reflect critically on how such theories *should* shape social reality (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Marti & Scherer, 2016). To counter this trend, we propose that performativity in theorizing can generate formative influences on reality through disruption and challenges to the existing status quo. In our own pages, Marti and Scherer (2016) assessed the performative effects of theories on public policy by demonstrating that a narrow focus on efficiency and stability in financial regulation has undermined social welfare. As a remedy, they take an explicit normative-prescriptive standpoint and propose that management theory can contribute to social welfare by incorporating considerations of social justice. Interestingly, the authors advocate deliberation, the structured and non-coercive discussion and reflection on preferences, values, and interests (Dryzek, 2000), as a feasible approach for affected groups to

reach agreement on financial regulation and other contested policy issues. The work of Marti and colleagues (Marti & Scherer, 2016; Marti & Gond, 2018) is exemplary of the critical, reflexive, emancipatory, and action-oriented styles of theorizing (e.g., Cornelissen et al., 2021; Reinecke et al., 2022) because they discuss the human and ethical consequences of organization and management.

At the same time, while critical of the existing status quo and performative in its treatment of the management theory-public policy relationship, this existing scholarship has not yet addressed in-depth the intricacies and challenges that might arise in the implementation of the Habermasian ideal of deliberation to public policy. Policy innovation in controversial domains such as financial regulation generates a distinct type of multi-system complexity that requires, we believe, further consideration. The permeability of management theory to policy practice thus, remains an open question; a point we turn to next.

Permeability

By “permeability,” we refer to the degree to which public policy is receptive to the insights of management theory. Permeability is thus, inherently linked to the question of whether and how management knowledge can be applied to public policy and encourages scholars to ask: can the insights from management theory feasibly take root within the public domain? Or, more importantly, does management theory address what policy makers actually care about? Is it relevant to protecting and promoting the public good? In asking these questions, we recognize that the concept of permeability remains more theoretically ambiguous than the concept of performativity. At the same time, we believe that asking such questions can help spur the conversations that will move our field toward theorizing for greater positive impact.

Take, for instance, how organizations have responded to significant pressures in their

external environments, at times, by symbolically but not substantively responding to such pressures (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Rather than aligning internal processes to face changes in their external context, organizations have deflected and muted the penetration of such contextual demands (cf. Seidl & Mormann, 2014). Reflecting on this dynamic, we contend that managerial theorizing has maintained a similarly insular perspective—beginning from existing theoretical quandaries rather than potentially new quandaries brought about by a context external to our theoretical landscape. Davis (2015: 315) stated it well: “An alternative to organizing research around theories and the questions they raise is to organize it around problems. That is, rather than starting from ‘I’m interested in institutional logics and how status and networks are influenced by conflicting logics’ (or whatever), one would start with phenomena in the world that are worth explaining, for example, ‘What accounts for increasing income inequality around the world, how do countries vary in their trajectories of inequality, and how might this be linked to organizational practices?’.” In this way, the concept of permeability can help us capture the relevance and transferability of our theories to addressing problems that are endemic to society and involve multiple interacting systems.

When permeability is low, theory is characterized by an overly narrow conception of explanatory (and potentially performative) relationships with weak connections to the multiple systems in which policy practice is embedded. Notwithstanding the rich and diverse history of management theory (Smith & Hitt, 2007) and important theorizing on hybrid organizations and social entrepreneurship (e.g., Battilana & Lee, 2014; Battilana et al., 2022), management scholars have mostly studied business settings and social contexts that are dominated by the “market logic,” which is informed by core beliefs such as self-interest, efficiency, competition, and utility maximization (Bitektine & Song, 2023). The market logic (as any other institutional

logic) constructs but also constrains the means and ends that social actors can possibly ideate and generate “a set of values that order the legitimacy, importance, and relevance of issues and solutions” (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008: 114).

We contend that the focus on contexts largely shaped by the market logic has crowded out the consideration of other logics (cf., Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). In contrast, the public policy context maintains multiple, often conflicting logics—including economic, political, cultural—that all play out at once, and where their interactive effects are what ultimately influence policy. One could also point to the theoretical concept of stakeholders within management theory (cf. Freeman et al., 2010). Similar to the dynamic of logic complexity, there are many equally powerful stakeholders with diametrically conflicting areas of concern, responsibility, accountability, resources, and constituents within the public policy context, as compared to a few (or one) powerful stakeholders within the for-profit business context. In addition, due largely to incompatible home cultures of management researchers and policymakers, the ability for us to influence and learn from each other is often limited (Beech et al., 2022). Indeed, the focus of management research on evidence and scientific rigor seems fundamentally at odds with the pragmatist epistemology and value focus that underlies most public policy (Wickert et al., 2021).

We encourage management scholars to explicitly disclose their assumptions regarding permeability and to elaborate whether and to what degree their theorizing is workable in a public policy context. Consider, for example, Wijen (2014) who discussed a fundamental policy trade-off in the context of socio-environmental governance. Specifically, he argued that if organizations try to align their practices with the prescribed means of a policy, it may jeopardize the policy’s ends. As policy makers cannot fully anticipate how prescribed means are linked to

desired ends, policies might be dysfunctional, especially under conditions of high complexity and low transparency. According to Wijen (2014), enforcing compliance may thus threaten goal achievement. While Wijen does not discuss the performative assumption of his theory on policy, he points out that current practice cannot be easily changed given today's rigid institutions are ill-equipped to deal with causal complexity. Wijen (2014) underlines the challenge of applying management theory to policy practice when permeability is low.

BRIDGING OUR DISCONNECTS

Based on the cursory literature review mentioned above and our experience as readers, authors, reviewers, and editors at *AMR*, most articles published in this journal assume (often implicitly) performativity to be low and permeability to be high. That is, in our manuscripts, most of us do not explicitly discuss the potential performativity of theoretical concepts. Instead, we assume that theory is merely representative of social reality and has little potential to shape the behavior and interactions that constitute that reality, including policy practice. We also do not reflect on permeability and tend to assume that management theory can be easily applied to public policy and that our theoretical ideas can be almost seamlessly implemented into policy practice. Although we have not formally derived distinct categories by blending these two dimensions of the management theory-public policy relationship, we could envision performativity and permeability mapping onto a 2x2 matrix with low and high levels. Our discussion here is centered on the concern that most published management articles to date are located in the low performativity / high permeability cell, reflecting a descriptive-instrumental treatment of the management theory-public policy relationship. The lack of balance in this virtual matrix offers our community a unique opportunity to start populating the other three cells.

Practically, to realize the full power of management theory to better the world (at scale),

we call on our colleagues to consider deepening their direct and personal interactions with the public sector. For example, some colleagues might find benefit from embedded residencies where they can lend their expertise to policy makers while operating within a different environment than academe or private firms and engaging with stakeholders who operate across legislative, administrative, and community boundaries. Conferences that invite policy makers to interact with academic scholars are another such forum (e.g., Behavioral Science and Policy Association). Academic partnerships with governmental agencies can offer scholars a consulting model of engagement to learn about policy contexts and hone their skills to apply management practices to such contexts. Per Marti and Gond (2018), management scholars can encourage policy makers to experiment with new theory and identify anomalies of existing theory. We can also help policy makers to make sense of these anomalies thereby facilitating shifts in practices (Marti & Gond, 2018). Through publications, teaching, consulting, and outreach activities—and considering that as academics we are high-status actors and trusted sources of expertise and legitimacy—we have significant influence on which new theories and anomalies practitioners will focus. This authority implicates significant responsibility as well as raises the question of our value judgments and normative standpoints; important facets of our profession that we must acknowledge and consider.

Other colleagues might find benefit from exploring grant processes that will push them to evaluate their work through a public good lens. The U.S. National Science Foundation's mission, for instance, combines intellectual criteria and broader impact since resources come from taxpayers and thus, involve different evaluation and monitoring processes. Though most of us might not seek out these federal sources of funding out of necessity, given the luxury of internal research budgets, the exercise of imagining and articulating the importance of our theory to such

institutions can yield new understanding and insights regarding public policy. Such interactions and experiences can also help us better communicate to policy makers through a shared language that is thoughtful of our differing cultural perspectives.

CONCLUSION

We hope that our editorial sensitizes authors to the implicit assumptions underlying management theory and can provide guidance on how to position research to influence policy practice. Making our assumptions explicit, we believe, is crucial to advancing our understanding of public policy and ultimately, the potential of management theory to positively impact this domain. Achieving clarity regarding the dimensions and constitutive assumptions underlying the management theory-policy practice relationship also allows for the design of more targeted and effective interventions. Specifically, we have discussed the revelation of two assumptions. First, management theory can be high in performativity and thus, we need to be intentional regarding the kind of reality we want create. This normative interest can manifest through discussions of the available means to achieve (seemingly) taken-for-granted ends such as social welfare or the public good (cf. Marti & Scherer, 2016) or through integration of social mechanisms that make it more likely that theories become self-fulfilling (Marti & Gond, 2018). Second, management theory can be low in permeability and thus, not easily actionable in policy practice. This requires our careful consideration of the potential system-level intricacies involved in the application of our theoretical insights. Together, a consideration of performativity and its underlying mechanisms can help increase permeability of management theory to public policy, and by extension, the relevance, usefulness, and positive impact of our cumulative management knowledge. Other possible assumptions surely exist, and we encourage future research to further refine and build on our preliminary observations.

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