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In Defense of Theory

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In Defense of Theory

Abstract

[Excerpt] One of the trends I see in the popular press and even in some research circles is that the concept of “theory” seems to be under assault. The term “theory” has in some ways become a synonym for some to “impractical.” I regularly hear practitioners and even some academics make statements to the effect of “well, that may be good in theory, but in the real world...” There also seems to be a fairly poor understanding of what even constitutes a theory, what the characteristics of a theory are, and ultimately why theories are important and why we should study them. There is much written about theory in academic circles, but this information is rarely circulated more widely. Perhaps this editorial can shed a faint glimmer of light onto a subject to which many simply are never really introduced.

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From the Editor

In Defense of Theory

One of the trends I see in the popular press and even in some research circles is that the concept of “theory” seems to be under assault. The term “theory” has in some ways become a synonym for some to “impractical.” I regularly hear practitioners and even some academics make statements to the effect of “well, that may be good in theory, but in the real world . . .” There also seems to be a fairly poor understanding of what even constitutes a theory, what the characteristics of a theory are, and ultimately why theories are important and why we should study them. There is much written about theory in academic circles, but this information is rarely circulated more widely. Perhaps this editorial can shed a faint glimmer of light onto a subject to which many simply are never really introduced.

Theory, at its core, is a linguistic device used to understand a complex world. The purpose of theory is to help understand *why* or *how* something occurs; this is as opposed to the goal of description, which is to help understand *what* occurs. A logical outflow of theory is to predict an outcome of a set of events, but there is more to theory than simply the creation of predictions. In that regard, a hypothesis may flow from a theory, but it is not a theory; a logical argument is not a

theory; nor is a list of academic references, the use of statistics, or a diagram.

A theory must have two key characteristics: it must be able to make useful predictions, *and* it must be falsifiable. In other words, a theory must be capable of predicting how the world operates. More important, however, any such predictions must be testable so that it is possible for one to reasonably conclude that those tenets have not held true (if the test shows that outcome). Research advances theory in a number of ways. It can be advanced by repeated tests and—when the theory fails—refinements. Qualitative research can identify the sorts of issues that play crucial roles and therefore should be incorporated into a theory on a given phenomenon. And of course, theoretical writings help develop logical thinking with regard to a given theory. As a whole, research investigates parts of theories, tests them, and then updates the understanding of the theory by the accumulation of evidence that refines the description of the way the world (or the specific phenomenon under study) operates.

In contrast to a theoretical approach, a belief that the world operates in a given manner, but that does not afford the opportunity to test that belief and show it to be potentially untrue (i.e., falsified), is an exercise in

faith, but not theory. There is nothing inherently wrong with such an approach, but it is simply not scientific theory and it should not be construed as such. Not all theoretical research needs to follow an empirical hypothesis-test-revise approach; there are many ways to advance theory. But all theory must be falsifiable. All theoretical work must be written with the idea that tests of the theory will have to be conducted for the theory to advance, and evidence may eventually potentially revise or even disprove the theory.

By understanding what theory is and what it is not, I feel one can have a better understanding of the different sorts of contributions that come from industry research and academic research. The hospitality industry is supported by many organizations, like Center for Hospitality Research (CHR) supporters PKF Hospitality Research, KPMG Global, Smith Travel Research, and DK Shifflet and Associates, that are skilled at delivering descriptive information but do not necessarily operate at the level of theory. There is nothing wrong with this; indeed, it is critical information for the successful operation of a company to know *what* is occurring (say, in the market, and with their competition). Academic research is better adapted to building, testing, and refining theory and to providing explanations for how the world (or industry, or employees) operate. Organizations like the CHR play an important role of bridging research and practice, often best exemplified by using the descriptive data collected by consulting organizations and using those data to test theories derived in academic publications.

The work of the CHR, of bridging theory and practice, breaks down the dark line that is often drawn between “theory” and “the real world.” Not only is such a distinction unnecessarily dismissive of the

value of theory, but it is inaccurate. In my previous editorial, I discussed the importance for researchers not to dismiss the value of practitioner experience and knowledge. Here is the other side of that argument. By the same token, practitioners should not be dismissive of the importance of theory building. Theory building is a slow, accretive process, with research streams being gradually developed, often over many decades. Sometimes theory development will lag behind practice, and then theory building is necessary to understand why practical applications operate in the way they do. This is not a flaw with theory per se; rather this is an opportunity for companies to partner with academics to help point the research toward questions that need to be answered to improve practice.

To be sure, a theory is a simplification of the way things operate. It is an attempt to understand how and why phenomena occur and to provide an explanation that generalizes beyond specific circumstances. By making its inevitable simplifications, however, a theory will typically be unable to explain some phenomena, or perhaps be inconsistent with a specific set of circumstances. Sometimes contradictions to the theory will come in the form of statistical analysis; other times, it will be from cases and qualitative research; challenges may be arise from anecdotal evidence. Again, such contradiction is not a flaw with theory per se; rather, it is an opportunity that should exist to refine and develop the existing theory. Scientists will refine and adjust the theory to help explain observed inconsistencies, and sometimes they may have to discard the theory altogether—replacing it with a more appropriate approach. The need to continuously test and refine theory is not a failing with science or theory; this *is* science and theory.—*M.C.S.*