

Using Theory Elaboration to Make Theoretical Advancements

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Abstract

We describe an actionable research approach for addressing current challenges to theoretical advancement labeled *theory elaboration*. Theory elaboration is the process of conceptualizing and executing empirical research using preexisting conceptual ideas or a preliminary model as a basis for developing new theoretical insights by contrasting, specifying, or structuring theoretical constructs and relations to account for and explain empirical observations. We identify and describe seven specific tactics for conducting a theory elaboration study: horizontal contrasting, vertical contrasting, new construct specification, construct splitting, structuring specific relations, structuring sequence relations, and structuring recursive relations. We also link each tactic with different types of theory advancements. In addition, we provide a sequential decision-making process for deciding whether to adopt a theory elaboration approach given a particular research domain and context. Finally, we identify research domains and specific topics in organizational behavior, human resource management, strategic management, and entrepreneurship for which theory elaboration is likely to be most effective as a means to make theoretical advancements.

Keywords

theory building, theory elaboration, philosophy of science, epistemology, theory advancement

Many theories used by contemporary management researchers were formulated several decades ago and have persisted mostly intact since then (Suddaby, Hardy, & Huy, 2011). The opposing forces of *fragmentation* and *lack of novelty* seem to restrict theory advancement. On the one hand, the field of management is viewed as splintered (Birkinshaw, Healey, Suddaby, & Weber, 2014; Pfeffer, 1993, 2013; Webster & Starbuck, 1988). “Our field is rapidly being pulled apart by centrifugal forces. Like a supernova that once packed a wallop, our energy is now dissipating and we are quickly growing

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cold,” noted Hambrick (2004, p. 91). On the other hand, management theories are described as devoid of novelty. “Like symphony orchestras that play a repertoire of a dozen baroque and classical composers year in and year out, management research can sometimes appear like a living museum of the 1970s,” noted Davis (2010, p. 691). Clearly, there is dissatisfaction with the pace of theoretical progress and a slow pace of progress predicted for the future (Edwards, 2010). A possible solution for the fragmentation challenges is to consolidate ideas and work with what we have, whereas lack of novelty can be solved via the creative discovery of new theoretical frontiers. But how can we address this push-pull dilemma to make theoretical advancements?¹

We suggest that one way to address current challenges to theoretical advancement is to adopt an approach that has loosely been referred to as *theory elaboration*. Lee, Mitchell, and Sablinski (1999) referred to the concept of theory elaboration when, in a review of qualitative management research, they suggested that “Theory elaboration occurs when preexisting conceptual ideas or a preliminary model drives [a] study’s design” (p. 164). They used the term to distinguish between theory generation that “occurs when the inquiry’s design produces formal and testable research propositions” and theory testing that “occurs when formal hypotheses or a formal theory determines the study’s design” (Lee et al., 1999, p. 164).² Since then, some researchers have referred to the work by Lee et al. and explicitly used the term *theory elaboration* to describe their research approach.³ Other scholars have adopted such an approach implicitly and without the label *theory elaboration* to carry out their research. Some of the articles that implicitly or explicitly adopted such an approach are among the most highly cited and impactful published articles in the management field, yet this approach is not codified.⁴

Our article uses a reverse-engineering process to extract fundamental features of impactful theory elaboration studies and make them explicit and actionable.⁵ By defining and explaining how to conduct a theory elaboration study, offering illustrations about implementation tactics (i.e., how to use particular tactics to achieve specific theory advancement goals), and pointing to particular contexts and circumstances where theory elaboration is most fruitful, our article serves as a catalyst for “cloning” the important theoretical advancements that have been achieved by the handful of studies that have adopted this perspective in the past.

Table 1 includes a brief summary of 10 impactful articles that adopted a theory elaboration approach explicitly or implicitly. On the surface, many of these studies seem to have little in common. Yet, for each study listed in Table 1, the authors conceptualized and executed an empirical study using preexisting conceptual ideas as a basis for contrasting, specifying, and/or structuring theoretical constructs and relations so as to advance an existing theory. Additionally, each study has received substantial attention based on citations, as reflected in the last two columns of Table 1. We use these studies as key reference points when reverse engineering fundamental features and processes underlying impactful theory elaboration.

The remainder of our article is organized as follows. First, we offer an in-depth and detailed definition of theory elaboration. Second, we describe three broad implementation approaches and seven specific tactics for implementing a theory elaboration perspective. This section of the article offers specific and actionable guidelines regarding how to conduct a theory elaboration study to achieve specific theory advancement goals. Third, we outline decision steps prior to adopting a theory elaboration perspective. This section of the article describes a decision-making process for choosing whether to adopt a theory elaboration perspective given a particular research domain and context. Finally, we identify an initial set of research domains and research questions for which the adoption of a theory elaboration perspective can be particularly beneficial for theory advancement.

Theory Elaboration: Definition and Constituent Elements

To produce a clear definition of theory elaboration, we examined how it has been explicitly and implicitly applied to date in impactful published articles. We assessed, categorized, and integrated

Table 1. Summaries of Impactful Articles Using a Theory Elaboration Perspective.

Article	Research Question(s)	Brief Description	Substantive Theories	Results	Citations	Citations Per Year
Bechky (2003)	How is information shared between different occupational communities?	Investigation of information sharing practices between different groups in a single organization	Knowledge sharing	Description of co-creation process to establish common ground between different occupational groups	1,328	102
Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano (2001)	How are routines developed when new technology is introduced?	Investigation of 16 hospitals implementing an innovative technology for cardiac surgery	Organizational learning	Identification of four process steps underlying successful adoption of new technology	1,287	86
Ely and Thomas (2001)	Under what conditions does diversity enhance or detract from workgroup functioning?	Investigation of diversity perspectives and practices in three separate organizations	Diversity theory	Three perspectives on workforce diversity that influenced how people managed diversity	1,588	106
Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991)	What is the nature of strategic change and the CEO's role in instigating it?	Investigation of a strategic change effort in a large public university	Organizational change	Framework with four phases of strategic change.	2,612	104
Greenwood and Suddaby (2006)	How do actors embedded in an organizational field facilitate change in that field?	Investigation of how large accounting firms transformed the orientation of the industry	Institutional theory	Process model of institutional entrepreneurship	1,355	135
Maguire, Hardy, and Lawrence (2004)	How do individuals on the periphery of an organizational field facilitate change in that field?	Analysis of actions of institutional entrepreneurs when advocating for HIV/AIDS treatment in Canada	Institutional theory	Set of propositions describing how and why actors at the center of a field initiate change	1,367	113
Maitlis (2005)	How do large groups of stakeholders make sense of contentious issues?	Longitudinal analysis of sensemaking processes in three symphony orchestras	Organizational sensemaking	Categorization of four forms of organizational sensemaking	849	77
Shane (2000)	Why do entrepreneurs discover opportunities?	Investigation of eight sets of entrepreneurs that exploit a single MIT invention	Austrian economics	Description of the relation between sensemaking and "sensegiving"	3,741	233
Tripsas and Gavetti (2000)	How do capabilities and cognition influence organizational inertia?	Investigation of Polaroid Corporation's response to technological change	Organizational inertia	Identification of factors that enable entrepreneurs to discover opportunities	1,778	111
Weick (1993)	Why do organizations unravel? How can organizations be made more resilient?	Investigation of Mann Gulch fire disaster in Montana	Organizational sensemaking	Managerial cognitive representations direct search processes in a new learning environment	3,603	157

Note: Citations and citations per year are based on Google Scholar as of October 30, 2016.

the various explanations and applications into distinctive themes and ideas—the constituent elements of the theory elaboration definition. We then consolidated the themes and ideas with the original description (mentioned earlier) by Lee et al. (1999) to arrive at an integrative definition of theory elaboration, as follows:

Theory elaboration is the process of conceptualizing and executing empirical research using preexisting conceptual ideas or a preliminary model as a basis for developing new theoretical insights by contrasting, specifying, or structuring theoretical constructs and relations to account for and explain empirical observations.

Theory elaboration entails engaging in a process of conceptualizing and executing empirical research. This requires specifying constructs, relations, and processes at the conceptual level and assessing the fit of those relations empirically. This dual process facilitates connections within and between the conceptual and empirical planes, thereby nurturing “a logic of discovery rather than only a logic of validation” (Van Maanen Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007, p. 1146). Theory elaboration also entails using preexisting conceptual ideas or a preliminary model. Existing ideas provide a foundation for a new study (Lee et al., 1999). Accordingly, theory elaboration requires that researchers be familiar with the existing research and that a study is designed and conducted to explicitly build on what has been done before. Theory elaboration is also about improving theories so that they accurately account for and explain empirical observations. The “aim of organizational and management research is to . . . provisionally order, explain, and predict, (presumably) observable social processes and structures that characterize behavior in and of organizations” (Van Maanen et al., 2007, p. 1145).

Theory elaboration entails contrasting, specifying, or structuring theoretical constructs and relations as implementation tactics. Contrasting facilitates comparisons across contexts or levels of analysis to evaluate how constructs and relations apply in settings different from those in which they were originally developed. Construct specification creates clearer, more useful constructs and a better understanding of the nature of relations involving those constructs. Structuring is a tactic in which theoretical relations are elaborated on so that they accurately describe and explain empirical observations. It may focus on identifying relations that have not previously been identified, or it may focus on explaining complex relations related to sequential or repeated interactions that have not been fully considered in prior theory.

Similarities and Differences Between Theory Elaboration and Other Approaches for Theorizing

Next, we offer several clarifications as well as discussion of similarities and differences between theory elaboration and other existing approaches for theorizing. Theory elaboration is an important facet in the broader knowledge creation process, which also includes theory generation (i.e., the deductive or inductive creation of new theory) and theory testing (i.e., the analysis of whether and when a theory holds up empirical scrutiny). These three facets—theory generation, testing, and elaboration—each serve a complementary purpose in the knowledge creation process, and although they each have distinctive inputs, processes, tactics, and outputs, they are not mutually exclusive. As summarized in Table 2, theory generation provides new theoretical ideas. It begins with an unexplained phenomenon and then draws on data to induct new constructs and relationships (inductive theory generation) or derives new constructs and lays out relationships using well-reasoned arguments (deductive theory generation). New testable propositions or constructs stem from the theory generation process. Theory testing exposes theoretical ideas to empirical scrutiny. It begins with formal hypotheses derived from existing theory. Researchers then collect and analyze data that may

Table 2. Contrasting Theory Generation, Theory Testing, and Theory Elaboration.

	Theory Generation	Theory Testing	Theory Elaboration
Input	Unexplained phenomenon; little to no existing theory	Formal hypotheses derived from extant theory	Partially explained phenomenon; an existing conceptual model and/or ideas
Process and tactics	Induct constructs and relationships from data or develop and derive new concepts and relationships using logical, well-reasoned arguments	Collect and analyze data to assess whether they provide evidence supporting hypothesized relationships	Use existing concepts and models to collect and organize data to contrast, specify, and structure theoretical constructs and relations so as to refine existing theory
Output	New testable propositions; new constructs	Accept or reject hypotheses derived from extant theory	Refinement of existing theoretical ideas—refined contextual factors, constructs, and/or relationships

serve as evidence in support of the hypotheses. This allows researchers to accept or reject the derived hypotheses. Theory elaboration fosters the development, expansion, and tightening of existing theoretical ideas. Theory elaboration begins with an existing conceptual model that partially explains a phenomenon. Researchers then use the existing concepts and model to collect and organize data to contrast, specify, and structure theoretical constructs and relations so as to refine existing theory. The output of such a process is a refined and elaborated theory that more accurately accounts for contextual factors, constructs, and/or relationships.

Most studies include an element of theory generation, testing, and elaboration, but the primary focus of each study is usually different. Some studies focus primarily on theory generation, some on theory testing, and some on theory elaboration. Yet, because of the interdependent nature of these facets, a study with a dominant focus on one facet may include other facets in a less prominent way. Most of the literature on knowledge creation discusses tools, perspectives, and insights pertaining to theory generation and testing (e.g., Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Suddaby, 2010; Whetten, 1989). We contribute to this existing literature by adding tools, perspectives, and insights pertaining to theory elaboration.⁶

Theory elaboration is related to other recognized methodological approaches including grounded theory and abductive reasoning. First, consider the relation between theory elaboration and grounded theory. Grounded theory may serve as a form of theory elaboration in well-done studies. Grounded theory is a “pragmatic approach to social science research, [in which] empirical reality is seen as an ongoing interpretation of meaning produced by individuals engaged in a common project” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 633). It is an ongoing and recursive process of theory development, testing, and elaborating. Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed grounded theory as an antidote to so-called “great man” sociological theories, which they viewed as so distant from empirical reality that they were virtually resistant to empirical testing or examination. They sought a “compromise between extreme empiricism and complete relativism by articulating a middle ground in which systematic data collection could be used to develop theories that address the interpretive realities of actors in social settings” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 634). In so doing, Glaser and Strauss (1967) urged researchers to link empirical observations and interpretations with substantive (i.e., existing) theory in the formulation and generation of grounded theory. Common misconceptions are that grounded theory allows a

researcher to ignore prior research in formulating a study or that grounded theory may be used to test predefined hypotheses (Suddaby, 2006). Neither option is true. Just as theory elaboration requires a researcher to be aware of existing theory and build on but not explicitly test existing theory, so does grounded theory. A grounded theory design is a potentially useful way to conduct a theory elaboration study (e.g., Bechky, 2003; Gephart, 1978, 1993, 1997), yet not all theory elaboration studies necessarily utilize a grounded theory design. In fact, only about half of the theory elaboration examples that we highlight in Table 1 make a specific reference to grounded theory. Gephart's (1978) ethnomethodological study of succession events in an emerging organization provides a salient example of how a grounded theory research design may be used to extend and elaborate prior theory. Specifically, he used a grounded theory design to examine and make sense of succession events in a university organization, and this allowed him to elaborate theory of organizational leadership succession in ways that would otherwise remained uncovered.

Second, consider the relation between theory elaboration and abductive reasoning. *Abductive reasoning* is a term coined by philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1931-1958). It refers to reasoning that forms and evaluates hypotheses in order to make sense of puzzling facts (Thagard & Shelley 1997). Examples of abductive reasoning are found in medical diagnosis, fault diagnosis, and archaeological reconstruction (Weick, 2005). Peirce initially described abduction as the use of known rules to explain a fact or observation but later broadened the meaning to include making up new rules to explain surprising facts and observations. "In this broadened view clues give rise to speculations, conjectures, and assessments of plausibility" (Weick, 2005, p. 433). Locke, Golden-Biddle, and Feldman (2008) contrasted abduction with other forms of reasoning by pointing out that "deduction proves that something *must* be; induction shows that something *actually is* operative; abduction merely suggests that something *may be*" (p. 907). Even though abduction is thought to be a valuable way to advance theory (e.g., Blaikie, 2007; Locke et al., 2008), its practical application for that purpose is less clear. Van Maanen et al. (2007) pointed out that "the forms abductive reasoning can take are not well understood, and we have too few cases of success and failure in hand to warrant much more than blind guesses as to its paths" (p. 1153). Similarly, Bamberger and Ang (2016) noted that "abductive reasoning is by its very nature overly permissive in attempting to distill theory from . . . findings" (p. 4). Theory elaboration, which may be viewed as a form of abductive reasoning, provides an actionable and tangible set of guidelines to use abductive reasoning as a means to advance theory.

Given the aforementioned description, theory elaboration is also different from some of the prior specific descriptions of abduction for theory advancement. Blaikie (2007) and Gephart (in press) described an interpretive abductive process for theory advancement that begins with capturing everyday commonsense terms used by social actors. Those terms are then used with social actors' accounts of their experience to develop social scientific descriptions that provide the basis for new or revised theories (Gephart, in press). Theory elaboration differs from this interpretive abductive process in that theory elaboration starts with an existing theory, which is used to examine empirical realities to identify where such theory falls short so that it can be elaborated. So although theory elaboration may be viewed as a type of abductive reasoning, it differs in its starting point from the interpretive approach to abductive reasoning described by Blaikie (2007) and Gephart (in press). This, however, does not preclude theory elaboration for fitting in with the broader philosophy of abductive reasoning (Peirce, 1931) and hence being viewed as a form of abduction.

Next, we offer a discussion and actionable guidelines on how to conduct a theory elaboration study. We consider three broad implementation approaches—contrasting, construct specification, and structuring—and seven specific tactics for conducting a theory elaboration study: horizontal contrasting, vertical contrasting, new construct specification, construct splitting, structuring specific relations, structuring sequence relations, and structuring recursive relations.

Conducting a Theory Elaboration Study: Implementation Approaches and Tactics

There are several ways in which theory may be advanced as part of a theory elaboration study. As per Bacharach's (1989) framework for evaluating theories, advancements may take place in one of five different forms. First, theory may be improved through enhanced construct validity such that constructs are more clearly defined and distinguishable from other similar constructs. Second, theory advancement takes place when construct scope is adequately captured such that it sufficiently reflects the phenomenon in question. Third, theory may be improved when proposed relations have greater logical adequacy such that the implicit or explicit logic of a relation is clearly specified and nontautological. Fourth, theory may be improved if relations have greater empirical adequacy such that they better reflect organizational realities. Finally, theory may be improved when theoretical relations have greater explanatory potential and predictive adequacy such that they can more accurately explain and/or predict outcomes of interest.

A theory elaboration study should address at least one or more of these five criteria for theory advancement. These criteria are related to how a theory elaboration study is conducted. From the prior research adopting a theory elaboration perspective, we have identified three broad implementation approaches and seven specific tactics that can be used to elaborate theory. Each broad approach advances theory in a different way in accordance with the criteria outlined by Bacharach (1989). First, a contrasting approach to theory elaboration is the examination of a theory's application across different settings so as to improve logical and empirical adequacy of the theory. A contrasting approach may be further subdivided into horizontal or vertical contrasting. Second, a construct specification approach involves identification or refinement of theoretical constructs so that they more accurately reflect empirical realities. A construct specification approach can be used to improve construct validity and scope. A construct specification approach may entail two specification tactics: new specifications (i.e., specification of a new theoretical construct) or construct splitting. Third, the structuring approach entails describing and explaining theoretical relations so that they more accurately align with empirical observations. A structuring approach can be used to improve explanatory potential and predictive adequacy of an existing theory. A structuring approach may entail specific tactics including specifying or refining individual relation structures, sequence structures, or recursive structures. Table 3 provides a summary of each approach and specific tactic that might be used as part of a theory elaboration study.⁷

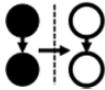
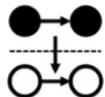
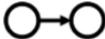
Next, we describe each broad implementation approach and specific tactic. In addition, we offer "implementation guidelines" highlighting when each tactic will be most suitable and beneficial given a particular research context and purpose. In short, the material in this section offers concrete and actionable guidelines regarding how to conduct a theory elaboration study.

Contrasting

Contrasting is a theory elaboration approach in which the application of a theory in one setting is compared with the application of that same theory in another setting. Contrasting theoretical constructs and relationships across different contexts allows researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of a theory and analyze the aspects of a theory that are generalizable and which aspects are context specific. Contrasting may be done across different industry, organizational, or geographic contexts (i.e., horizontal contrasting) or across different levels of analysis (i.e., vertical contrasting).

Horizontal contrasting. Horizontal contrasting is the process of examining how an existing theoretical insight fits in a context different from that for which it was developed. A theory is often developed

Table 3. How to Conduct a Theory Elaboration Study: Implementation Approaches and Tactics.

Implementation Approaches and Specific Tactics	Graphical Representation	Fundamental Features	Implementation Example	Primary Theory Advancement Purpose ^a
Contrasting Horizontal contrasting		Contrasting observations across different contexts	Maguire, Hardy, and Lawrence (2004); Greenwood and Suddaby (2006)	Improving logical and empirical adequacy
Vertical contrasting		Contrasting observations across different levels of analysis	Tripsas and Gavetti (2000)	Improving logical and empirical adequacy
Construct specification New specification		Identifying and defining new constructs	Bechky (2003); Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991)	Improving construct validity and scope
Construct splitting		Identifying a need to break a broad construct into specific constructs	Maitlis (2005); Ely and Thomas (2001)	Improving construct validity and scope
Structuring Specific relations		Defining/redefining a specific relation between two constructs	Greenwood and Suddaby (2006); Shane (2000); Weick (1993)	Improving explanatory and predictive adequacy
Sequence relations		Providing an explanation of a sequence of events or relations	Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano (2001); Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991)	Improving explanatory and predictive adequacy
Recursive relations		Accounting for a recursive relation between two or more entities over repeated interactions	Tripsas and Gavetti (2000)	Improving explanatory and predictive adequacy

^aPer Bacharach's (1989) criteria for theory evaluation.

inductively from data within a specific setting or deductively with a defined context as a boundary condition. To advance that theory, one can examine how it fits with or explains data collected from a different context (Vaughan, 1992). Replications and differences that emerge offer the opportunity for a theory to be advanced. Horizontal contrasting represents the situation in which the level of analysis (e.g., individual, team, organization, or field) remains constant across comparisons but the context for comparison varies. For example, Maguire, Hardy, and Lawrence (2004) used a theory elaboration perspective to compare and contrast theoretical insights pertaining to institutional change initiated by organizations in the center of a mature field, as reported in prior research, with data pertaining to institutional change initiated by actors on the periphery of an emerging field in their research setting. The key output from horizontal contrasting is the generalization of aspects of a

theory to a new context and a deeper understanding of how the elements of a theory vary when applied in a different context.

Vertical contrasting. Vertical contrasting is the comparison of a theory developed to explain constructs and relations at one level of analysis with data gathered to describe constructs and relations at another level. The practice of adapting theory developed for one level of analysis to examine phenomena at another level is prevalent in management research (Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009). Examples include individual-level concepts that have been adapted to explain organizational-level activities, including organizational learning (Argote, 1999), organizational decision making (Cyert & March, 1963), and organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985). When transferring a theoretical perspective across levels of analysis, it is important to consider which aspects of the theory function in a similar way in the new and old setting (Morgeson & Hofmann, 1999) and which aspects of the theory change across levels. For example, Tripsas and Gavetti (2000) used theory on cognition, which is traditionally an individual-level construct, to examine organizational responses to technological change. The cognition literature provided an initial framework to examine how a top management team collectively interpreted external technological changes and how such interpretations constrained organizational behavior and impacted the development of a firm's capabilities. The output of vertical contrasting is new theoretical advancements that generalize a theory beyond prior applications and describe nuanced theoretical differences as theory gets adapted across levels of analysis.

The tactics of vertical or horizontal contrasting provide researchers with the opportunity to improve the logical and empirical adequacy of an existing theory. The fundamental nature of existing theoretical relations can be scrutinized by carefully considering whether such relations make logical sense as they are applied in different settings or at different levels of analysis from those for which a theory was originally designed. By carefully considering whether the logic of a relation holds or changes across different contexts, the true mechanisms driving that relation may become clearer, thereby enhancing logical insight into and understanding of a relation. Second, by using a contrasting approach for elaborating theory, the empirical adequacy of a theory can be advanced. Bacharach (1989) pointed out that for a theory to be empirically adequate, the following should be satisfied: "There either must be more than one object of analysis, or that object of analysis must exist at more than one point in more than one point in time" (p. 506). By examining whether a theory holds up empirically across different contexts through horizontal or vertical contrasting, theory elaboration can enhance the empirical adequacy of the theory. In sum, we propose the following theory elaboration implementation guideline:

Implementation Guideline 1: If the primary research focus is to improve logical and/or empirical validity of an existing theory, then a contrasting approach and tactics can be employed as part of a theory elaboration study.

Construct Specification

Construct specification is a theory elaboration approach in which a theoretical construct is specified or refined to more accurately reflect the realities and insights that emerge empirically. Based on such empirical work, new constructs may emerge, or the need to split theoretical constructs may become evident. Each of these different types of construct refinement can potentially improve a theory.

New specifications. Existing theory can be advanced by identifying and defining constructs that have not previously been considered in existing theory. Constructs are the theoretical units that are

approximated or observed in the empirical world. “Clear constructs are simply robust categories that distill phenomena into sharp distinctions that are comprehensible to a community of researchers” (Suddaby, 2010, p. 346). Identifying and defining previously unspecified constructs creates opportunities to recognize new theoretical relations that accurately depict reality (Suddaby, 2010). Conducting a theory elaboration study enables a researcher to identify new constructs in an empirical setting, and a grounded theory approach is one way to do so (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). For example, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) used theory elaboration as a means to identify and describe the construct of sensegiving—“the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (p. 442). Sensegiving was inducted, using a grounded theory approach, as a concept to complement the existing theoretical concept of sensemaking in a strategic change context. Without the application of the existing theory on sensemaking and strategic change, the recognition and specification of the sensegiving construct may never have come about.

Construct splitting. In some instances, theory can be advanced when existing constructs are split into specific dimensions to provide accurate portrayals of the different elements of those constructs. Scholars may initially propose and develop broad constructs in an effort to achieve theoretical parsimony (Eisenhardt, 1989). Examining how a construct behaves in reality may allow a researcher to recognize that a single construct has multiple dimensions. If partitioned into two or more dimensions, the validity and scope of the construct may be enhanced, and it becomes easier to account for outcomes of interest when taking the different dimensions into account (Bacharach, 1989). For example, Ely and Thomas (2001) used existing theory on workgroup diversity as a basis for their examination of diversity perspectives and workgroup effectiveness in three diverse professional services firms. Through an in-depth analysis of individual interview data, they identified three distinct workforce diversity perspectives: the integration-and-learning perspective, the access-and-legitimacy perspective, and the discrimination-and-fairness perspective. Their research suggested that these different diversity perspectives

influenced how people expressed and managed tensions related to diversity, whether those who had been traditionally underrepresented in the organization felt respected and valued by their colleagues, and how people interpreted the meaning of their racial identity at work. These, in turn, had implications for how well the work group and its members functioned. (Ely & Thomas, 2001, p. 229)

Therefore, by identifying and specifying different perspectives on workforce diversity, Ely and Thomas were able to explain prior contradictions in the research on cultural diversity and workforce outcomes. This example along with others in the literature (e.g., Maitlis, 2005) illustrate that theory can be refined by identifying and defining unique dimensions of an existing construct; in so doing, more accurate theoretical linkages can be proposed, and previous inconsistencies within management research can be resolved (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001; Maitlis, 2005), thereby improving the validity and scope of the construct.

Adopting a construct specification approach to theory elaboration allows researchers to specify new constructs or split existing constructs based on observed empirical realities. Such tactics can enhance the construct validity and construct scope of existing theory. Construct scope and validity is enhanced when a new or revised construct is clearly defined and distinguishable from other similar constructs, increasing discriminant validity (Bacharach, 1989; Kerlinger, 1973). Construct splitting may enhance discriminant validity by more clearly distinguishing between different constructs. Theory is therefore advanced when constructs are refined such that they sufficiently but parsimoniously capture and reflect the phenomenon in question. The tactics of new construct specification or

construct splitting empower researchers to improve accuracy of existing constructs, thereby advancing existing theory. Based on the prior arguments, we offer the following theory elaboration implementation guideline:

Implementation Guideline 2: If the primary focus is to improve the validity and/or scope of a construct, then the construct specification approach and tactics can be employed as part of a theory elaboration study.

Structuring

Structuring is a theory elaboration implementation approach in which theoretical relations are elaborated on so that they accurately describe and explain empirical observations. A structuring tactic to theory elaboration may focus on identifying relations that have not previously been identified or it may focus on explaining complex relations related to sequential or repeated interactions that have not been fully considered in prior theory. We identify and describe three tactics to elaborate theory using a structuring approach.

Specific relation structures. One tactic to improve or advance a theory is by identifying and describing specific relations between constructs that have not previously been described or identifying and describing the mechanisms that underlie known relations. As Bacharach (1989) pointed out, “a theory may be viewed as a system of constructs and variables in which the constructs are related to each other by propositions and the variables are related to each other by hypotheses” (p. 498). Theory elaboration enables a researcher to hone in on the relation between two (or more) constructs or variables to isolate and understand how variance in one accounts for variance in another (Langley, 1999; Mohr, 1982). Yet management researchers seldom account for all the variance in an outcome variable, and many times, the mechanisms driving key relations between variables are poorly understood (Anderson et al., 2006). Theory elaboration enables a researcher to use existing theory as a basis for moving from a direct and linear relationship to moderation, mediation (through a new construct), and nonlinear relationships and to specify previously unspecified connections between constructs or isolate and unpack the mechanisms driving known relations. For example, Greenwood and Suddaby (2006) elaborated theory on institutional entrepreneurship by identifying and describing why and how actors at the center of an organizational field implemented institutional change. Prior research by the same authors had drawn attention to the relation between a central field position and institutional change (cf. Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002), but the antecedents and mechanisms of this relation were poorly understood. Greenwood and Suddaby conducted a theory elaboration study to build on their prior understanding so as to specify which central actors in a field are more likely to institute change and isolate the mechanisms that drive such change.

Sequence structures. Another tactic for elaborating theory is through the examination of sequence effects. Many management theories are developed as variance theories that provide “explanations for phenomena in terms of relations among dependent and independent variables (e.g., more of X and more of Y produce more of Z)” (Langley, 1999, p. 692). However, some organizational situations need to be understood by considering the temporal ordering and probabilistic interaction between variables. Therefore, process theories that “provide explanations in terms of the sequence of events leading to an outcome (e.g., do A and then B to get C)” can provide an enriched and more valid perspective of reality (Langley, 1999, p. 692). Although conducting research that accounts for temporal ordering of events is typically complex and challenging (Langley, 1999), theory elaboration is a useful way to examine such interactions over time and their effects on key outcome

variables. When examining temporal processes, it is often useful to organize data using existing theoretical constructs to gain new theoretical insights (e.g., Langley & Truax, 1994; Nutt, 1984). Hence, a theory elaboration tactic that utilizes existing theory as a base to analyze data and develop new theoretical perspectives can be highly productive. For example, Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano (2001) used theory elaboration to expand insights into organizational change by accounting for different sequential learning processes between those organizations that were successful in implementing new routines versus those that were not. They collected and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data on the learning and change processes and outcomes in multiple hospitals implementing innovative new cardiac surgery technology. Using extant theory on organizational learning and change as a theoretical base, they identified and categorized the learning and change processes within each hospital. Their results reflect consistent differences in learning sequence between hospitals that successfully and unsuccessfully implemented the new technology. If Edmondson and colleagues had not used extant theory as a basis for identifying learning and change processes, their task of uncovering the temporal effects of organizational change would have been significantly more challenging. Similarly, if they had not collected and analyzed rich qualitative and quantitative data, then they would not have been able to accurately capture longitudinal effects. A sequence structuring tactic as part of a theory elaboration study provided Edmondson and colleagues the unique opportunity to integrate process and variance elements of organizational change.

Recursive structures. A theory elaboration perspective can also be applied to advance theory by accounting for and describing recursive interactions between different constructs in a theoretical model. While the concept of an interaction is commonplace in management theories (e.g., moderation), it is less common for scholars to examine what happens with repeated interaction between two constructs over a period of time. Using qualitative and quantitative data to capture and analyze an unfolding relation between two constructs as they interact repeatedly may enhance scholarly understanding of the nature of such a relation. It is often the case that an existing theory may already reflect a relation between two constructs, yet the recursive nature of the relation between such constructs is often poorly understood or ignored. Therefore, a prior theoretical model can serve as a basis for designing and conducting a study to examine how a relation develops and evolves as two (or more) constructs interact repeatedly over time. Two kinds of recursive interactions can be examined in a theory elaboration study: dyadic interactions between actors or entities and multilevel interactions between constructs operating at different levels of analysis.

Tripsas and Gavetti's (2000) research on cognition and capabilities is an example of multiple, multilevel interactions between constructs over time. They used a theory elaboration perspective to examine the relationship between managers' understanding of the changing world around them and the accumulation of organizational capabilities over time. Through their in-depth study of Polaroid, they identified that managerial cognitive representations direct organizational search processes, which in turn influence the accumulation of organizational capabilities. Accumulated organizational capabilities then impact managerial cognitive representations and perceptions as they seek to make sense of continually changing environment. Hence, a theoretical understanding of recursive relationships between managerial cognitions, organizational capabilities, and firm inertia was derived.

A structuring approach to theory elaboration allows researchers to improve the explanatory and predictive adequacy of an existing theory. The explanatory adequacy of a theory is dependent on the specificity of assumptions regarding objects of analysis and the scope and parsimony of related propositions (Bacharach, 1989). Predictive adequacy is the degree to which hypotheses and propositions approximate reality (Bacharach, 1989). By using a structuring approach to better specify and understand specific, sequence, and recursive relations, the true nature of the interconnections between constructs and the mechanisms driving those interconnections can be more explicitly

captured in management theories. With that, the scope and parsimony of propositions can be improved. As Bacharach (1989) pointed out,

qualitative field research . . . may go much further in enhancing the explanatory adequacy of a theory than quantitative research. Such techniques are ideal when the theory constructionist is seeking to find and explain causal relations, while quantitative methods are better when the researcher wishes to test these relations. (pp. 508-509)

Hence the structuring approach to theory elaboration has the potential to substantially enhance the explanatory and predictive adequacy of an existing theory. We therefore propose the following theory elaboration implementation guideline:

Implementation Guideline 3: If the primary focus is to improve the explanatory and predictive adequacy of an existing theory, then the structuring approach and tactics can be employed as part of a theory elaboration study.

We have described three broad approaches and seven specific tactics that can be used as part of a theory elaboration study. Although each tactic is independently described, it is common, and even desirable, to employ more than one tactic in a single study. In other words, these tactics are not mutually exclusive because, as summarized in Table 3, they accomplish different yet complementary goals to advance theory.

Although thus far we have focused on the opportunities from adopting a theory elaboration perspective, we do not advocate using theory elaboration in all research domains and under all circumstances. Moreover, there are specific decision criteria that should be examined to evaluate the extent to which adopting a theory elaboration perspective may be particularly advantageous. Next, we outline a decision-making process that can be used as a tool to understand the extent to which a theory elaboration perspective is appropriate.

Decision Process for Choosing Whether to Adopt a Theory Elaboration Perspective

Theory elaboration is likely to be most beneficial under certain conditions. Accordingly, in this section, we outline a three-step decision process that serves as a guide when choosing whether or not to adopt a theory elaboration perspective. The decision process is based on three questions, and if the answer to all three questions is in the affirmative, then theory elaboration is a viable and potentially beneficial research perspective. If the answer to any of the questions is in the negative, then other research approaches may be more beneficial. This sequential decision process is summarized in Figure 1.

Question 1: Is There an Existing Theory and Access to Data That May Be Used to Explain or Offer Insight Into the Focal Phenomenon?

Theory elaboration uses preexisting conceptual ideas or a preliminary model as the starting point. Thus, the first decision point involves conducting a comprehensive literature review to ascertain the extent to which there is some theory that might provide a foundation for analyzing and understanding the phenomenon of interest and whether it is possible to access data that might be used to evaluate the phenomenon. If there is no prior theory that might provide a foundation for analyzing data pertaining to the issue of interest or if it is difficult or impossible to access data that may be used to evaluate what is going on, then other perspectives to theorizing such as a deductive theory

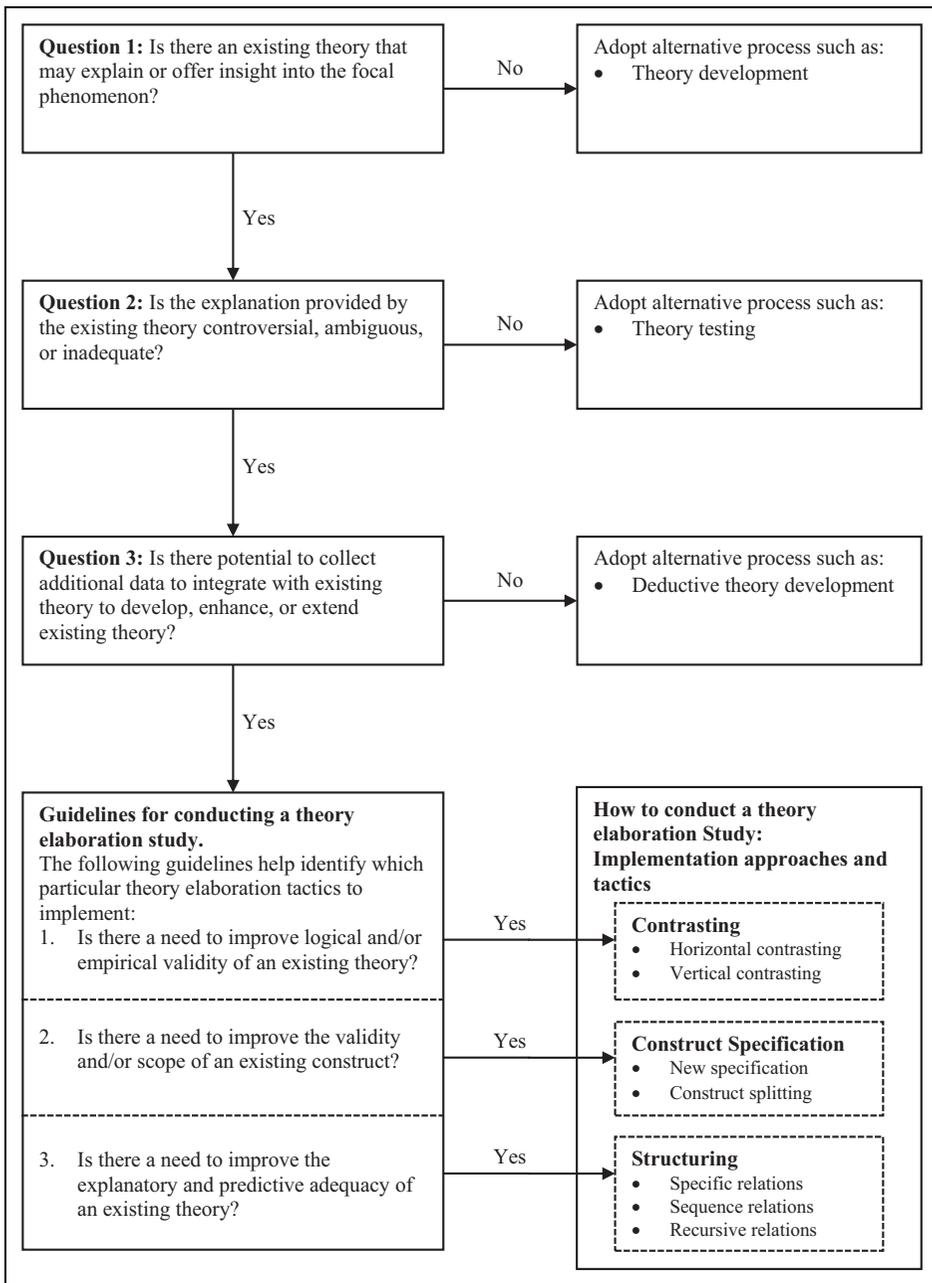


Figure 1. Decision process for choosing whether to adopt a theory elaboration perspective.

development approach are more appropriate. Many articles published in the *Academy of Management Review* fit this scenario. For example, Navis and Ozbek (2016) used this perspective to develop a theoretical explanation of the

paradox in which entrepreneurs high in overconfidence and narcissism are propelled toward more novel venture contexts—where these qualities are most detrimental to venture

success—and are repelled from more familiar venture contexts—where these qualities are least harmful and may even facilitate venture success. (p. 109)

On the other hand, if there is some existing theory that may provide a basis for categorizing existing data and/or explaining focal relations and processes and there is the potential to access data to evaluate focal relations and processes, then one can transition to Question 2. For example, Edmondson et al. (2001) utilized the existing theory on organizational routines and team learning as a starting point to explain the adoption of new technology in hospitals. They gained access to qualitative and quantitative data from cardiac surgery departments in 16 hospitals, and this allowed them to proceed to Question 2 toward a theory elaboration perspective.⁸

Question 2: Is the Explanation Provided by the Existing Theory Controversial, Ambiguous, or Inadequate?

Theory elaboration involves contrasting, specifying, or structuring theoretical constructs and relations. Thus, if the phenomenon of interest does not involve some type of controversy, ambiguity, or inadequacy in terms of explaining it, then other perspectives to theorizing such as theory testing are more likely to be appropriate. In such a case, hypotheses can be deductively developed and tested within the context of the existing data (Lee et al., 1999). On the other hand, if there is some controversy, ambiguity, uncertainty, or inadequacy in the existing theoretical explanation, then one can transition to Question 3. For example, the controversy and ambiguity in research on workgroup diversity provided an opportunity for Ely and Thomas (2001) to pursue a theory elaboration study. They summed up the existing literature as follows: “The skepticism as well as mixed results concerning intergroup differences in organizational behavior diminish the potential value of this line of research for elucidating the relationship between cultural diversity and work group effectiveness” (p. 233). The skepticism as well as mixed results provided a basis for them to consider collecting additional data to integrate with existing theory to develop, enhance, or extend existing theory, as per Question 3.

Question 3: Is there Potential to Collect Additional Data to Integrate With Existing Theory to Develop, Enhance, or Extend Existing Theory?

As described earlier, theory elaboration has a dual conceptual-empirical as well as inductive-deductive focus. Thus, if the research context is such that, for example, new data are unlikely to lead to inductive theorizing, then a researcher may be required to adopt a purely deductive theory development perspective. On the other hand, if there is the possibility of collecting new data that would allow for both inductive and deductive theorizing, theory elaboration will allow for contrasting, specifying, and structuring theoretical constructs and relations to more accurately account for and explain empirical observations so as to advance existing theory. For example, Shane (2000) collected rich multisource data (e.g., interviews, technology licensing office archives, patent records, financial records) to account for the opportunity identification processes adopted by eight entrepreneurial teams, all exploiting the same MIT invention (i.e., 3D printing technology). Shane’s access to a novel setting (with eight different entrepreneurial teams all with access to the same technology) coupled with a contested theoretical base pertaining to entrepreneurial opportunity identification (i.e., neoclassical equilibrium theories, psychological theories, and Austrian theories) provided a valuable opportunity to collect and analyze data that allowed him to integrate empirical insights with existing theory on opportunity discovery to enhance and extend theory in ways that would not have been possible had theory elaboration not been used. Specifically, the limited number of teams with access to the exact same technology and the intricacies of each team’s opportunity

discovery processes would not have allowed for a more traditional theory testing approach. Additionally, the established yet contested theory base for explaining opportunity discovery meant that developing a new theory would have been inappropriate because it would have added more confusion and noise to a crowded research domain. Hence, adopting a theory elaboration approach provided an opportunity to refine and clarify existing theory.

Opportunities for Theory Elaboration Research

In this section, we offer a discussion of specific types of research situations for which there is potential for the adoption of a theory elaboration perspective. Within each of these situations, we offer illustrations of specific domains in organizational behavior and human resource management (OBHRM), strategic management, and entrepreneurship to which a theory elaboration perspective may be relevant and useful for theory advancement.⁹ This selected set of illustrative opportunities is summarized in Table 4.

Emergent Theory

A fruitful setting for applying a theory elaboration perspective is with emergent theories. When a theory is first developed, some aspects may be underspecified or unclear. A theory elaboration perspective can be used to analyze and assess how data gathered from an empirical setting fit with a new theory and evaluate how aspects of the theory can be refined, adapted, and enhanced. An example of theory elaboration in an emerging theoretical domain is reflected in the advances to institutional entrepreneurship theory. The concept of institutional entrepreneurship emerged out of an essay on institutional theory (DiMaggio, 1988). DiMaggio's (1998) description of the concept was interesting but arguably underspecified. Maguire et al. (2004) utilized the concept of institutional entrepreneurship introduced by DiMaggio to analyze qualitative and quantitative data to explain institutional changes in HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy field. Through their detailed and deliberate efforts to apply the concept of institutional entrepreneurship to explain what they observed in empirical data, they were able to enhance and further develop the emergent theoretical concept of institutional entrepreneurship.

While there are always new theoretical concepts emerging in different areas of management scholarship, there are certain new theories recently introduced to the management literature that may be advanced through a theory elaboration perspective. For example, in the area of organizational behavior, the recently proposed theory of purposeful work behavior (Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2013), which links personality traits with individuals' goals and job characteristics to foster the psychological state of meaningfulness, may be refined and advanced through theory elaboration. Similarly, the emerging theory of resource orchestration (Sirmon, Hitt, Ireland, & Gilbert, 2011) in strategic management could be refined and enriched through theory elaboration. Sirmon and colleagues (2011) suggest "that research questions pertaining to resource orchestration across firm breadth, depth, and life cycle need to be examined" (p. 1407). To do this, the resource orchestration theory can serve as a starting point for examining managers' actions to effectively structure, bundle, and leverage firm resources in different organizational contexts. Theory elaboration would allow researchers to contrast resource orchestration activities across different stages of a firm's life cycle, different levels of management, and/or different product portfolios, thereby contextualizing activities associated with resource orchestration. Additionally, structuring tactics may be employed to assess how resource orchestration activities in one period affect such activities in subsequent periods via feedback loops and path dependencies. In an emergent theoretical space, relevant contextual factors may be overlooked, and important time-dependent and follow-on relationships may be

Table 4. Selected Opportunities for Theory Elaboration Research.

Research Context	Research Domain		
	Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management	Strategic Management	Entrepreneurship
Emergent theory: a situation in which a theoretical perspective is underdeveloped and still emerging	Purposeful work behavior (e.g., Barrick, Mount, & Li, 2013)	Resource orchestration (e.g., Sirmon, Hitt, Ireland, & Gilbert, 2011)	Creation theory (e.g., Alvarez & Barney, 2007)
New contexts: a new context or change of an existing context in which organizations and individuals operate	Individual interactions in online social networks (e.g., Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013)	Crowdsourcing as mechanism for organizational search (e.g., Afuah & Tucci, 2012)	eLancing marketplaces as a setting for entrepreneurial activity (e.g., Aguinis & Lawal, 2012)
Theory borrowing: theory is borrowed from another domain or another level of analysis	Application of retooling concepts to individuals confronting cultural change (e.g., Molinsky, 2013)	Application of individual problem formation concepts to organizations (e.g., Baer, Dirks, & Nickerson, 2013)	Application of individual and organizational identity concepts to new ventures (e.g., Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Navis & Glynn, 2011)
Cross-level effects: variables at different levels of analysis appear to materially interact with one another	How leadership humility translates into team-level and organization-level outcomes (Owens & Heckman, 2012)	Response of CEOs and top management teams to organizational crises events (e.g., Pfarrer, DeCelles, Smith, & Taylor, 2008)	Interactions between founders and boards of directors in determining strategic direction of entrepreneurial firms (e.g., Garg, 2013)
Theory contradictions: conflicting conclusions exist about mechanisms or constructs accounting for an outcome	Test validity in human resource recruitment and selection processes (Aguinis & Smith, 2007)	Executives' interpretation of and response to external stakeholder demands (e.g., Eesley & Lenox, 2006; Waldron, Navis, & Fisher, 2013)	Role of entrepreneurial passion (e.g., Chen, Yao, & Kotha, 2009; Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009)
Theory reversals: phenomena operate in the opposite direction than what is typically examined	Professional identity loss and recovery (e.g., Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014)	Eradicating a firm's organizational identity (e.g., Anteby & Molnár, 2012)	The demise of successful new ventures (e.g., Fisher & Kotha, 2014)

underspecified or ignored. The approaches of contrasting and structuring can help fix this by accounting for relationships in different contexts and examining path dependencies and feedback loops.

New Contexts

The emergence of a new research context or the transformation of an existing context also offers a fruitful opportunity for theory elaboration. Such a situation requires that researchers seek to understand the extent to which existing theories apply and consider how theories might need to change for the new context. Pfeffer (2013) argued that sound theories remain consistent across time and space and that researchers are too quick to adapt theories for new contexts. Others argue that many

management theories are context dependent because of historically contingent institutionalized practices and assumptions, hence the context in which a theory is applied matters a great deal (Willmott, 2013). Past research utilizing a theory elaboration perspective has examined concepts and relations in unique and interesting contexts—such as a fire fighting team (Weick, 1993). When the environment in which an organization or individual operates changes or when a new technology emerges that transforms how people or organizations relate to each other, then existing theories that predict and explain behavior and performance may need to be updated. Theory elaboration provides the tools and flexibility to do this without ignoring what has been developed in the past.

New contexts for research in different areas become available on an ongoing basis. New research areas that may be relevant for elaborating theory relating to OBRHM, strategy, and entrepreneurship include interactions in online social networks (e.g., Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013), crowdsourcing as a mechanism for management search (e.g., Afuah & Tucci, 2012), or online marketplaces as a setting for entrepreneurial interactions (e.g., Aguinis & Lawal, 2012). When elaborating or adapting theory for a new context, the theory elaboration tactic of horizontal contrasting is most likely to be useful as it enables a researcher to adapt a theory developed for another setting and to apply it to the next context. That said, the approaches of construct specification and structuring may become relevant in the new context if one identifies unaccounted for relationships and constructs.

Theory Borrowing

Borrowing or adapting theories from other areas of study (e.g., Whetten et al., 2009) may provide a setting in which a theory elaboration perspective is useful. Whetten and colleagues (2009) described two types of theory borrowing: (a) “horizontal borrowing” reflecting theories borrowed and adapted across disciplines—such as the incorporation of social movement theory from sociology into the study of organizational change and (2) “vertical borrowing” for theories borrowed across levels of analysis—such as the inclusion of theoretical individual-level concepts into research explaining organizational-level phenomena such as organizational decision making (Cyert & March, 1963) or organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

When theories are borrowed from other disciplines and/or transferred across different levels of analysis, the applicability of the theory to the new context and its validity in that context can be called into question (Whetten et al., 2009). Scholars must carefully consider how a theory needs to be changed and adapted for a new context. In doing so, they have the opportunity and obligation to elaborate the theory. For example, Bingham and Davis (2012) adopted a theory elaboration perspective as a basis to enhance theory on organizational learning, a concept that is borrowed from the literature on individual learning and applied to an organizational level of analysis (Argote, 1999). Theory elaboration allowed them to more clearly understand and articulate how sequences of learning activities affect organizational outcomes.

In the recent literature, theory borrowing has been used in a number of different settings. For example, Molinsky (2013) applied the concept of retooling from the operations management literature to examine how individuals confront cultural change in the organizational behavior literature. Individual problem-solving frameworks have been borrowed to consider how organizations frame and address strategic challenges in the strategy literature (e.g., Baer, Dirks, & Nickerson, 2013), and identity concepts have been borrowed from the individual identity literature to consider how identity impacts new ventures in the entrepreneurship domain (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Navis & Glynn, 2011). In all these cases, theory elaboration may provide a means for further advancing and developing a theory that has already been developed. Specifically, the theory elaboration tactics of vertical and horizontal contrasting are relevant when a researcher is attempting to borrow and adapt

a theory from another area of study as it is important to compare, contrast, and assess if and how the theory holds up in the new setting.

Cross-Level Effects

Theory elaboration is useful for examining interactions between constructs extending across different levels of analysis. Such interactions are often complex and difficult to conceptualize and analyze (Aguinis, Boyd, Peirce, & Short, 2011; Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Culpepper, 2013). The flexibility of theory elaboration allows research to not only examine variables at various levels of analysis (e.g., industry, category, organizational, departmental, workgroup, individual) but also to examine interactions between variables across these different levels of analysis. An example of a cross-level effect is evident in the research of Lepoutre and Valente (2012), which used a theory elaboration perspective to examine interactions between individual-level variables (e.g., individual experience, behavioral impetus, cognitive sensitivity) and organizational-level variables (e.g., local differentiation) in theorizing how and why some organizations become less sensitive to the prevailing logic and correspondingly enact a deviant logic. Any situation in which important mechanisms seem to operate across levels of analysis presents a potentially fruitful domain for theory elaboration research. Opportunities for cross-level theorizing using a theory elaboration perspective are prevalent in current management research. For example, research on diversity has evolved due to work examining cross-level relations. Initially, diversity was studied at the individual level of analysis. More recently, diversity research has examined how heterogeneity across individuals, teams, and context impacts performance outcomes—including both bottom-up and top-down processes (Ragins & Gonzalez, 2003). Yet the complexity and recursive nature of such cross-level interactions mean that many opportunities exist to elaborate theory in this domain. In other cross-level scenarios, theory elaboration may also be used to further analyze how CEOs and top management teams respond to organizational crises events (e.g., Pfarrer, DeCelles, Smith, & Taylor, 2008) or how interactions between venture founders and their board of directors determine the strategic direction of entrepreneurial firms (e.g., Garg, 2013). The various structuring tactics, particularly specific relational structuring and recursive structuring, are important when examining interactions between constructs extending across different levels of analysis. Additionally, construct splitting may be important to elaborate more precise constructs as one examines their effect and relationships across levels.

Theory Contradictions

Another fruitful condition for theory elaboration is in resolving contradictory or conflicting conclusions in existing research. This occurs when the same theory yields different results or when different theoretical mechanisms are both argued to account for the same result. Such situations may demand that a researcher conduct an in-depth study utilizing existing conceptual frameworks. By getting “close” to the issue through collecting and analyzing multiple types of data, a researcher may be able to elaborate why existing theories yield contradictory conclusions and thereby enhance and develop existing theory. Ely and Thomas (2001) provide an example of a theory elaboration study that helped resolve mixed results in prior research on work group diversity. By carefully examining how individuals in three different professional service firms viewed cultural diversity, they “identified three diversity perspectives that appeared to have different implications for how well people functioned in their work groups and, therefore, how likely their workgroups were to realize the benefits of their diversity” (p. 240).

Current opportunities for resolving theory contradictions using a theory elaboration perspective may include deeper theoretical treatment of test validity in human resource recruitment and selection

processes (Aguinis & Smith, 2007), resolving questions relating to how and when executives respond to stakeholder demands in the strategic management literature (Eesley & Lenox, 2006; Waldron, Navis, & Fisher, 2013), and consideration of the role of entrepreneurial passion in the entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009; Chen, Yao, & Kotha, 2009). The tactics of construct specification and structuring most likely play into elaborating theory to resolve theory contradictions. The underlying cause of a contradiction is usually not clear, but it may relate to an unobserved or underspecified construct or a relationship that is poorly understood, and the tactics of construct specification and structuring can resolve this in a theory elaboration study.

Theory Reversals

An additional fruitful setting for theory elaboration research is to explain phenomena that work in the opposite direction to what is typically considered or evaluated. Theories are developed to account for how and why certain things happen in a certain way (e.g., resources are associated with power in resource dependence theory; institutions give rise to isomorphism in institutional theory). In some instances, scholars may observe that the expected pattern is broken or reversed. There is sometimes an opportunity to explore why such a reversal took place and thereby examine the “flipside” or reversal of an existing theory, thereby elaborating the original theory. For example, Mantere, Schildt, and Sillince (2012) used the reversal of a planned strategic change at a large government organization as an opportunity to examine what happens when a strategic change is reversed. Prevailing logic would suggest that the reversal of a planned change would prompt a company to go back to its prior strategy, but they discovered that the process is more complex and nuanced than expected and were thereby able to enhance research on strategic change by examining change reversal. Contradictions or reversals to the prevailing logic have the potential to provide “interesting” theoretical developments (Davis, 1971), the elaboration of theoretical propositions that “deny certain assumptions of [the] audience” (Davis, 1971, p. 309) by highlighting something that goes against the prevailing logic.

Theory reversals have recently been captured in research related to professional identity loss and recovery (e.g., Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014), eradicating a firm’s organizational identity (e.g., Anteby & Molnár, 2012) and the demise of successful entrepreneurial ventures (e.g., Fisher & Kotha, 2014). As researchers seek to understand such phenomena in greater detail, so theory elaboration may be advantageous to catalyze theoretical advancements. The recursive and sequence relationship structuring tactics should be particularly valuable as researchers examine how a theory operates in reverse because the process and feedback effects of moving in the opposite direction from what was intended are likely to be pronounced.

Limitations of a Theory Elaboration Perspective

We readily acknowledge that the theory elaboration perspective has limitations. First, the opportunity to capture and integrate complex contextual relations using theory elaboration can result in research that generates overly complex theories. Theories that are complex are less likely to be understood and hence may not have broad appeal or utility. Researchers adopting a theory elaboration perspective walk a fine line between elaborating theories such that they become overly complex and hence unusable while also accounting for the cross-level and cross-context complexity that is a hallmark of organizational situations.

A second potential limitation of a theory elaboration perspective is that it may result in theories that are so specific to a certain context that they lack generalizability. Although accounting for context in management research is generally considered to be a worthwhile endeavor (House,

Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995), if one begins to elaborate and change theories to account for many different contexts, the theory may lose its impact because external validity may be jeopardized.

Third, theory elaboration research is affected by the strength of the elaborated theory that serves as the starting point for the theory elaboration process. If the underlying theory is weak or flawed, then unless the researcher makes some advances to strengthen the theory in the theory elaboration process, there is a risk that the elaborated theory will also be weak or flawed.

Fourth, because specific theories present a unique perspective on a phenomenon, any theoretical advancement that comes from theory elaboration is likely to be limited to the theory perspective that is used as a starting point for a theory elaboration study. To overcome this limitation, one may need to engage in theory building rather than theory elaboration where one seeks to move away from a particular perspective.

An additional potential limitation of theory elaboration is that conclusions are not always established on the basis of formal statistical tests and standards. Researchers who depend solely on a probability percentage as a basis for drawing conclusions may perceive the qualitative elements of the theory elaboration perspective as somewhat subjective. Although statistics also provide multiple opportunities for “subjective” interpretation, there is a risk that readers and reviewers perceive statistical conclusions to be necessary and therefore place less value on insights emerging from the qualitative elements of theory elaboration.

Conclusions

Management research faces fragmentation and lack of novelty. These two challenges work in opposition to one another and lead to a seemingly inescapable push-pull dilemma when attempting to advance theory. Accordingly, there is a need to embrace alternative perspectives that might enable us to make theoretical advances. Theory elaboration is such an alternative because it develops stronger links between the conceptual and empirical planes.

Although the concept of theory elaboration was first alluded to in the 1990s, there is not a clear definition for it, and there are no guidelines regarding when, why, and how a theory elaboration perspective can be used as a viable means for advancing theory. This lack of clear definition and implementation guidelines is a likely reason why only a few scholars have adopted it as a basis for conducting research. Interestingly, however, many of the handful of published studies that used a variant of theory elaboration have had a significant impact. Our article makes a unique value-added contribution by defining and describing theory elaboration as a perspective that allows investigators to systematically evaluate observable phenomena in relation to existing conceptualizations as a basis for advancing theory. Our article also described seven concrete and actionable implementation tactics for those wishing to conduct a theory elaboration study. Given the important theory advancements and impact of some of the articles that have used a theory elaboration perspective, we hope our guidelines and recommendations will serve as a catalyst to “clone” those very successful and impactful studies so as to lead to theoretical progress in other research domains. Furthermore, we described boundary conditions for the use of theory elaboration—decision criteria to understand the appropriateness and potential of adopting a theory elaboration perspective in a particular context and research domains.

In closing, theory elaboration holds a great promise as a perspective to empower management scholars to overcome some of the current challenges associated with theory advancement. A small number of scholars have already used a variant of this perspective to produce high-quality and high-impact research. We hope that given the specific guidelines and recommendations offered in our article, the number of researchers taking advantage of this perspective may increase substantially

and with that the paradoxical challenges of fragmentation and lack of novelty confronting management research may be collectively tackled.

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Both authors contributed equally to this article.

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Notes

1. As noted by an anonymous reviewer, assessments of theoretical novelty may depend on the knowledge of the person making the assessment. Also, the more fragmented a field, the more challenging it is to assess novelty. Therefore, as fragmentation increases, so does the difficulty in assessing novelty. Fragmentation of a field and striving for novel theoretical contributions therefore exacerbate one another, and with increased fragmentation, assessing novelty becomes more complex.
2. Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) used somewhat similar language to classify published studies based on the extent to which they “build new theory” and/or “test existing theory.” However, their classification and measurement instruments did not include a theory elaboration category.
3. We conducted a search and found that between the years 2000 and 2015, authors of 12 articles in *Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)*, 4 articles in *Organization Science (OS)*, 4 articles in *Strategic Management Journal (SMJ)*, and 1 article in *Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ)* used the term *theory elaboration* to describe their research approach. We also searched other journals, particularly some that publish micro-oriented research such as *Journal of Management* and *Journal of Applied Psychology*, but we did not find any relevant articles. This was an interesting finding in itself because it suggests the potential for theory elaboration studies in micro-oriented fields.
4. Four of the *AMJ* articles that explicitly used the term *theory elaboration* to describe their approach earned *AMJ*'s best paper award in the years they were published (*AMJ*, 2015; Elsbach & Kramer, 2003; Gilbert, 2005; Graebner, 2009; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006). Two of the articles explicitly adopting such a perspective are among the most cited articles published in *AMJ* in the past 10 years (*AMJ*, 2016; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004), and one of the *SMJ* articles explicitly adopting the theory elaboration perspective is the top-cited article in *SMJ* from 2011 and winner of the Academy of Management Carolyn Dexter Award (Bingham & Eisenhardt, 2011; *SMJ*, 2016).
5. We acknowledge that many published articles do not reflect the nuanced intricacies of how research was actually conducted (Bosco, Aguinis, Field, Peirce, & Dalton, 2016), yet we can only go by what is reported in each article, and we are interested in the process and practices of those scholars who do report using a perspective that we classify as theory elaboration. This is all done based on information presented in the published articles.

6. Some prior studies that used a *theory generation* label to describe the research approach could more appropriately be classified as theory elaboration. However, up to now, the theory elaboration concept has been inadequately developed, so it may not have been known or understood by researchers, hence they used another less useful label.
7. Theory elaboration integrates and synthesizes ideas and practices pertaining to contrasting, specifying, and structuring that are currently being used in an unsystematic manner. We do not claim that these implementation approaches and tactics are new. However, we integrate them in a coherent and holistic manner to make the implementation of theory elaboration studies systematic and actionable.
8. Even if there is some existing theory and access to data to evaluate the focal relations and processes, researchers may still decide to develop a new theory to explain a phenomenon. This is certainly a viable possibility. However, we offer theory elaboration as a perspective that builds on existing theory to address the theory fragmentation challenge. So, we do not see the generation of new theory and theory elaboration as necessarily mutually exclusive and competing perspectives. However, our article focuses on the theory elaboration option rather than the theory generation option.
9. As an additional consideration to the opportunities described in Table 4, there appears to be a significant opportunity to conduct theory elaboration studies on more micro-focused topics. It is evident from our review of the literature that macro-focused researchers and journals have embraced and utilized theory elaboration more readily. Even though some of the topics of prior theory elaboration studies are related to organizational behavior and human resources (e.g., workplace diversity; Ely & Thomas, 2001), these studies have appeared in more macro-focused journals. Hence there is a clear opportunity to examine micro-focused topics using a theory elaboration approach.

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