

## EDITORS' COMMENTS: MYTH BUSTING— WHAT WE HEAR AND WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT AMR

Whether it is a statement made by a professor in a doctoral seminar, a comment shared in confidence by a trusted colleague, a casual remark offered by a tablemate at the Academy of Management President's Breakfast, or a claim posted on any of a number of division listservs, message boards, and websites, we all have heard rumors about the trials and tribulations of publishing in the *Academy of Management Review* (AMR). After almost three years as associate editors, we find that former editor Art Brief's (2003) description of "AMR—The Often Misunderstood Journal" still rings true. Our experiences have taught us a lot, and we have some concerns that misunderstandings may create impediments that are discouraging involvement from scholars who have much to offer.

So, in the spirit of the Discovery Channel's *MythBusters*, or of Ray and Tom Magliozzi, from *Car Talk*, in these comments we take on some commonly held beliefs we have heard about publishing in AMR in order to shed light and reveal if they reflect the realities (even socially constructed) of what we have come to learn about the journal. We organize what we have heard into three categories—(1) writing papers targeted for AMR, (2) getting published in AMR, and (3) the review process at AMR—and we base our responses on a variety of sources. We analyzed data and statistics generated by Manuscript Central. We surveyed our Editorial Board members in November 2010 and draw from the (many detailed!) responses we received, as well as our own experiences and learning gained as authors, reviewers, and associate editors. Finally, we draw from and direct readers to written insights and advice offered by previous editors and associate editors.

### WRITING PAPERS TARGETED FOR AMR

**What we hear: Writing theory is too risky because AMR is the only outlet for theoretical contributions.**

**What we've learned: It's true that empirical research has a broader range of outlets, but the risks of writing theory targeted for AMR are too often overblown and the rewards are too often underrecognized. Other top journals do publish theory. In addition, a paper rejected at AMR can be a great platform for new theory or empirical projects.**

The idea that empirical work is safer is one that we have heard often from authors and, we find, is fairly widespread across many divisions. Even some members of the Editorial Board share this concern. One board member wrote, "I'm hesitant to put my efforts in just one basket (with empirical work, there's always another A journal where you can try again—AMR is really the only A theory journal in town)." Another member added, "I find that very few journals are receptive to AMR-type papers. So a paper that is written for AMR but then rejected has a hard time finding another home."

We believed that scholars weren't realistically assessing the potential associated with crafting a theoretical paper, but we needed to dig more deeply to learn the fates of theoretical papers that did not get published in AMR in order to test our assumptions. Because we had no way to track papers' paths once rejected from AMR, this question was the one we were most curious about in surveying the Editorial Board members.

When asked what happened to their papers that were rejected at AMR, respondents indicated that over 40 percent of the manuscripts have been published, or are forthcoming, elsewhere. The respondents indicated a number of outstanding journals as the ultimate outlets for manuscripts that had not been successful in the review process at AMR, including *Organization Science*, *Journal of Management*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Organization Studies*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *Human Resource Management Review*, *Journal of International Business*, *Jour-*

*nal of Management Studies*, and *Leadership Quarterly*, as well as book chapters.

Interestingly, respondents indicated that 15 percent of their papers were gone but that the *AMR* review process planted the seed for a completely new paper that has achieved or is along the path to publishing success. In addition to the idea that there are other outlets, a rejection, especially when received with constructive and developmental feedback, can be a valuable platform for new scholarship. As noted by one Editorial Board member:

The reviews helped me understand the contributions of the ideas in the paper. I used part of the theory as the foundation for an empirical paper, which was later published in *AMJ*. I used another idea from the rejected paper as the starting point in the development of a new conceptual paper, which was later published in *AMR*.

Another Editorial Board member wrote:

The reviews from *AMR* made me realize that I didn't have the basis of a full theory paper. However, I was able to take the key ideas from the paper to help me beef up the front end of an eventual empirical paper submitted to *SMJ*. I think the theory development, and the paper as a whole, is stronger because of the *AMR* review process.

The fates of the remaining rejected manuscripts were approximately evenly divided among four categories: currently under review at another journal (10 percent), in the process of being submitted elsewhere (10 percent), currently inactive (13 percent), and put to rest (12 percent).

As associate editors of a journal that publishes theoretical contributions, it is somewhat challenging for us to promote other journals as outlets for articles we would like to publish, because, ultimately, journals are competing for scholarly contributions. While we hope that you will consider *AMR* as the primary publication for your theoretical manuscripts, it is unequivocally not the only outlet available (Cropanzano, 2009).

**What we hear: I can't figure out what a theoretical contribution is, let alone write one.**

**What we've learned: It's true that writing theoretical contributions is challenging. It's helpful to remember that there is no "I" in theory (or that an unexamined manuscript is not worth publishing.) Authors can benefit greatly by engaging the insights of seasoned scholars who have**

**written about the craft of theory building, breaking down and analyzing exemplar articles, and engaging friendly reviewers.**

In response to our questions about writing theory, one Editorial Board member wrote, "I just think people underestimate how hard it is to write theory." Another added, "I think that writing theory-only papers is deceptively difficult, requiring a lot of tacit knowledge about how to construct a cogent argument." Developing theory is also complicated by the fact that there is no single model for theory development in our field. Adding to the complication, the very subject of our theoretical inquiry—management—is broad and diverse; management theory is grounded in disciplines as varied as economics, psychology, sociology, social psychology, and the humanities. The fact that what many scholars view as the premier outlet for theory papers is a "big tent" journal that aims to represent all divisions of the Academy may only add to the challenge of learning to structure a theoretical contribution in a specific area. Finally, as noted by one member of the Editorial Board, there is a belief that "most Ph.D. programs do not put an emphasis on theory development, but combine it with empirical methods."

While writing theory is hard, it is not impossible. When the Editorial Board members were asked their primary reason for rejecting manuscripts, their responses revealed definite patterns. As would be expected, there was a strong theme of lacking a clear theoretical contribution to the literature as a major reason for rejection. What trips authors up many times is a failure to provide a theoretical explanation to support their arguments—asserting that a relationship exists but not providing a compelling conceptual rationale underlying their expectations. Closely related, some authors substitute references or empirical findings for theory (Sutton & Staw, 1995). These can certainly support theory, but they do not take the place of a theoretical argument. As one board member shared, it is not uncommon that

authors end up with what appears as "theory piling-on," in which they introduce a large number of theories, but neither explain these theories in sufficient detail nor support how they arrived at them. They also fail to explicitly link them to their ideas and arguments . . . causing them to attempt to cover too much ground and, thus, lose sight of the forest for the trees.

At a basic level, what we hope to see is the development of theoretical arguments—explanations for why some sort of relationship exists between variables or why some phenomenon occurs. It is the explanation, as well as the logic building up support for the relationship, that is critical in theory building. Stating that researchers have found a correlation between two variables does not explain why the relationship occurs. Theory describes why the relationship might exist, whereas empirical examinations evaluate the validity of the theory. In this regard it is critical to provide clear explanations as to what is expected and to articulate in a testable way why it is expected. Moving toward this approach is moving toward developing theoretical arguments rather than simply asserting what is expected to exist.

In addition, many reviewers also comment on issues regarding writing quality, suggesting that too often submissions are difficult to read, sloppy in grammar as well as structure, and simply poorly written. When this happens, the reviewers and the associate editors obviously struggle with balancing the search for a strong contribution to the literature with working through challenging text.

We believe that the key shortcomings in many manuscripts result from a natural tendency toward insular thinking that could be discovered and fixed if authors were more willing to fearlessly expose their theoretical efforts prior to submission. While single-authored articles are not uncommon in *AMR*, because of the nature of the review process, every published paper is the result of multiple scholars' participation. As we have come to learn, engaging with others prior to submission to *AMR*—as examples to educate you or as friendly reviewers to scrutinize your ideas—can go a long way toward increasing the quality of the theoretical contribution of a manuscript.

For example, the writings of seasoned scholars who have thought deeply and written well about the art of theory building can provide tremendous insights to guide authors' efforts to craft a theoretical contribution. A number of excellent articles are available, including Van de Ven (1989), Whetten (1989), Sutton and Staw (1995), Weick (1995, 1999), Mannix (2003), Kilduff (2006), and Corley and Gioia (2011).

In addition, some early advice we received can go a long way in helping build an argument

that meets the high expectations of *AMR*'s audience. We and others have found it valuable to outline or map out the structure of exemplar articles and then customize the learning gained in this process to come up with new and more effective approaches for communicating fundamentally good ideas. Specifically, it can be helpful in focusing and developing theory to (1) identify a few top-notch *AMR* articles, (2) read through them closely to understand the ways that ideas are organized and developed, (3) outline or map out the structure of the articles, and then (4) apply what is learned in this process to come up with an approach to structure the theory. This discipline can help to develop and organize ideas and focus thinking on the elements of theorizing that offer the best potential. A good place to start is with award-winning papers, as well as recent papers most relevant to the area of inquiry.

Finally, one common source of reviewers' frustration and, correspondingly, their justification for reject recommendations is when they believe that a paper has been submitted prematurely. Too often authors confuse the need for novel and fresh insights with an unfounded and dysfunctional sense of urgency. We don't have data to support this, but based on our experience and feedback from reviewers, we believe that authors of theory papers may be less inclined to solicit collegial feedback on substance and presentation from friendly reviews than they would be for empirical papers. As one board member wrote, "We always say that papers benefit from informal peer review before journal submission, but I think that is especially true for conceptual papers. And for some reason, authors seem unwilling to expose conceptual papers to informal peer review." Another board member wrote, "I've thought that submissions would have benefited from a stronger prereview process of peer review and review through conference submissions. It seems that authors find it hard to find stringent reviews of their work prior to submission." Engage others early and often in your ideas before sending a paper into *AMR*.

#### GETTING A PAPER PUBLISHED IN *AMR*

**What we hear: It's impossible to get published in *AMR*. *AMR* publishes only X research and my work isn't valued here.**

**What we have learned: It's true that it's hard to publish in *AMR*, but our big tent is both less and more inclusive than many people recognize. Acceptance rates look a lot less daunting once the clearly unsuitable submissions are accounted for. *AMR*'s mission is to be "receptive to a variety of perspectives . . . [and to publish] novel, insightful, and carefully crafted conceptual work that challenges conventional wisdom concerning all aspects of organizations and their roles in society."**

These rumors reflect concerns of authors who are reluctant to submit to *AMR* because they are deterred by the odds of acceptance. These concerns are further exacerbated when authors believe that their theoretical logic or approach will not be well received in the review process at *AMR*.

It's true that the odds that a paper submitted to *AMR* will be rejected are much greater than its chances of being accepted. *AMR* is a highly selective journal, and the acceptance rate for all submitted manuscripts is less than 10 percent. However, it should be noted that the (high) single-digit acceptance metric reflects a base of all papers submitted to *AMR*, including over 30 percent that are desk-rejected (never sent out for review). An *AMR* editor desk-rejects articles because of a clear lack of fit, such as an empirical manuscript or a theory chapter pulled directly from a dissertation. Although the time opportunity costs are low for these papers (the turnaround time is very short), many aspiring authors can avoid rejection by realistically assessing whether their paper fits the mission of *AMR*. The *AMR* Mission Statement, the Information for Contributors, and Kilduff (2007) are resources that can help scholars recognize if *AMR* is an appropriate outlet for their work.

You also may have heard (or perpetuated) rumors that *AMR* publishes only (insert some area of research other than your own) and/or that *AMR* does not like to publish (insert your own area of research). At *AMR* we strive to uphold rigorous standards of conceptual development and to publish articles making a clear, significant contribution to our understanding of management and organizations, and we seek to publish research that engages a full range of scholars who belong to the Academy of Management. Does this mean all domains of focus are equally represented in *AMR* publications? Not

necessarily. But this doesn't mean that any particular area of research is more or less favored. One explanation for the representation of topics published in *AMR* is strikingly simple: "Editors begin with what authors submit" (Eisenhardt, 2001: 351). Some areas, such as strategy-related and OB-related topics, have higher submission rates than other areas of management research. In part, this is a natural reflection of the differences in the number of authors in these respective domains as represented by the divisions of the Academy of Management.

A somewhat different but related concern is that *AMR* doesn't value all kinds of theorizing equally. We welcome alternative approaches to theorizing within management research, but regardless of the approach, there needs to be a clear theoretical contribution. One example of where this comment often emerges is in the fine line between a theoretical review (Kilduff, 2007) and extending a theoretical review into a clear, compelling contribution to the literature (LePine & King, 2010). Another issue that arises is the important and difficult task of effectively managing the trade-offs between comprehensive recognition of existing scholarship and the need to anchor and craft a coherent argument and theoretical contribution; the length of a manuscript needs to reflect the magnitude of the type of theoretical contribution *AMR* publishes.

Publishing in *AMR* is challenging, and that is part of the reason why *AMR* is viewed as a top outlet for manuscripts. However, we cannot substitute challenging for biased or showing favoritism. As Schminke notes, it is certainly true that "editors are in the business of publishing, not rejecting, manuscripts" (2002: 489). We want to publish as much great theory as possible, and we believe that being an inclusive publishing outlet for a broad range of topics means we are more broadly applicable for all of management research. We have genuine concerns, however, that these rumors that *AMR* values only certain types of theory or certain types of theorizing can become a self-fulfilling prophesy, because scholars who perceive that their theoretical contributions are not valued by *AMR* will be less inclined to submit to *AMR*. Our goal is to publish papers, and, as noted above, we certainly want to mitigate biases on the disciplinary perspective theoretical contributions offered. We hope to change this behavior, for we definitely want to publish manuscripts representing the full do-



main of management research. So, please, do send your manuscript to *AMR*—we are definitely interested in your area of research.

**What we hear: *AMR* is biased toward U.S./North American authors.**

**What we've learned: While *AMR*'s publication numbers reveal a better track record than many imagine, in aiming to be a global journal, *AMR* must continue its efforts to engage international scholars.**

Another commonly held belief is that *AMR* favors research from the United States or greater North America. The Manuscript Central data cast doubts about the veracity of this purported bias at *AMR*, with one-third of the papers published since 2005 written by lead authors outside the United States and over one-fourth of the papers published written by lead authors outside North America. However, we find this rumor quite disturbing, since *AMR* aims to be a global journal, and it is easy to see how detrimental this belief may be, generating impediments that may discourage international scholars from submitting to *AMR*.

In all fairness, it is reasonable to imagine that many international submissions face a slightly more difficult process given differences in language. The growth and increasing globalization and diversity of the Academy may somewhat naturally shift doctoral students' training to focus on publishing skills that can be leveraged in a more straightforward manner across languages and cultures, such as data analysis. And as noted above, one issue that reviewers often comment on is quality of writing. This is a delicate issue with regard to international submissions in particular. It can be very challenging for individuals not native to the English language to submit a high-quality manuscript to *AMR*. And while we strive to be developmental with authors, it is hard when the writing is difficult to read.

But perhaps a more challenging notion is that international scholars may be more reluctant to submit to *AMR* because of their approach to theory building, rather than the writing per se. A concern that seems to be particularly pronounced in our discussions with scholars from outside the United States is a perceived lack of support for alternative perspectives and more critical management theory. Concerns about be-

ing viewed as too critical or nonconforming to submission structure flow into fears that manuscripts will not receive a fair shot at publication. These are important concerns and ones that we as associate editors try to balance so as to give international scholars a fair opportunity and, in all honesty, to try to increase their success in publications. Addressing the issues of international submissions to *AMJ*, Eden and Rynes (2003) reflected on the sentiment of a panel of editors of a number of leading journals. They noted:

The editors on the panel indicated that one of the reasons they sought international submissions was that they hoped they would be different in some way—for example, that they would offer different ways of posing questions or interpreting findings, or that they would illuminate the boundary conditions of findings generated in North American settings (2003: 679).

This is an excellent observation that underlies the views of the editorial team at *AMR* as well; as these authors suggest, international scholars may be *better* positioned to make novel and important theoretical contributions because of their different perspectives. At *AMR* we strive to publish thoughtful, compelling theoretical manuscripts that contribute to our knowledge of management research. By doing so we want to make sure that we uphold high standards but also that we publish insightful and interesting articles from a variety of perspectives and approaches. Given this, we hope to increase the representation of publications from scholars throughout the world.

#### THE REVIEW PROCESS AT *AMR*

**What we hear: The *AMR* review process is too harsh and stressful. Reviewers aren't helpful.**

**What we've learned: It's true that the reviewers and the review process at *AMR* are demanding, but we believe that a rigorous review process is an appropriate and necessary path to promote rigorous and relevant theoretical contributions. *AMR* has an extraordinary group of dedicated and talented scholars willing to put in the time and energy to help authors publish outstanding theoretical contributions.**

A concern we hear from authors relates directly to the quality, or at least the perceived

quality, of the reviewers assigned to their manuscript. In our time as associate editors, we have heard authors lament that reviewers are not always qualified, that their primary objective is to reject, and that they don't really try to help authors get their papers published.

As a group, the Editorial Board is very qualified, and we have a strong cadre of ad hoc reviewers that we draw from to complement the board. Every reviewer for *AMR* is evaluated by the associate editor for each manuscript. The Editorial Board of *AMR* is composed of individuals with great knowledge and experience and a demonstrated willingness to work to help unearth great ideas in manuscripts. To be invited to serve on the board, reviewers must consistently turn in timely reviews that are rated as very high in quality by the associate editors. Having been on the editorial side of the review process, we are greatly impressed with just how knowledgeable, generous, and engaged the board members are as reviewers. Indeed, we have been surprised by the number of thank-you emails we have received from authors whose manuscripts were rejected, asking us to pass along how much they appreciated the depth and care of reviewer feedback. Does that mean that all reviews and reviewers are exceptional? Certainly not. But we firmly believe that the reviewers bring a wealth of content knowledge regarding theoretical domains and current thinking in the literature and, equally important, a willingness to work very hard to provide constructive and developmental feedback.

Responding to our survey about how they have used feedback from papers rejected at *AMR*, Editorial Board members strongly indicated that the review process, even when their papers were rejected, was developmental. Many of our reviewers serve in a similar capacity with other journals, and they share our sentiment that *AMR* reviews are both helpful for moving theory forward and high in quality. As noted by one board member, "My experience with *AMR* is that (a) the reviewer feedback is normally of a much higher quality than in other journals and (b) the editor dealing with the paper invests a lot in guiding the author through the reviews." Another member noted that the process helped improve the framing of his paper's arguments and clarify its contribution to the literature. Other board members wrote, "The direction provided in the reviews and by the associate editor led us

to uncover a more useful concept in related literatures. This was then used to develop a completely new model and manuscript, which was recently published," and "I never fail to be impressed by the quality of the comments of the other reviewers. . . . *AMR* is a very high standard."

Obviously, we biased the feedback we received by asking the Editorial Board members about the quality of the review process, but it is important to recognize that the board members are on the board precisely because they are great reviewers, are often successful in crafting theoretical contributions, and have a wealth of experience reviewing for *AMR* and other management journals. Over 40 percent of the members participating in our survey have submitted four or more manuscripts for consideration for publication at *AMR*, and 85 percent of those responding have had a paper rejected. We highlight these statistics because they underscore that our board members are not only heavily involved as reviewers but are authors as well and are genuinely more sympathetic to the author's perspective than they often get credit for.

**What we hear: *AMR* drags authors along and then rejects their manuscripts after multiple rounds of revisions.**

**What we've learned: The review process is developmental and timely. It's important for authors to remember that rejection is part of the process.**

Although timeliness is not the primary goal of academic journals, when reviewers take a long time, it compromises the process, and when authors take a long time, it puts a greater burden on the reviewers to recall the original submissions. We believe that novel contributions are best fostered by review processes that facilitate engagement among scholars and that timeliness helps keep the authors and the reviewers familiar with manuscripts in ways that sustain a productive relationship. In addition, many individuals in our field are working under time constraints for tenure and promotion, so timeliness is very important for maintaining progress toward their goals. We are proud that the turnaround time at *AMR* is one of the lowest, with an average of fifty-two days.

Unfortunately, there are times when the process does extend to multiple rounds of review, with some of these ultimately resulting in rejection. While these are quite painful, they are also increasingly rare, and during our editorial term, we have made a conscious effort to not drag authors along. Of course, this is not always possible, and as editors we have to balance our hope for a path to successful submission with the ambiguities associated with an additional review round for a high-risk submission. However, over the past three years, the number of manuscripts with protracted rounds of reviews has decreased: over one-third of the accepted manuscripts received "conditional accepts" based on the first revision, which jumped up to 90 percent by the second revision.

Last, we would like to emphasize that rejection is part of the process. Even the most successful authors get rejected. In our survey of Editorial Board members, the majority of respondents indicated they had multiple manuscripts rejected from *AMR*. Several had more than six! Acting on "once bitten, twice shy" is a bad strategy; scholars become authors by continuing to strive for publishing success in spite of rejections. We want to highlight the potential for learning from the *AMR* review process, regardless of the outcome, because, as we have learned, success is as much a function of persistence and resilience as it is of flawless theoretical logic.

As can be discerned from the above discussion, there are a number of reasons that theory papers get rejected from *AMR*. Publishing, as well as editing, is an art, not a science, and occasionally mistakes are made. But if we use an objective eye, there's usually more truth than fiction in the feedback authors receive about manuscripts rejected for reasons of poorly constructed logical arguments, lack of novel insight, inadequate conceptual development, or failure to reflect a current and deep appreciation for the relevant literature. These issues are significant when the focus is making theoretical contributions, and they are at the heart of *AMR* publications, as well as rejections. These are standards that we must uphold to maintain the overall quality of *AMR*, but they also are opportunities for improvement in future development.

## CONCLUSION

At the outset, our objective in writing this "myth busting" commentary was to uncover preconceptions and assumptions that circulate about *AMR*; to investigate their truthfulness through analysis of our own experiences, discussions with Editorial Board members, and interpretation of available data; and to try to shed some light on what we have heard. We acknowledge that writing theory isn't easy and that the review process is challenging, but we also hope we've conveyed that *AMR* truly does value contributions from a variety of domains and perspectives. The best outcome of these comments for us will be if you have gained insights and knowledge that motivate you to engage, or reengage, more actively with *AMR* as a reader, reviewer (Carpenter, 2009; Lepak, 2009; Treviño, 2008), and author (Rindova, 2008).

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