

WHAT IS THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION? A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract. *Theoretical contribution is a process which is based on the theory development and advancement in existing theory with some logics and facts. This study has focused on some theoretical contribution related question and their answers through the narrative review of literature. This study will highlight what is the theory? And what are the major building blocks of theory? How authors can contribute in theory? The answers for these questions during theoretical studies will enhance the impact of paper and also increase the chance of publication. This study also suggested how theoretical concepts can be practical implemented in the society and organizations to enhance organizational performance and validate the theory.*

Keywords: Theory, theorizing, theoretical contribution, theory building blocks, theory utility.

Introduction

The most asked question in scholarly community is “What is your theoretical contribution.” This study will try to answer this question. Theory is the set of instructions, which is based on some statements (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). The purpose of these statements is to explain some phenomena. In the real world, every phenomenon tries to explain some realities through different factors. So, it is important to highlight the major factors those have more contributed role to explain the phenomena. The highlighted factors should be integrated with each other to establish a relationship (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). These factors and their relationship try to explain why and how this phenomenon occurs. Therefore, theory is the set of statements to highlight

some factors and then established the relationship between these factors which will explain how and why this phenomenon is occurred (Gioia & Pitre, 1990).

Theoretical contribution is not a new concept in management sciences. Because the management science's field is interlinked with psychology, sociology, economics, political sciences and many other disciplines (Gordon & Howell, 1959). So, it is the multidisciplinary study which enhanced the importance of theory and its contribution. However, at the same time theoretical contribution is not so easy task because it requires too much effort. Furthermore, there are no specific actions to perform to reach the theory. No, any proper guideline is provided to a scholar for theoretical development. So, lack of knowledge and expertise for theory development are the major constraints in theoretical contribution (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

Top journals in the management sciences like AMR require the theoretical contribution within the field of management sciences. The aim of this journal is to publish only original articles which those have unique and interested theoretical contribution (Whetten, 1989). It is not important that the theory must be accepted, but it is important that theory must be interested and having some logic behind the theory. So, the theory must be based upon some facts, and it must be value added in the existing knowledge. The theory-related journals focused on only the theory contribution (Corley & Gioia, 2011). If editor or reviewers feel that paper had no meaningful contribution in theory, then they will not accept paper for publication. Thus, every paper must be interested and factual to contribute to the theory.

This study has focused on the following questions. What is the theory? What is theorizing? What is not the theory? What are the essential building blocks of theory development? What is theoretical contribution? How editors and reviewers admit the theoretical contribution? What is theory utilization?

What is Theory?

Theory has not the specific definition because different scholars have different views regarding theory. However, the main concern regarding theory is same. Most of the scholars are agreed that theory is based on some variables those have the relationship with each other to find or explain any phenomena (Corley & Gioia, 2011). So, it is concluded that the set of statements, which is based on some variables and these variables have some relationship with each other, the relationship may or may not be the organizational processes or the way of actions to perform specific activities to reach specific outcomes (Gioia & Pitre, 1990).

Theory does not always remain fixed. It will be developed and got, matured or rejected with the passage of time and advancement of knowledge.

Furthermore, the acceptance of theory plays the more important role than the development of theory (Corley & Gioia, 2011). If the theory is really good, but it will not be accepted by target population, then it is useless. Either theory will accept or got to reject it is not important the main importance of thing is that it should be interested based on facts and figures and must be accepted by the stakeholders (Kaplan, 1964).

Theory must be comprehensive based on some specific terms regarding to the field. In a theory, at least one phenomenon must be addressed. It should answer almost all questions regarding theory. The most important thing regarding is that it must be generalized (Corley & Gioia, 2011). So, the theory must be rechecked, or it can be do again, which will give the solution of specific phenomena. If the theory cannot be retested, then it will not be admitted as theory. On the other hand, the advancement of knowledge and theory contribution may reject the theory but for specific time period and in specific situation, theory must be retest and prove the same phenomena again and again (Mintzberg, 2005).

What is Theorizing?

Theorizing is the overall process of theory development. All the set of activities which will perform to develop the theory is called theorizing. According to different scholars' theory is the product and the theorizing is the process (Weick, 1995). So, it is the process which will adopt to gain end product of theory. Theorizing process has not a specific process or set of specific actions to achieve theory. Because each theory is unique and the process to develop each theory is also different. So, it is different from theory to theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995).

The general theorizing process is based on the abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing and idealizing. It is the complete process of theorizing. The theorizing approximation can be divided in to four major processes. The first process is to identify a broad framework and develop the broad framework to address the specific phenomena. In this process only, factors and variables have been identified (Weick, 1995). These are major factors that are contributing in the phenomena. But the relationship between these variables has not been identified at this stage. This step only highlights the people and factors or variables and makes the framework in broader sense in this stage. No relationship between variables can be identified at this stage (Bacharach, 1989).

The second stage of theorizing process is based on specifying the broader framework in to specific sense to address the phenomena. In this stage the

concepts or variables are defined and they are more cleared. The definition of variables makes them clearer (Weick, 1995). If some additional variables are taken in the broader framework of first stage then they are ignored in this stage because this stage give more clear concepts about the phenomena and effecting variables on the phenomena. Still there is no relationship between the variables have been developed in this stage. So, this stage only gives the definition and clarity about variables instead of making the relationship between variables (Runkel & Runkel, 1984).

The third stage of theorizing is to develop the hypothesis. In this stage post factum interpretation has been given to develop ad hoc hypothesis. This hypothesis development will make a clear relationship between variables on the basis of facts and figures. In this step the process got more clarity and developed the relationship among variables but at that stage no any theoretical test has been conducted (Weick, 1995). This stage of theorizing gives the whole clarity about concepts, their relationship and the set of all activities which will be done during theorizing. Only data collection and hypothesis testing about theory has not done in this stage. So, this stage is the exploratory stage, so, this stage will not explain the phenomena (Staw & Ross, 1978).

The last stage of theorizing process is generalization on the basis of empirical results. In this stage of theorizing everything about theory will be explained properly. Relationship between variables have been defined and these relationships also tested through hypothesis testing process and the results of these tests can be interpreted (Weick, 1995). This stage also gives the future predictions about the phenomena. This stage also provides a framework to develop future relationship among variables. Theorizing is totally different from theory. In simple words theory is the end product and theorizing are the process or set of activities to perform for the achievement of this end product is theory (Weick, 1993).

What is not Theory?

The answer to this question is really interested because in most of the papers, authors claim some parts of their paper as theory. However, actually, these parts are not the part of theory. Many scholars are agreed that five parts variables, diagrams, data, hypotheses and references are not the part of theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995). On the other hand, some scholars also suggest that these are not the actual theories, but these parts have the major contribution in theory development. It is concluded that variables, diagrams, data, hypotheses and references are not theory (Whetten, 1989).

Variable of consideration is the only factors which are describing the phenomena. So, these are the factors of theory not the actual theory (Sutton &

Staw, 1995). However, the variables are only one part of whole theory as mentioned in the process of theorization. The identification or definition of variables is the only one set of the theorizing process. So, it is useless to consider that variables constitute the whole theory. Variables are used to develop the theoretical framework (March & Simon, 1958).

Diagrams are not theory. Because diagrams only show only the pictorial path or the process to doing each activity to reach the result of theory. One picture is better than hundreds of stories that's why some scholars give too much importance to diagrams (Sutton & Staw, 1995). It is better to include the diagram in paper, which will be more understandable for both reviewer and readers to grasp the concept of theory or phenomena. However, in actual, it is not the theory it is just the pictorial way to develop a good understanding. So, many scholars are agreed that diagrams will support to readers to grasp the whole concept, but it is not the concept or theory (Whetten, 1989).

Data is not the theory because data needs to be retest or prove the theory. In most of the management studies primary or secondary data is used for hypotheses' testing. The results of these hypotheses will either support or reject the theoretical framework (Sutton & Staw, 1995). So, data is only used in the repetition of theory. Different types of data will support the same theory. Therefore, it is huge difference between theory and data its self. Based on that difference, many scholars are agreed that data is not the theory. Treat both differently (Kaplan, 1973).

Hypotheses are not theory because hypotheses or propositions are just assumptions. The main difference between hypotheses and proposition is that hypotheses are the statement those can be tested through statistical techniques but propositions are also concepts, but they can define and establish the relationship between concepts (Sutton & Staw, 1995). These concepts cannot be tested through statistical techniques. In both cases, data will be used but this data can only support to test and retest of hypotheses to establish the validity of theory. However, the data alone without theory is useless. So, data needs theory to establish the relationship between variables. On the other hand, some scholars believe on empirical model and theoretical models separately, but their consent is also that data is not a theory. Both are independent by their identity, but they need support of each other for their validity (Kaplan, 1964).

References are not theory, but they provide a guideline or pathway for sound literature review for the establishment of the broader framework for theory. This framework also establishes the relationship between variables and defined variables. References are also the acknowledgement of contributors who provide the guideline to establish the framework for theory or phenomena

development (Sutton & Staw, 1995). The place to put references in the paper is the end of paper in management sciences. References are also not mentioned during concept or theory development. So, most of the scholars are agreed that references are separate from theory. With the consent of different scholar's point of view this study also supported that references are not theory (Weick, 1993).

It is concluded that variables, diagrams, data, hypotheses and references are not theory. At the same time, it is also not justice to ignore the importance of variable in theory making. The answer to this question will clear the importance of each part of papers and make a clear difference that what is not the theory.

Essential Building Blocks of Theory Development

Every theory is different from another theory. So, it is impossible to make a universal building block for each theory. It varies from one theory to be other. However, there are some essential blocks which very the theory must be addressed (Whetten, 1989). This question will address these major building blocks of theory. There are four major building blocks of each theory. These are what? When? How and Why? Every theory must answer these four questions or every theory must be based on the answer of these four building blocks (Whetten, 1989).

What? It is considered the most important building block of every theory. It consists of the variables or concepts which will explain the phenomena. This question will highlight the major factors those are effecting on the phenomena (Whetten, 1989). There are two steps in this block. The first step is to choose the right and relevant factors those are effecting on the phenomena. While the other step of this building block is parsimony. In this process the un related factors or low effecting factors on any specific phenomena should be deleted (Dubin, 1976).

When? It is the second most important essential block of every theory. The purpose of this element is to create the balance between parsimony and comprehensiveness of the theory. It is really complicated issue for the theorist. Because in this step they also have to remove some additional concepts from theory (Whetten, 1989). These are those concepts or variables which have fulfilled the first essential building block of theory. Because every selected factor does not have the same or high effect on social phenomena. So, it is required to reduce more less effecting or additional elements those have been selected. Here, theorist had to consider that no factor will be deleted, which will reduce the comprehensiveness of theory. So, the balance between

comprehensiveness and parsimony should be developed at this stage (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

How? It is also the most important building block of theory because in this stage causality or the relationship between variables was established. This relationship is based on the operationalization which means how variables are effecting with each other. Furthermore, this stage will also suggest that process of all interlinked activities to achieve the outcomes for any phenomena. Some scholars also suggest that there must make a diagram based on boxes and arrows to show the variables and the relationship between these variables (Whetten, 1989). This diagram will be more convenient for readers, reviewers and authors to understand the whole theory, and it's all processes in a way as author has established during theory development. The diagram representation of theory also combines both what and how factors of theory. Because the diagram shows the variables which are based on what element and also show the relationship between these variables which address how the element of theory building (Mintzberg, 2005).

Why? It establishes the rationale of the theory. It also gives the justification of variables to contributing in the exact phenomena. It is equally important to give the reasoning that why these factors are socially, economically and psychologically important to resolve the particular problem or phenomena. This building block also established the reason that why this theory is significant and why colleagues and friends will recommend this theory (Whetten, 1989). So, it is the answer of the acceptance of theory by society. It also established the link between empirical and theoretical model (Homans, 1964). Most of general and important questions will be addressed in this theory building block.

The building blocks of what and how describe a phenomenon. Only why is the building block which will explain the phenomena. All theory building blocks have their own importance. Every theory will address these basic building blocks of theory. No, any theory will be established without these five theory building blocks.

What is Theoretical Contribution?

Theoretical contribution is the most important question which will be asked everywhere during discussion or publication. What is your theoretical contribution? Many scholars are misunderstood that theoretical contribution is only the addition or subtraction of variables from theory. However, in actual it is not the theoretical contribution (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Dubin, 1976). Theoretical contribution has broader scope. The authors must be addressed that

why they add or subtract any variable from existing variables in theory? And how change in the variable will effect on existing theory? So, these questions must be addressed during theoretical contribution. Without answering these questions no theoretical contribution is considered significant (Weick, 1989).

Theoretical contribution is further divided into two dimensions. The first dimension is the originality. This dimension of theoretical contribution is also divided into two sub dimensions. These are incremental and revelatory (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Dubin, 1976). The first dimension of originality is incremental. This dimension will explain if some additional variable is added in the existing theory and how the addition of new variable will behave in current phenomena. How the current theory will change through the addition of this new variable. This is the main purpose of incremental contribution is to show how the new variable will change or improve existing theoretical framework (Glaser, Strauss, & Strutzel, 1968).

Revelatory is the second dimension of originality in theoretical contribution. This concept how the theory will contribute towards the advancement of existing knowledge (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Dubin, 1976). It is also considered that theory must reveal the hidden truths related to phenomena, which have not been discovered yet. So, it may be led to new theory development. So, the revelatory play's more important part in theory contribution. Theoretical factors must open the hidden factors related to phenomena. The theory must be interested, and it is not important either theory is accepted or rejected. The important thing is that how much theory is interested for its stake holders (Festinger, 1962).

The second dimension of theoretical contribution is the utility. The utility of theory is the practical implementation of theory. It explains how concepts will be implemented in the organizations or in society. The utilization of theory is the also divided into two sub dimensions these are scientific utility and practical utilities (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Dubin, 1976). The scientific utility is the utility of theory in the other fields of study. How one theory can be implemented in the other fields of study and enhance the theoretical implementation in knowledge. It is also cross validation of theory in different fields, which will enhance the credibility of theory (Mintzberg, 2005).

Practical utility of theory is also the contribution of theory. Because it is the practical implementation of theoretical concepts into organizations and has to find the effect and outcome of these concepts (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Dubin, 1976). If the theoretical contribution matches with the practical outcomes of the concepts, then the theory is considered to have a great contribution in social and organizational development (Dubin, 1976).

It is concluded that only the addition and subtraction of variables without reasoning and finding the effect are not the theoretical contribution. Editors, reviewers and readers want to find out the interested outcomes of theories—its utility and originality. All these factors should answer how it affects? Or how it explains changing effect? And also explain the reason without reasoning no theoretical contribution will be considered. That is the main reason of rejection of papers because authors claim it has theoretical contribution but in reality, paper has not been contributing in theory.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the various aspects of theory building and theory contribution. Different questions have been addressed throughout this study, which will provide a comprehensive guideline for researchers to consider while developing and contributing in theory. These guidelines also reduce the misunderstandings about theory contribution. The implementation of this study during the theory development or contribution will enhance the productivity and chances of publication of theoretical papers in theory-related journals.

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