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CHAPTER 15

WRITING THEORY, CONCEPTUAL, AND POSITION ARTICLES FOR PUBLICATION

Gary N. McLean

Not all research is based on data, whether quantitative or qualitative. An important area of publication that helps challenge existing knowledge and pushes us to new understandings occurs from the development of new theories or refinement of existing theories. In a somewhat less structured and more informal way, conceptual and opinion articles can also make an impact on the core beliefs, values, and assumptions of a field. This chapter explores each type of article, with definitions and examples of each type.

Unlike many of the other chapters in this book, the three types of articles examined in this chapter do not have a rigid or even suggested format. Problem statements, for example, are often not found in such articles. Although each type of article includes a component that references the existing literature, how that literature is used may be very different from the ways in which it is used in other articles. Furthermore, there are not clear distinctions among the three types of articles discussed in this chapter. This will be frustrating to some who have difficulty with such ambiguity. Nevertheless, the lack of such rigidity is also freeing as it allows greater creativity in the writing of such articles.

Theory Articles

The goal of theory is to help us understand more fully the phenomena that are critical to a concept under investigation. After defining theory and indicating why theory is important, this section offers suggestions for developing a theory article and an example.

Definitions

Lynham (2000) defined theory building as "the purposeful process or recurring cycle by which coherent descriptions, explanations, and representations of observed or experienced phenomena are generated, verified, and refined" (p. 161). According to Gioia and Pitre (1990), theory is "a coherent description, explanation and representation of observed or experienced phenomena" (p. 587). The definitions provided by WordNet Search (n.d.) expand this concept:

- A well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world; an organized system of accepted knowledge that applies in a variety of circumstances to explain a specific set of phenomena
- A tentative insight into the natural world; a concept that is not yet verified but that if true would explain certain facts or phenomena

Based on these definitions, a theory is not necessarily a fact that can be observed and measured consistently; it is a best guess at the time, based on "observation, experimentation, and reasoning" ("Is Evolution Only a Theory?" n.d.), as to how a phenomenon can be explained. Theories may be improved and developed over time. An important reason for publishing a proposed theory in a refereed journal is that it is then subjected to peer review and is available for other scholars to critique ("Is Evolution Only a Theory?" n.d.). This process discriminates good theory from bad theory or theory that is not yet fully developed.

Why a Theory Is Important

No field can exist without either home-grown or imported theories from other fields. Through theories, we gain greater understanding of the phenomena of the field that are essential to its study. As we conduct research in a field, theory provides a focus for identifying the research variables of importance and helps in explaining the findings of that research and making recommendations for practice and future research. Hypotheses used in conducting such research emerge from the theories currently in place in a field. Theories, by building on the past,

create even broader understanding of phenomena being studied, therefore, creating cyclical, continuous growth in understanding the field.

Thus, theory is foundational to everything that is subsequently studied in a field. Writing about theory provides the building block that is essential for all other writing in a field.

Suggestions for Theory Article Development

A number of authors have suggested a formal approach to the development of a theory. A summary of these approaches is provided after general suggestions for writing a theory article are provided.

The complexity of suggesting an approach to writing a theory article, and the potential overlap with several other types of articles contained in this book, is underscored by reviewing the scope of articles requested, for example, by *Human Resource Development Review*, the theory journal for the Academy of HRD:

> Such papers may include syntheses of existing bodies of theory, new substantive theories, exploratory conceptual models, taxonomies and typology developed as foundations for theory, treatises in formal theory construction, papers on the history of theory, critique of theory that includes alternative research propositions, metatheory, and integrative literature reviews with strong theoretical implications. Papers addressing foundations of HRD might address philosophies of HRD, historical foundations, definitions of the field, conceptual organization of the field, and ethical foundations [Torraco, 2005b].

Based on this wide scope of potential approaches to a theory article and based on the ambiguity that exists among different types of articles, it is not possible to prescribe one approach to writing a theory article. A review of theory articles across a wide spectrum of HRD-related journals that publish theory confirms that there is no set format for such articles.

In spite of the wide range of approaches and paradigms used in developing theory, Lynham (2002b) proposed a useful, though broad, list of steps to take in writing a theory article:

- Conceptual development
- Operationalization
- Application
- Confirmation or disconfirmation
- Continuous refinement and development (of the theory) [p. 229]

An article focused on theory would therefore usually address the first four points, but not necessarily in order.

Those who are interested in writing about theory must have a wide understanding of what has been written previously on the topic of interest. This is possible only if one reads broadly in the field and outside the field. This requires not just a literature review at the time of the writing; rather, an author must read on an ongoing basis related to phenomena of interest to the author. Ongoing reading helps to shape the direction that an author will pursue in developing a theory. So authors who are considering writing about theory should subscribe to an extensive array of journals containing articles related to the phenomenon or will be disciplined to read from those journals regularly online or in the library. Because so many fields overlap today, it is not enough to read journals only in one's field. Rather, reading of journals across a broad scope of fields is necessary.

When Thor Heyerdahl (1950) was trying to solve the problem of how migrations occurred across the Pacific Ocean, he realized that part of the problem with previous hypotheses was the way the problem was being approached. He concluded that the problem was that scientists and researchers tend to be "specialists, the whole lot of them, and they don't believe in a method of work which cuts into every field of science, from botany to archaeology. They limit their own scope in order to be able to dig in the depths with more concentration for details. Modern research demands that every special branch shall dig in its own hole. It's not usual for anyone to sort out what comes up out of the holes and try to put it all together" (p. 31). So he decided that the solution to "the problems of the Pacific without throwing light on them from all sides was, it seemed to me, like doing a puzzle and only using the pieces of one color" (p. 32).

Although not all theories have this overarching goal of bringing together all of the elements of a theory ("the pieces of the puzzle"), many do. This can be done successfully only if one has a broad-scope understanding of what has been written about the phenomenon from multiple fields.

The literature review across this broad scope of fields should be integrated (Torraco, 2005b). This portion of the article should be interesting, lively, and internally interactive. Because the purpose of this review is to lead up to the proposed theory, it is important to draw the lessons learned from the literature as they apply to the theory (see Chapter Eleven, this volume).

As potential authors read the literature on theory and think about its implications to the evolving theory, they must allow their intuition to interact with that literature to see where it might lead them in developing their ideas. Some authors have suggested that it is important to bracket one's previous understandings or biases about the subject in order to come to the concept with a new perspective. (See Gearing, 2004, for a discussion of the differences in perspectives that exist

in what bracketing means.) The goal is to be able to look beyond what is already understood today but still within the context of what is understood about the phenomenon under review.

Having allowed intuition, experience, observations, reasoning, and the concepts that emerge from literature to contribute to the development of the theory, authors must not overlook the world of practice. Integrating these sources into a theory is critical for a theory that will be useful moving forward (see Figure 15.1).

Writing a theory article requires the author to take a risk. Developing or evolving theory often requires challenging existing theory. Sometimes colleagues will have spent a lifetime researching a particular direction regarding the phenomenon, and they may not be prepared to hear a new perspective. Not all people are excited about change and new directions in their field.

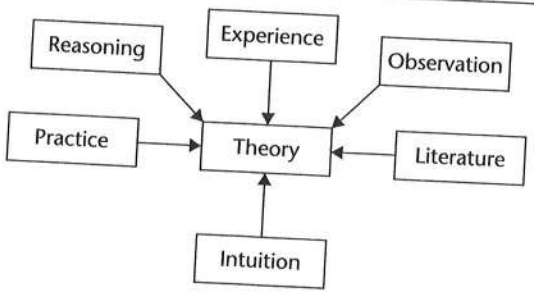
Once an author has developed a theory, it is time to put it to the test—a major difference between a theory article and a conceptual article. Is it consistent with what we know from earlier research? Can the theory be supported empirically, either quantitatively or qualitatively, by observation or measurement? What more do we need to know in order to move the theory forward?

Finally, based on this further testing, the author must be prepared to change that theory or perspective based on whatever new knowledge emerges. This may be the most difficult of tasks for those who choose to research in the theory area. They have to be prepared to give up what they may have defended heartily and move to a new, and better-supported, perspective.

Torraco (2005a) offered "guidelines for developing good theory":

- The theorist should have substantial knowledge about the two domains for theory building.
- The theory should be based on the clear specification of the problem or need for theory building.

FIGURE 15.1. SOURCES OF INPUT INTO THEORY DEVELOPMENT.



- The research should demonstrate explicitly the logic and theoretical reasoning used by the theorist to link the research problem with the theoretical outcome (e.g., the theory or model).
- The work should propose and discuss research propositions, questions, or hypotheses for further theoretical and empirical study of the phenomenon modeled by the theory [p. 364].

He explicated further the first point above, explaining the two domains:

- Knowledge of the elements of theory and of the process of developing new theoretical knowledge (i.e., knowledge of theory building)
- Deep conceptual understanding and practical knowledge (knowledge from experience) of the phenomenon or topic to be modeled by the theory [p. 369]

Those looking for more extensive advice on writing theory articles are referred to two excellent and detailed resources: an issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources* (Lynham, 2002b) and a chapter in an edited book, *Research in Organizations* (Torraco, 2005a). In particular, Torraco provides an excellent table outlining theory-building methodologies and the values, assumptions, strengths, and limitations of each for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches, including several specific types of approaches under each.

Examples

As an example, consider that many articles have been written on the evolving theory of national human resource development (NHRD), a concept in which HRD principles address societal issues as well and are being applied more broadly than in traditional organizations, such as in communities, nations, and regions. In the opening article of *Advances in Developing Human Resources,* McLean (2004) conceptualized the meaning of NHRD based on previous research on the concept and then developed the operationalization and implementation of the concept through thirteen case studies. This process indicated, as Cho and McLean (2004) concluded, that there appeared to be at least five tentative models for NHRD. Lynham, Paprock, and Cunningham (2006) extended the exploration into the theory of NHRD with a focus on NHRD solely on transitioning societies. Wang and Swanson (2008a), taking exception to the broadening definition of human resource development, critiqued the concept of NHRD as being inadequately based on good theory and used an economics paradigm to refute the theories and models that were evolving. To this charge, McLean, Lynham, Azevedo, Lawrence, and Nafukho (2008) responded, point by point, to the argument that

Wang and Swanson made (2008a). With particular reference to the case that the theory on NHRD has been poorly developed, McLean et al. (2008) stated:

> Until the construct of NHRD is better understood (through increasingly deeper and *thicker* description), the development of a complete, bounded, and stable theoretical framework (if even possible) and its readiness for testing and evidence-based verification (from, for example, a post-/positivist perspective), would understandably be inappropriate from a constructivist perspective [p. 245].

Several other arguments were posited to support the appropriate immaturity of the construct of NHRD at this time and, thus, its immature theory development. To this claim, Wang and Swanson (2008b), in a rejoinder, highlighted areas of similarities and suggested a framework for additional research. This series of articles is an excellent example of the continuous evolution phase of theory that Lynham (2002b) suggested.

We still have a long way to go to have a well-developed NHRD theory, but the iteration outlined here indicates the process through which a solid, mature theory of NHRD will develop.

Conceptual Articles

Most of the literature suggests that conceptual writing is a necessary component of theory writing (Egan, 2002). In fact, Lynham (2002b) specified conceptualization as the first step in developing a theory. Although a conceptual article is similar in many respects to a theory article, it is more abstract and not yet proven, whereas a good article on theory will contain evidence that the theory has been tested and is concrete in its application. Generally a concept is more focused than a theory, as it is often a component of a theory. It also bridges to opinion articles, because such conceptual articles may also include well-informed opinions. As with much other research, there are not clear lines between these types of articles, resulting in overlapping components and approaches.

Definitions

Collins English Electronic Dictionary (Concept, 2008) has defined concept as

1. an idea, especially an abstract idea. . . .
2. in philosophy, a general idea or notion that corresponds to some class of entities and that consists of the characteristic or essential features of the class

Torraco (2005a) defined concepts as "the elements of theory that are common to all research methods" (p. 352).

Suggestions for Article Development

Because the concept of writing a conceptual article is not as well established as the other two types included in this chapter, it is more difficult to offer specific suggestions in writing such an article. Nevertheless, three are important:

1. Keeping in mind the narrow focus of a concept, write solely on that concept. Do not pull in extraneous ideas.
2. Take advantage of the foundations that others have established, and build on them. Use your own observations and experiences as you seek to extend a concept that others have established.
3. As you present your concept, be clear and concrete in indicating how the concept can be applied in a practice setting.

Lynham (2002a) suggested that conceptual thinking and writing are the first steps in the theory development process and posited that the first step is to identify "the units of the theory, also known as the concepts of the theory" (p. 245). She described these concepts as "the things or variables whose interactions constitute the subject matter, or phenomenon, that is the attention of the theory" (p. 245). The next step is "to specify how the units interact and relate to one another, which is accomplished by stipulating the laws of interaction that pertains to the units of the theory" (p. 245). It is also critical to identify the boundaries of the concept and the systems under which the concept can be applied.

Because conceptualization is only the first step of theory development, a conceptual paper will not proceed beyond the operational stage as a theory paper does. If an article goes beyond this to look at its application and confirmation or deconfirmation, then the author should write a theory article rather than a conceptual article.

Examples

Building on the work of Watkins and Marsick (1996), who built on the work of others on the concept of the learning organization, Tolbert, McLean, and Myers (2002) developed the concept of a global learning organization. It integrated concepts from the learning organization literature and literature on globalization, added their own experiences, and developed their concept of the global learning organization. It is not comprehensive enough to be considered a theory; they did

not propose interactions or variables or test them at the time the article was published. Yet they went beyond writing an opinion piece by drawing on established theories and research.

Opinion Articles

Opinion articles are seldom refereed, though they are usually reviewed by an editor who may require revisions. Such articles may be published as editorials, as articles in nonrefereed sections of a journal (which may be labeled "Forum"), as letters to the editor, and even as book reviews (see Chapter Sixteen, this volume). Such articles are very different from those that usually fit into refereed journals such as those described in the bulk of this book. Generally the purpose of an opinion article is to convince or persuade others to accept the author's perspective, perhaps also leading to a change in their behavior, either personally or institutionally.

Definitions

Opinion (n.d.) has been defined as

1. A belief not based on absolute certainty or positive knowledge but on what seems true, valid, or probable to one's own mind; judgment
2. An evaluation, impression, or estimation of the quality or worth of a person or thing
3. The formal judgment of an expert on a matter in which advice is sought

An opinion article may also be called a *position paper* or *position article.*

Suggestions for Article Development

Writing opinion pieces can be fun; it gives the author a chance to be truly creative and express something of deep interest or value to him or her. At the same time, they can be tricky to write. Just as the author holds a deep opinion, others probably hold an alternative or even opposing position. They may want to submit a rebuttal article, and the opinion author then may become enmeshed in a very public debate or even argument. So potential authors need to think very carefully about the reason for writing such an article before submitting it. They also need to be prepared for what may be public humiliation or public acclaim—or perhaps both. Suggestions for writing such an article follow.

- Avoid personal attacks. Such attacks usually alienate readers, not just those you may be attacking. Keep the focus of the article on the ideas that are important to you. If you are critiquing others' ideas, be sure you focus your criticisms on their ideas and not on them.
- Avoid making overgeneralizations. Because these may be easily refuted, they weaken an argument or position. Furthermore, they may suggest that you do not have better arguments. Keep your argument focused, and stick as close to facts as you can.
- Avoid being too vague, which can lead to misinterpretation of your position.
- Keep the article relatively short, perhaps only two or three pages when published. You increase the possibility of your article being read when readers can get your point fairly quickly.
- Humor, or at least a light touch, will also keep the readers interested. It also helps to make something that is deep and serious more likely to be read and may also influence others' thinking. Being too serious may antagonize readers or bore them. Some topics, of course, may require a serious approach.

One way to get a sense for how a good opinion piece is written is to study opinion pieces that have appeared in reputable magazines such as *Fast Company* and the *New Yorker*. Reading and studying such examples will help improve the ability to write such articles.

A good idea before submitting such an article is to have people who are disinterested in the focus of the article read it. They can give feedback on whether it contains vague comments or too much emotion and has made personal attacks. They can generally help authors understand where they may have missed the mark and if the argument is weak.

Examples

As a former editor of a number of journals, I have extensive experience in writing opinion pieces, primarily as editorials. Two of my most interesting articles to write, and that provided me with the greatest fun, were written for *Human Resource Development International* and published in nonrefereed sections of the journal.

One example was stimulated by a visit to a Leonardo da Vinci museum exhibit. I have long been puzzled by the emphasis on developing a narrow research agenda on the part of many academic institutions. It is well known, however, that da Vinci was a genius who had a broad scope of excellence across many fields: anatomy, art, architecture, design, and others. This led to my article entitled: "Tenure Denied! Not Ready for Promotion! No Merit Pay Increase! Poor Leonardo da Vinci!" (McLean, 2007).

Another example is an exchange of articles between Richard Swanson and me over the foundational areas that support human resource development. I first wrote a critique of Swanson's (1995) three-legged stool model, in which the stool of HRD is supported by the legs of psychology, economics, and systems theory. I titled my critique: "HRD: A Three-Legged Stool, an Octopus, or a Centipede?" (McLean, 1998). Swanson (1999) responded with a defense of the model, to which I also responded in an article entitled: "Get the Drill, Glue, and More Legs" (McLean, 1999).

What I have found to be so interesting is that these nonrefereed pieces (along with many others) have generated much more interest and feedback than all of my refereed pieces.

Submission Outlets

Every author struggles to find an appropriate outlet for his or her work. There is no one right place to submit an article. Almost any journal will accept the three types of articles discussed in this chapter, although some journals focus primarily on theory and conceptual articles (for guidance on finding these, see Chapter Two, this volume). Answering the following questions will help in making a decision on where to submit theory, concept, or opinion articles:

1. Do I want to publish in a journal that is primarily theoretical and conceptual, or do I want to include it in a journal with broader inclusion of article types?
2. What audience do I want to influence?
3. What is my purpose for writing this article? If you are writing for promotion and tenure purposes, you may have to target different journals than if you are simply trying to influence your field. Some institutions, for example, have established tiers of journals (A, B, C, D), and top-tier journals are given more credit than low-tier journals. If you are in an institution that gives, say, Social Science Citation Index journals higher credit, you may wish to go to http://scientific.thomson.com/mjl to identify *SSCI*-listed journals.
4. What journals are interested in the content matter of my article?
5. What journals do I most often cite in my article?
6. Do I want fast turnaround, or am I willing to wait longer? Some journals take very long for the referee process; others are much faster.
7. Where do leaders in my field publish?

No matter which journal you choose for submitting your article, always review its guidelines in detail and examine past issues. Also, you may wish to seek out an

established author in your field, who may be willing to help you think through options for submission.

Conclusion

Every type of article, including the three discussed in this chapter (theory, conceptual, opinion), requires a particular approach by the author. The three focused on here move from formal and fact-based to informal and personally influenced.

One of the joys of this book is that it highlights many different approaches to writing. There is surely an approach here that meets the needs and interests of all authors.

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