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Thinking Outside the Box

Theory: Conceptual Engagement or Ornament?

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ABSTRACT

The growing expansion of empirical methods, increasing pressures for academic productivity, and the intensive use of artificial intelligence tools have redefined the role of theory in management research. Although scientific output continues to display theoretical frameworks, deep conceptual engagement has been progressively replaced by superficial uses of theory as rhetorical ornamentation. This essay problematizes this transformation, arguing that theory risks losing its structuring function when it is mobilized merely to comply with editorial norms, while empirical findings accumulate disconnected from conceptual reflection. We revisit critiques that denounce this distancing and show how the popularization of AI systems, by facilitating textual recombination, may reinforce minimalist practices of theoretical legitimation. We contrast this scenario with scientific traditions that allow the publication of empirical findings prior to the formulation of comprehensive theories and discuss why such openness remains limited in management studies. We propose that thinking outside the box entails recognizing the legitimacy of studies not yet theoretically anchored, encouraging more robust conceptual syntheses, and fostering a scientific culture that values both reflection and discovery.

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INTRODUCTION: WHEN THEORY LOSES ITS FUNCTION

A preliminary search for expressions such as 'theoretical essay,' 'theoretical approach,' or 'theoretical study' in abstracts published in *BAR — Brazilian Administration Review* between 2004 and 2025 identified only 11 occurrences. Although limited and specific to fully theoretical studies, this number serves as a symptom of a deeper trend: the persistent marginalization of explicit theoretical production in leading management journals. More than a statistic, this finding reveals a possible displacement of theory's role, whereby it operates as a presumed foundation but is rarely problematized or developed in depth. When examining scientific production over recent decades, a concern emerges: are we producing theory? More fundamentally, are we genuinely engaging theoretically, or merely reproducing theoretical structures that function as procedural justifications for predominantly empirical studies? In empirical research, to what extent do theoretical frameworks sustain and guide knowledge construction, rather than serving as discursive frames of legitimacy?

This question echoes classic critiques that problematize the replacement of rigorous theoretical development with conceptual performances strategically positioned to meet editorial expectations. Hambrick (2007) argues that a substantial portion of management research has transformed 'theoretical contribution' into a disciplinary ritual, disconnected from substantive advances in understanding phenomena. MacInnis (2011), in examining conceptual production in marketing, reinforces that the theoretical deficit does not stem solely from the absence of theory, but from the fragility with which theory is constructed, articulated, and mobilized. In a context where artificial intelligence tools expand the capacity to generate formally coherent texts that are not necessarily conceptually grounded, it becomes even more urgent to question whether theory remains a structuring element of research or has gradually become a methodological ornament employed to meet implicit editorial expectations. The central concern, therefore, does not lie in the absence of theoretical sections in articles, but in the loss of theory's epistemological function as an instrument to construct, organize, and advance scientific knowledge.

THEORY AS ORNAMENT

The problem emerges from the growing dissociation between what theory is supposed to accomplish and what it effectively does in contemporary scientific practice. Theories are expected to organize thinking, clarify relationships, delimit assumptions, guide explanatory models, and reveal otherwise invisible aspects of phenomena (Sutton & Staw, 1995; Whetten, 1989). Yet, in many studies, theory clearly operates peripherally, functioning as a discursive accessory that legitimizes the study but neither shapes the investigative logic nor substantively informs the interpretation of results. This distance between theory and intellectual construction characterizes what Sutton and Staw (1995) describe as 'non-theory' disguised as theory: sets of concepts mobilized without logical articulation, accumulations of references lacking synthesis, and conceptual justifications that add little explanatory value.

The challenge, therefore, is not the quantitative insufficiency of theory, but its functional reduction. Theory often appears, but does little work. It is rarely constitutive of the research itself. This gap between theory as a formal requirement and theory as an intellectual instrument of integration and explanation is what this essay seeks to illuminate. Rather than organizing scientific thought, theory has, in many cases, become a rhetorical device that enables authors to comply with normative requirements without necessarily contributing to disciplinary theoretical advancement. The consequence is the production of methodologically well-executed studies that are theoretically fragile, in which concepts do not function as explanatory mechanisms but as symbolic markers of academic belonging.

To systematically explain this dissociation between theory's epistemological function and its effective use in contemporary scientific practice, Table 1 contrasts two distinct logics of theoretical mobilization: theory as ornament, predominant in the current scenario, and theory as structure, advanced here as a normative and epistemological proposal. This distinction does not concern the presence or absence of theory in articles, but rather how theory operates in the knowledge production process.

Table 1. The role of theory.

Dimension	Theory as Ornament (Current Scenario)	Theory as Structure (Proposed)
Primary Function	Rhetorical prop for editorial legitimation.	Interpretive and organizing axis of thought.
Temporality	Retrospectively adjusted to result (ex post).	Defines assumptions and guides inquiry (ex ante).
AI-Mediated Production	Algorithmic recombination of linguistic patterns.	Auxiliary tool; does not replace human reflection.
Relationship with the Empirical	Forced alignment with established literatures.	Acceptance of relevant findings not yet theorized.
Academic Training	Consumption of established models (repertoire).	Intellectual practice of theory construction.

Note. Developed by the authors.

HOW DID WE GET HERE? PRESSURES, AI, AND THEORETICAL SUPERFICIALITY

The trajectory leading to theoretical superficiality is multifaceted. A first element concerns institutional pressures for productivity, impact, and efficiency that permeate contemporary academic life (Müller & De Rijcke, 2017). As illustrated in Table 1, the logic of theory as ornament is reinforced when theoretical production becomes predominantly retrospective, adjusted ex post to results already obtained, rather than structuring the investigation from its outset. Such pressures incentivize standardized research formats in which theory often assumes an instrumental role: justifying hypotheses, situating the study within a field, and meeting editorial requirements, while rarely structuring the investigative logic or challenging underlying assumptions.

In this regard, MacInnis (2011) emphasizes that many failures in conceptual manuscripts stem from the absence of a clearly formulated conceptual problem and from the lack of theoretical synthesis capable of reconciling distinct literatures. Vargo and Koskela-Huotari (2020) advance this argument by demonstrating that many conceptual manuscripts are rejected not due to lack of references, but because of their inability to construct an integrative theoretical framework that substantively contributes to disciplinary development. This critique becomes more pronounced when contrasted with empirically rigorous studies that, despite technical sophistication, display superficial theoretical engagement insufficient to sustain interpretation or propose robust explanatory mechanisms.

Another contemporary element of this phenomenon lies in the indiscriminate use of artificial intelligence tools for textual production (Andersen et al., 2025). These technologies operate through the recombination of linguistic patterns rather than conceptual understanding, creating an illusion of theoretical depth without genuine conceptual advancement. When used as substitutes for theoretical reflection rather than as auxiliary tools of expression, such systems may reinforce the homogenization of scientific discourse and favor the reproduction of generic frameworks, broad definitions, and theoretically weak constructions (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023). The result is a literature that is more uniform, less challenging, and less capable of generating theoretical innovation. The adoption of these tools in academic contexts has been driven primarily by pragmatic factors, such as time savings, stress reduction, and perceived efficiency, rather than by substantive epistemological or theoretical concerns (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023).

This tendency is exacerbated in academic environments where efficiency and productivity are valued over deep conceptual reflection, as discussed by Bin-Nashwan et al. (2023) in their analysis of the institutional effects of academic evaluation models.

This scenario contrasts sharply with the conceptual tradition outlined by Whetten (1989), Sutton and Staw (1995), Corley and Gioia (2011), and more recently Vargo and Koskela-Huotari (2020). For these authors, theories are not mere repositories of citations, but integrated structures of thought that articulate constructs, explicate assumptions, formulate mechanisms, anticipate implications, and guide research programs. Theories are instruments of intellectual transformation and function as lenses through which phenomena can be understood and reconfigured. When reduced to discursive ornamentation, theory loses its epistemic function, limiting research's capacity for cumulative advancement and meaningful knowledge production. Empirical findings, isolated from a robust conceptual foundation, generate only fragmented pieces of evidence, incapable of sustaining enduring theoretical progress.

THE EMPIRICAL PARADOX: STUDIES WITHOUT THEORY

While theory is important, it is necessary to acknowledge that empirical studies play a crucial role in scientific development. There are many cases in which the nature of the phenomenon under investigation does not yet allow for a consistent theoretical explanation (Von Krogh et al., 2012), yet the findings are relevant and important for scientific advancement. Accepting relevant findings that are not yet theorized, as highlighted in Table 1, allows for a rethinking of the relationship between empirical discovery and conceptual explanation, shifting the focus from the requirement of ex ante theoretical framing to the heuristic potential of observed phenomena.

In fields such as medicine or biology (Ioannidis, 2005), for example, new findings frequently precede the formulation of theories. Significant empirical discoveries can be published even without a defined theoretical framework precisely because they represent important advances that will later require new conceptual propositions. This methodological openness, however, does not always find space in applied social sciences, where the lack of theory is often interpreted as intellectual weakness (Von Krogh et al., 2012).

Recent evidence in areas such as Marketing reinforces this epistemological openness. Golder et al. (2023), in proposing an 'empirics-first' approach to knowledge generation, argue that rigorous data-driven analyses can reveal patterns, regularities, and relevant phenomena even in the absence of fully formalized ex ante the-

ories. For these authors, such empirical evidence serves as a fundamental input for the subsequent construction and refinement of theories, particularly in contexts characterized by high data availability and still poorly understood phenomena.

The discussion of 'empirics-first' approaches sheds light on a central paradox in the logic of scientific validation in Management. Although the production of robust empirical evidence is often valued, its legitimacy remains conditional upon the presence of clearly defined theoretical frameworks from the outset of the investigation. As a result, studies based on emerging phenomena tend to be evaluated not for the heuristic potential of their findings, but for their capacity to be accommodated within already consolidated theories. Research in other social science fields suggests that relevant phenomena can and should be investigated empirically before their theoretical mechanisms are fully understood, provided that their strength and prevalence in the real world are clearly demonstrated (Mortensen & Cialdini, 2010).

Reconfiguring how the relationship between empirical evidence and theoretical explanation is conceived and evaluated in Management could stimulate the construction of new frameworks, foster conceptual creativity, and open paths for deeper theoretical innovation, while preventing theoretical frameworks from becoming mere ornaments of publication. Jaakkola and Vargo (2021), in discussing criteria to assess the impact of academic publications, defend the centrality of 'potential for change' as a core element of scientific knowledge production.

Profound change does not occur only when established theories are empirically tested, but especially when the field is challenged to think differently, whether through theoretical problematization or through empirical findings that do not fit existing frameworks.

CENTRAL CLAIMS

This essay elucidates several central claims aimed at illuminating institutionalized practices, often taken for granted in the field of Management, that contribute to the transformation of theory into an ornamental resource and to the weakening of its structuring function in scientific production. The claims that follow should not be read in isolation, but as components of a cumulative argument concerning epistemological inconsistencies, institutional reproduction mechanisms, and emerging challenges associated with the intensive use of artificial intelligence technologies.

The first claim holds that although the dominant logic of scientific research in Management presupposes a clear sequence linking theorization, hypothesis formulation, and empirical testing, widely accepted editorial practices reveal a structural inconsistency in this model. In particular, it is not uncommon for empirically complete but theoretically immature studies to be invited to incorporate theories a posteriori, often suggested by reviewers, to improve the conceptual framing of tests already conducted. This practice contrasts with the principles of open science and preregistration, which assume the ex ante definition not only of hypotheses and methods, but also of the theoretical assumptions guiding the investigation. By allowing theory to be retrospectively adjusted to results, the field reinforces an instrumental relationship with conceptual frameworks, compromising the epistemological coherence of the hypothetical-deductive model that officially underpins its scientific production.

The second claim argues that this inconsistency is not accidental, but reproduced through institutional evaluation mechanisms that cut across the multiple roles occupied by researchers themselves. The dissemination of ornamental theory cannot be attributed solely to early-career authors or isolated works, as it is reinforced in contexts where researchers act as authors, reviewers, committee members, and editors. In these evaluative arenas, it is common for works to be criticized for theoretical weaknesses, overly descriptive writing, or superficial use of frameworks, while similar criteria are later mobilized to judge articles and dissertations, thus naturalizing theory as a mandatory requirement of legitimacy rather than as a living interpretive structure guiding knowledge production.

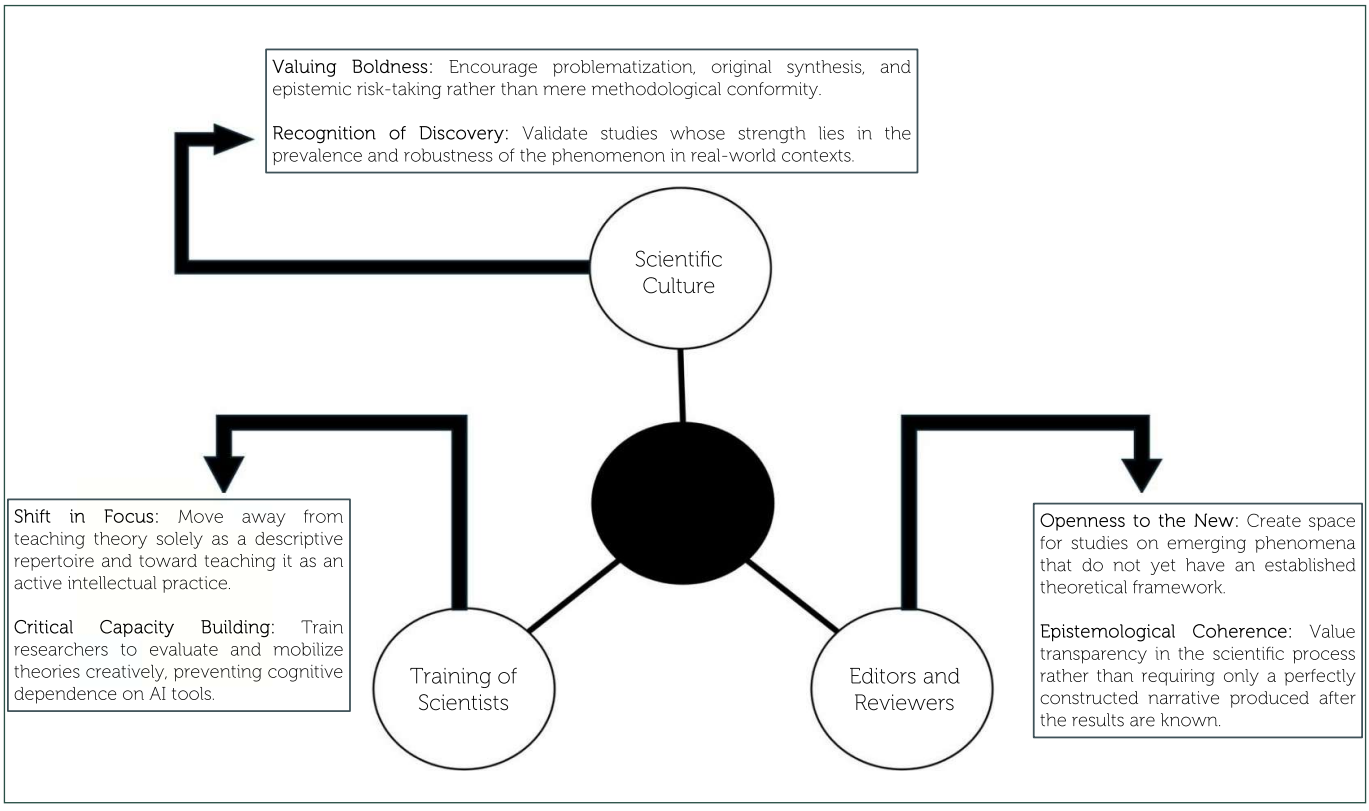
The third claim extends this diagnosis by considering the role of contemporary technologies in intensifying these practices. The growing use of artificial intelligence tools in scientific production goes beyond academic writing, encompassing manuscript evaluation, automated literature synthesis, the transformation of complex research into simplified formats, and the accelerated generation of scientific content across media. By assuming functions traditionally associated with deep reading, interpretation, and conceptual synthesis, these technologies increasingly act as an intermediary layer between the researcher and knowledge. In this context, theory risks being constructed through algorithmic recombination of established discourses, while the cognitive effort required for problematization, abstraction, and theoretical innovation is progressively externalized. The potential outcome is not only the homogenization of scientific production, but the erosion of the intellectual competencies that sustain the very capacity to think theoretically.

The fourth claim emphasizes that recognizing these dynamics does not imply endorsing intellectual superfi-

ciality. Advancing an agenda that legitimizes innovative empirical studies not yet fully theoretically anchored should not be conflated with tacit acceptance of conceptual fragility. The epistemological flexibility required to stimulate relevant discoveries must be explicit, deliberate, and accompanied by formative mechanisms that strengthen, rather than replace, researchers' capacity for theoretical thinking. Otherwise, there is a risk of exchanging formal theoretical rigidity for increasing cognitive dependence on automated systems, in a context where theory ceases to function as a thinking tool and becomes merely an artifact of algorithmic mediation.

Aligned with this concern, the fifth implicit claim of the essay points to the centrality of scientific training in this new scenario. In a context where tools can generate reviews, summaries, and theoretical framings in seconds, academic training must be reoriented to ensure that students and researchers actively appropriate theories rather than merely consuming their automated versions. This entails rethinking the role of theory courses, which often remain restricted to presenting canonical models while rarely offering systematic training in how to build theory, develop conceptual arguments, or mobilize theoretical structures creatively and rigorously. Without formative spaces dedicated to the practice of theorizing, graduate programs risk producing technically proficient but theoretically fragile researchers. Thus, the promise of efficiency brought by AI technologies may inadvertently produce a science that is formally sophisticated yet cognitively impoverished, unless the academic community reaffirms, both curricularly and pedagogically, the importance of teaching theory as a substantive intellectual activity rather than as a repository of concepts to be mechanically applied.

Taken together, these claims reveal that the transformation of theory into ornament is not the result of isolated failures or individual choices, but of a broader institutional arrangement involving training practices, evaluation criteria, and shared cultural values in the field of Management. Overcoming this pattern therefore requires a coordinated reconfiguration of the conditions under which theory is produced, taught, evaluated, and legitimized. Figure 1 synthesizes this argument by representing theory as an interpretive structure located at the center of three interdependent spheres, scientist training, editorial practices, and scientific culture, highlighting that the recovery of its epistemological function depends on articulated interventions across these institutional levels.



Source: Developed by the authors.

Figure 1. Institutional conditions for theory as structure.

In sum, restoring the centrality of theory as an interpretive structure depends on reconfiguring the relationship between empirical discovery and theoretical explanation in the field of Management. Rather than systematically requiring fully formalized theories from the outset of studies, it becomes necessary to recog-

nize the legitimacy of empirical research grounded in still-untheorized phenomena, allowing relevant findings to challenge existing conceptual frameworks and serve as inputs for subsequent, deeper, and less ornamental theoretical construction.

CHANGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The agenda outlined in this essay goes beyond identifying the dynamics that have contributed to the ornamentalization of theory in Management research. Above all, it entails recognizing responsibilities distributed across the institutional instances that structure the production, evaluation, and reproduction of scientific knowledge in the field. As Corley and Gioia (2011) argue, the theoretical vitality of an area depends less on isolated individual contributions and more on the conditions under which certain types of knowledge come to be recognized as legitimate. In this sense, overcoming theory as ornament requires coordinated actions at multiple institutional levels, as synthesized in Figure 1.

In the realm of scientific training, particularly in doctoral programs, the central challenge lies in shifting the teaching of theory from a predominantly descriptive logic to an understanding of theory as an active intellectual practice. As emphasized by Whetten (1989) and Sutton and Staw (1995), theorizing involves the ability to articulate constructs, explain assumptions, formulate explanatory mechanisms, and sustain coherent conceptual arguments, competencies that do not automatically emerge from exposure to canonical models. In a context where artificial intelligence tools can generate reviews, syntheses, and theoretical framings in seconds, it becomes even more important for academic training to strengthen researchers' capacity to critically appropriate theories, preventing the substitution of theorizing effort with processes of algorithmic recombination (Andersen et al., 2025; Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023).

At the level of editorial and evaluative practices, reviewers, editors, and academic committees play a decisive role in legitimizing, or constraining, ornamental theory. Excessive emphasis on ex post narrative coherence, often associated with evaluation systems oriented toward productivity and predictability, tends to reinforce the retrospective adjustment of theories to results already obtained, at the expense of epistemological coherence in the research process (Müller & De Rijcke, 2017). Explicitly recognizing the legitimacy of research trajectories grounded in not-yet-fully-theorized phenomena, provided they are empirically relevant and methodologically transparent, is consistent with approaches that value the heuristic potential of scientific inquiry and its capacity to challenge established conceptual frameworks (Jaakkola & Vargo, 2021; von Krogh et al., 2012).

Finally, at the level of scientific culture, consolidating this agenda depends on a broader revision of the values guiding the field of Management. The standardization of formats, pressure for productivity, and valorization of methodological predictability create incentives for intellectual conformity and the reproduction of consolidated theoretical frameworks, limiting willingness to assume epistemological risks. Confronting this scenario requires strengthening an academic culture that values problematization, conceptual synthesis, and intellectual courage, recognizing that scientific advancement occurs not only through cumulative increments but also through theoretical reconfigurations capable of redefining how phenomena are understood and explained (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Vargo & Koskela-Huotari, 2020).

CONCLUSION: THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX AS THEORETICAL RECONSTRUCTION

Thinking outside the box in the contemporary context of Management research does not mean rejecting theory or minimizing its importance, but rather restoring theory to its fundamental role as an interpretive structure rather than a discursive ornament. Throughout this essay, we have argued that the formal centrality of theory in scientific production paradoxically coexists with its functional weakening, expressed in the retrospective use of frameworks, ex post adaptation to empirical results, and the uncritical reproduction of consolidated conceptual molds.

The analysis suggests that this phenomenon does not stem from individual failures or isolated competency deficits, but from institutional arrangements that shape training practices, evaluation criteria, and shared cultural values in the field. In this context, the growing algorithmic mediation of scientific work intensifies preexisting tendencies by facilitating the recombination of theoretical discourses without necessarily requiring the cognitive effort associated with problematization, abstraction, and conceptual construction. The risk, as discussed throughout the essay, is not the absence of theory, but its progressive reduction to a rhetorical artifact functionally detached from the knowledge production process.

Restoring the centrality of theory as an interpretive structure therefore requires rethinking the relationship between empirical discovery and theoretical explanation. Rather than systematically demanding fully formalized theories at the outset of every investigation,

it becomes necessary to recognize the legitimacy of empirical research grounded in still-untheorized phenomena, provided that such findings are empirically relevant and capable of challenging existing conceptual frameworks. As argued here, allowing certain phenomena to be initially observed before being fully explained can strengthen, rather than weaken, subsequent theoretical construction by expanding the space for genuine conceptual innovation.

Accordingly, the position advanced here is not one of theoretically permissive or intellectually lax science, but of epistemologically coherent science, capable of distinguishing between the provisional absence of theory and conceptual fragility. In a context where artificial intelligence tools expand the capacity to produce texts, reviews, and theoretical framings with speed and efficiency, preserving the relevance of theoretical thinking requires reaffirming theory as a substantive intellectual activity that cannot be automated without significant loss.

Ultimately, strengthening theory in Management research may require a seemingly paradoxical move: allowing some studies to exist initially without fully formalized theories so that theorizing can reclaim its role as an intellectual response to relevant phenomena rather than as a procedural requirement of legitimacy. Only then can the field cultivate a scientific environment capable of generating robust explanations, original ideas, and theoretical advances that transcend the repetition of inherited structures, preserving theory not as ornament, but as the engine of scientific innovation.

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