

FROM THE EDITORS

Loosening the theoretical reins: A case for phenomenon-driven research in *AMJ*

INTRODUCTION

The most generative theories in management scholarship begin with an observation or puzzle and build toward new ways of seeing. Meyer and Rowan's (1977) foundational work on institutional theory was rooted in observations of real-world organizations, in which formal structures seemingly did not appropriately reflect the day-to-day demands of work. Similarly, Latham and Locke's goal-setting theory (1979) grew from the observation that, when lumber crews were given specific production targets, they consistently outperformed those told simply to "do their best."

Novel and unexplained phenomena still abound today, especially given the rapid pace of societal and technological change (Gruber, 2023), and thus, we argue that contemporary management scholarship would benefit from greater attention to phenomenon-driven research. Theory development is the means by which the field explains puzzling patterns, yet we must be careful not to let it become an end in itself, with phenomena selected and shaped primarily to serve established theoretical frameworks rather than the other way around. Despite Hambrick's (2007) warning that the management field's devotion to theory may be "too much of a good thing," theory-first remains the dominant orientation of empirical management research – a legitimate and generative approach, but not the only one. Although the share of research published in *AMJ* that is largely or partially phenomenon-driven has increased in recent years (see Figure 1), as editors, we recognize that, given the journal's historical emphasis on theory development, management scholars pursuing phenomenon-driven research may be less certain how to motivate and position their work for *AMJ*. Equally, reviewers may benefit from guidance on how to best help authors develop phenomenon-driven work in which the potential for a theoretical contribution is not immediately apparent.

In this editorial, we ask how phenomenon-driven research can help drive theoretical development in the management field. We first reflect on how some evaluative norms in our field may make it more difficult

to publish strong phenomenon-driven research. We then argue that phenomenon-driven research is the primary mechanism through which the field renews itself. While the theoretical contribution remains a critical point of emphasis at *AMJ*, we maintain that it is imperative to broaden how it can be achieved in phenomenon-driven research, especially given the unprecedented pace at which new phenomena continue to reshape society (Gruber, 2023) and the field's limited record in helping address global grand challenges (George et al., 2016). We conclude with some guiding principles for how authors and reviewers may loosen the theoretical reins somewhat to enable new theory development through phenomenon-driven renewal.

THE RELATION BETWEEN THEORY AND PHENOMENON

The stated mission of the *Academy of Management Journal* is to publish empirical research that “tests, extends, or builds management theory and contributes to management practice.” The mission identifies theorizing and practical contribution as its core aims but leaves their relationship implicit: theorizing enables practical contribution by deepening our understanding of organizational phenomena. Over time, however, the relationship between theory and phenomena has evolved, with organizational phenomena often sought as a basis for deepening theoretical understanding, with relatively less focus on using them to motivate new theoretical development. Against this backdrop, we define phenomenon-driven research as scholarly work that is motivated by curiosity about real-world problems that we collectively see as important to resolve but do not fully understand. In other words, phenomenon-driven research “tackles problems that are relevant to management practice [but] fall outside the scope of available theories” (Von Krogh et al., 2012: 277).

The passion for understanding organizational phenomena and the ambition to advance theory are not in conflict. In fact, as we argue in this editorial, the potential for theoretical renewal is deeply rooted in the curiosity and drive to explore novel phenomena or to develop a better understanding of existing ones. In the current evaluative regime, the ambition to contribute to theory can play an important role; at the same time, it can also narrow what phenomenon-driven research can do at three successive points in the research process. At the point of motivation, authors are pushed to justify their research by problematizing existing theory rather than by identifying a neglected or poorly understood phenomenon. At the point of framing, authors are expected to follow an established structure and theoretical vocabulary, even when the phenomenon resists

that vocabulary. At the point of contribution, claimed advances generally register within an established theoretical conversation, which may privilege incremental extension over the introduction of new conceptual terrain. Grant and Pollock (2011) noted that a compelling introduction can either contribute to an ongoing conversation or start a new one. Yet, in practice, the former has overshadowed the latter, leaving the idea of starting a new conversation a rare exception. Novel phenomena are quite often fitted into existing theoretical containers rather than used to build new ones.

Theory and phenomenon are tightly interlinked – in theory. The reality is different because theories are not static entities but evolve through a socially constructed life cycle process (see Figure 2). In a first phase of *generative emergence*, a theory is born to explain a neglected, poorly understood, or puzzling phenomenon. New vocabulary and mechanisms are introduced to make sense of empirical patterns that do not fit prevailing explanations. In a second phase, the theory finds *productive application* in adjacent contexts and phenomena, enabling new discoveries and refinements about how a generalized set of concepts and mechanisms can meaningfully explain empirical patterns. However, as theories gain traction – for example, by becoming more widely cited and featuring prominently in doctoral seminar reading lists (Davis, 2015) – they may, in a third stage, become *institutionalized*. They become “lenses” that reviewers and editors come to expect. In a fourth stage of “*ossification*,” theories may become mandatory templates that constrain. This can lead researchers to a “gap-spotting” approach to motivating scholarship, focused on ever more incremental gaps in the theoretical conversation (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). It can also encourage authors to overlook aspects of a phenomenon that do not fit with prevailing theories or to force-fit existing theoretical lenses onto phenomena that call for new explanations, “stymying the discovery of important theories” (Hambrick, 2007, p. 1351).

Several forces help explain why theories in our field tend to ossify over time. Institutional pressures from editorial systems, tenure criteria, and doctoral training push scholarship toward established theories (Suddaby et al., 2011). Framing work through established theories becomes a legitimacy strategy, as novelty presented in more familiar theoretical terms is more likely to gain acceptance (Navis & Glynn, 2010). Scholars may also adopt strong, and potentially constraining, identities around dominant theoretical schools,

seeing themselves as “upper echelons researchers,” “institutional theorists,” or “sensemaking scholars”, rather than as “students of organizations.”

THE CASE FOR PHENOMENON-DRIVEN RESEARCH

If theories are born in the effort to explain phenomena, then their ongoing development likewise depends on returning to the phenomena that expose the limits of what our current theories can see. A stylized representation of theories as “columns” and phenomena as “rows” can help illustrate what the process of theoretical development through phenomenon-driven research may look like in practice.

Theories are columns in that each column builds depth within a particular domain of mechanisms, relationships, processes, and so on. Such vertical development is how theoretical precision is achieved, and how conversations in the literature are organized. Staying within a column allows scholars to refine constructs, specify mechanisms, and accumulate knowledge in a form that can be taught, reviewed, and extended. Doctoral training necessarily inducts scholars into particular theoretical traditions, and the shared language of a column enables coordinated inquiry that might otherwise fragment. To be clear, the verticality of our theorizing has been a feature rather than a bug. The problem, however, is that the phenomena that animate our scholarship rarely sit neatly within any one of these vertical domains.

First, phenomena may span beyond what current columns cover. Sometimes phenomena we do not understand or have not previously studied do not appear to fit any preexisting columns, in that our existing terminology in terms of constructs, processes, and relationships is ill-suited to explain the empirical patterns the phenomenon manifests. This is when a genuinely new theory is needed. Phenomenon-driven research, then, would serve to horizontally expand the grid by building new columns. In doing so, phenomenon-driven research can contribute to the elusive aim of starting new conversations rather than adding to existing ones (Grant & Pollock, 2011).

Second, phenomena cut across columns (Shaw et al., 2018). Rather than neat cells that fit in any single row, phenomena may be “blobs” with blurry boundaries (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024). Hybrid organizing, for example, cannot be understood through institutional theory alone, identity theory alone, or organizational design alone (Battilana & Lee, 2014). The phenomenon is a row that runs horizontally across

all of these columns, and its full structure becomes visible only when we understand how the columns connect. For example, real organizational phenomena rarely operate as isolated mechanisms. Their elements are interdependent. Effects are often non-linear, producing thresholds, feedback loops, and dynamics that no single-variable account can explain. And many of the properties that most interest us, such as coordination, culture, legitimacy, and trust, arise from interactions rather than from any one underlying mechanism. A theoretical column can specify a mechanism with precision, but the moment that mechanism interacts with others in ways that matter for the phenomenon, the column's explanatory power diminishes. Understanding the phenomenon, therefore, requires theorizing the interactions themselves, which is work that lives between columns rather than within them.

This attention to the horizontal matters more now than ever. The phenomena that most demand scholarly attention – such as the diffusion of artificial intelligence through organizational work (e.g., Lazar et al., 2025), the reorganization of firms around climate adaptation (e.g., Howard-Grenville et al., 2014; Wright & Nyberg, 2017), the rise of platform-based economies (e.g., Cutolo & Kenney, 2021), the challenges of ventures pursuing social and commercial goals simultaneously (Kim & Kim, 2022), to name just a few – are unusually complex and cross-cutting. Or from a micro perspective, we benefit from increased attention to how employees navigate blurred work–nonwork boundaries (e.g., Beckman & Stanko, 2020; Gabriel et al., 2020), sustain extreme work practices despite known costs (e.g., Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019), or how communication shapes access to critical resources (e.g., Huang et al., 2021). These examples may either call for fundamentally new explanations that go beyond our current theoretical toolkit or require implicating multiple theoretical traditions at once. Other phenomena, such as the rise of autocratic governance, the fragmentation of the global economic order, and the return of interstate war on the macro side, and the rise of gig work, the growing recognition of the significance of life transitions, and shifting patterns of evaluation and opportunity on the micro side, sit farther from the traditional boundaries of our field but are reshaping the organizational environments we study in ways we have barely begun to theorize. We believe that a field that is well practiced in vertical deepening but ill-equipped for horizontal expansion and integration will systematically underexplain the phenomena that matter most.

In phenomenon-driven research, therefore, the theoretical contribution is often less about extending any one theoretical column than about exploring uncharted territory beyond the current “grid” of theory and phenomena, or showing where an existing column breaks down. It may consist of generating the empirical foundation from which new columns eventually emerge, or introducing vocabulary that the field did not previously possess. Phenomenon-driven research is uniquely positioned to do this work because it starts from the row rather than from any single column.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR RESEARCH ¹

If theories follow a lifecycle from generative to constraining, and risk ossification, and if organizational phenomena are complex and consequential, then phenomenon-driven research is the primary mechanism by which a field renews itself. Akin to the need for what Kuhn (1962) called a paradigm shift – or what technology scholars see as a new cycle of path-dependent technology development (Anderson & Tushman, 1990; Dosi, 1988) – it is now imperative to encourage the generative stage of theory building.

Ongoing theoretical development through phenomenon-driven research, however, raises fundamental questions about how authors, reviewers, and editors approach the motivation and framing of scholarly work relative to prior work, and how a theoretical contribution can be achieved in phenomenon-driven research. Building on and complementing earlier editorials on phenomenon-driven theorizing (Dencker et al., 2023; Fisher et al., 2021; Ployhart & Bartunek, 2019), we offer reflections to authors and reviewers about how phenomenon-driven research may call for alternative ways to motivate and frame their work at *AMJ* and to claim theoretical contributions to the literature. Table 1 summarizes the guiding principles. Rather than meant as a prescriptive guide to phenomenon-driven research, these principles are intended as a reminder to approach scholarship and peer review with a flexible and generative mindset.

Motivating phenomenon-driven research

What does a compelling phenomenon-driven motivation look like? While much work published in *AMJ* is

¹ We coded *AMJ* papers from 2017–2025, with the help of a graduate student and AI, based on the underlying form of their motivation, distinguishing whether the motivation was puzzling (tensions or gaps within theory or empirical findings), reflected neglect (underexplored phenomena), or involved poorly understood phenomena (recognized but insufficiently theorized processes or mechanisms).

motivated by problematizing existing theory, phenomenon-driven research may call for alternative approaches in which theory is less prominently frontloaded.

While phenomenon-driven research may still be the exception rather than the rule at *AMJ*, recent examples published in the journal provide inspiration for alternative approaches to the well-established and productive theory-led template (e.g., Shaw, 2017). Across qualitative and quantitative studies, and at both micro and macro levels of analysis, we observed substantial variation in how phenomenon-driven research is motivated (see Figure 3), especially in the extent to which theory plays a prominent role at the front end. Although the approaches described below are not meant to be exhaustive – in fact, we are calling for greater openness to less templated ways of motivating work at *AMJ* – they may provide a useful starting point. We present them in order from limited to more extensive engagement with prior research and existing theory.

First, a motivation may simply be rooted in the observation that prior research has *neglected* an important phenomenon. For example, in a recent qualitative study, Rosado-Solomon et al. (2025) observe that, although mental illness is widespread in the workforce and carries enormous organizational costs, research on how employees with mental illness actually manage their symptoms at work remains scarce. Similarly, in a micro-level quantitative study, Keck et al. (2026) motivate their work by observing that research on mega-threats has examined how these events affect employees who share identities with victims but has largely overlooked the possibility that the same events may simultaneously activate majority-group members – those who share identities with perceived perpetrators. Finally, in macro-level quantitative work on California’s wildfires, Stein and Minniti (2026) observe that management research on public value creation has concentrated on formal contractual arrangements between public and private organizations, while neglecting the role of informal, self-organizing communities.

Second, a motivation may be built on the assertion that a phenomenon is *poorly understood*. This kind of motivation argues that critical aspects of a phenomenon remain unclear against the backdrop of prior related research. For example, Song and Jiang (2026) motivate their qualitative study of Thai sex workers by noting that existing sociological and management accounts of precarity explain how structural factors and individual strategies shape coping, but do not explain why some individuals develop greater agency in

coping than others. Similarly, in their study of mass shootings in local communities and the impact on organizational risk-taking, Schumacher et al. (2026) argue that the dominant framework for understanding organizational responses to performance shortfalls – the behavioral theory of the firm – rests on assumptions, such as the portrayal of decision-makers as dispassionate, that may not extend to the context of community trauma and its effects on risk-taking.

Finally, a motivation can be built around the claim that a phenomenon is *puzzling* from the vantage point of existing research. Such puzzles can take multiple forms, including ones where observations contradict theoretical expectations. For example, Fang and Tilcsik (2022) highlight that individuals from lower-class backgrounds earn less than those from upper-class backgrounds even when they are similar in education and occupational prestige – an outcome that contradicts standard explanations of the class pay gap. In other cases, a puzzle may arise from how a particular phenomenon exposes deficiencies and ambiguities between multiple plausible theoretical explanations. For example, Kirgios and Chang (2025) motivate their work by first setting the stage for the phenomenon – the increasing prevalence of goals around female representation and the growing use of diversity incentives – and then laying out that signaling theory and organizational behavior offer contrasting explanations for how diversity incentives may impact women’s leadership aspirations. Likewise, Lazar et al. (2025) motivate their work on algorithmic design and idea generation by observing that the rise of algorithms in knowledge work has given rise to two contrasting theoretical perspectives on the future of human expertise.

In sum, we believe there are many ways to motivate phenomenon-driven work, and that these approaches may vary in the extent to which they are anchored in prior theory. Those outlined above may offer a useful starting point for moving away from more typical theory-led motivations, which begin by problematizing theory and then explain why a particular context or phenomenon is well-suited to address a theory-centric problem. While it remains important to situate phenomenon-driven work within a broader scholarly conversation – and, as we discuss next, to articulate its theoretical contribution – the ex-ante problematization of the literature may be limited or even absent. By contrast, the ex-post discussion of the study’s value-added insight may be extensive.

Theoretical contributions in phenomenon-driven research

As we suggest above, our position is not that pursuing phenomenon-driven research requires authors to abandon the theoretical contribution. Rather, we encourage authors to consider what kind of theoretical contribution investigation of their phenomenon can make (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan's (2007) analysis of *AMJ* provides a useful lens. They classify empirical articles along a taxonomy with two dimensions: the extent to which an article develops new theory and the extent to which it tests existing theory. Crossing these dimensions yields five article types – reporters, testers, qualifiers, builders, and expanders – and their analysis shows that builders, testers, and expanders tend to make strong theoretical contributions, as evidenced, they argue, by significantly higher citation rates. Below, we outline how phenomenon-driven research can make a strong theoretical contribution through the high-contribution pathways in this taxonomy. Although we recognize that there may be many more routes to phenomenon-driven theoretical development, these pathways illustrate how scholars can abstract from the specifics of a focal phenomenon to arrive at a higher-level understanding of concepts and the interrelationships in explaining empirical patterns (see Figure 4).

Builders score high on theory building but relatively low on theory testing. They are perhaps the archetype of scholarly work that may initiate new cycles of theory development. Builders introduce new constructs, relationships, or processes, often – but not necessarily – through inductive work. For phenomenon-driven scholars, the builder pathway becomes available when existing theory lacks the vocabulary to explain what is happening: when the phenomenon does not fit nicely into established frameworks and when there is the scope to construct new theoretical building blocks. Two contribution pathways are especially relevant to builders. The first is new vocabulary: the phenomenon requires concepts that existing theory does not provide. Although some caution is warranted to avoid an unnecessary proliferation of terminology, when a phenomenon is genuinely poorly understood or puzzling from the vantage point of existing theory, new concepts can legitimately spark new theoretical conversations. The second is a type of mechanism discovery: the phenomenon reveals causal dynamics or processes that existing theory has not specified. Here, existing theory has not articulated the mechanism at all, and the

causal dynamics are novel. Making this shift often requires abductive reasoning and iterative cycling between data and theory (Cloutier et al., 2026).

Expanders score high on both theory building and theory testing. They introduce new constructs or relationships while also testing existing theory, thereby “changing the conversation” in a particular literature. At least three contribution pathways are available for phenomenon-driven research to be an expander. The first is boundary identification: the phenomenon reveals where an established theory breaks down, showing the limits of its explanatory reach. A canonical example of the boundary identification pathway is how Sine et al. (2006) challenge the applicability of structural contingency theory (Burns & Stalker, 1961), which was built around the distinction between organic versus mechanistic structures in large firms, to new ventures in highly dynamic environments (Bermiss et al., 2025). The second is mechanism discovery of a different kind: the phenomenon surfaces the process or causal dynamics behind a relationship that existing theory has established but never fully explained, thereby answering the “why.” Here, theory has established the relationship but not the reason it holds. The third is cross-tradition integration: the phenomenon cannot be explained by any single “vertical” theoretical tradition and instead requires insights from multiple conversations to be brought together.

Finally, testers score high on theory testing but relatively low on theory building. They rigorously ground predictions in existing formal theory and conduct demanding empirical tests, but do not introduce new constructs or relationships. As Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) note, rigorous theory testing is a valuable part of a theory's life cycle and thus should be encouraged at *AMJ*. They observed testers represent a small share of articles – a pattern that continues today (see Figure 4). A tester could, for example, conduct the first empirical test of an untested theory, or apply a well-developed theory to a population or context where it has rarely been examined. For phenomenon-driven authors, the tester pathway is available when the phenomenon itself provides an unusually powerful empirical context for testing what theory already predicts. In particular, when a phenomenon is fundamentally different from those on which existing theory is based, testing that theory in a new context can reveal which parts of that theory hold and which do not. Importantly, this gives information as to the conditions under which a theory operates. For example, existing theoretical

mechanisms underpinning gender-based differences in organizations may be tested in previously unexplored organizational contexts, allowing scholars to assess whether existing theories should be maintained, revised, or even discarded to make way for new ones.

Choosing one of these contribution types does not get authors off the hook with respect to what we already know about a strong theoretical contribution. Regardless of whether a study is an expander, builder, or tester, authors still need a compelling motivation: a clear articulation of what has been neglected, is poorly understood, or puzzling about the phenomenon. They need to identify an audience or the scholarly conversation this phenomenon enters, and whose thinking it is intended to change. They also need to describe clearly what the field already knows, because a theoretical contribution can only be assessed against a credible account of the existing conversation.

The analytical work of phenomenon-driven theorizing

The preceding sections described why phenomenon-driven research is needed and what kinds of theoretical contributions it can produce. But between “this has been neglected, is poorly understood, or puzzling” and “this is why it happens” lies a stretch of analytical work that existing accounts leave largely underspecified.

The analytical journey begins with a deliberate choice: theoretical agnosticism. By this we do not mean the absence of theoretical engagement, but rather the suspension of theoretical commitment during the early stages of inquiry. The instinct to reach for a familiar theoretical frame at the outset is understandable. It provides structure, vocabulary, and a sense of direction. But for phenomenon-driven work, premature theoretical commitment narrows what the researcher can see. It filters which patterns are noticed, which surprises are taken seriously, and which aspects of the phenomenon are treated as central rather than peripheral. Theoretical agnosticism means giving the phenomenon room to reveal its own structure before deciding which theoretical tools – new, or preexisting – are needed to explain it. This principle applies across methodological traditions, though it manifests differently in each.

Qualitative Research

For qualitative researchers engaged in inductive or abductive work, theoretical agnosticism is a familiar, if difficult, discipline. It is the commitment to letting categories emerge from the data rather than coding for

constructs derived from prior theory. Once the researcher has allowed the phenomenon to come into view on its own terms, a series of analytical moves follows. These are not strictly sequential in that they overlap, iterate, and circle back on each other. But they represent the core intellectual work of moving from puzzlement to explanation.

The first is *pattern recognition*, which involves seeing that something in the data is not random but structured, recurring, or systematic. This is where the phenomenon begins to take shape as an analytical object rather than just an empirical setting. What is surprising here? What keeps showing up? What does not fit? Pattern recognition is not passive observation. It requires active comparison, both within the data and against the expectations that existing theories would generate. The researcher is asking not just “what is happening?” but “what is happening that should not be, given what we think we know?”

The second is the *generation and evaluation of candidate explanations*. Having identified a pattern that existing theory does not adequately explain, the researcher asks, “what could account for this?” This is abductive reasoning in its most fundamental form: the search for the most plausible explanation of a surprising fact. Critically, this is the stage at which theoretical engagement intensifies, but in a different mode from the conventional template. Rather than starting from one theory and deriving predictions, the researcher considers multiple theoretical traditions as candidate explanations and evaluates them against the phenomenon. Some will be inadequate. Some will capture part of the pattern but not all of it. Some will need to be combined or modified. The phenomenon adjudicates among theories, rather than the other way around.

The third is *iterative cycling* between data and emerging explanation. Each pass through the data refines the explanation. Each refinement sends the researcher back to the data looking for different things, for confirming evidence, for disconfirming evidence, for boundary conditions, for the cases that do not fit. This cycling is where theoretical precision is gradually built. It is also where the research process most diverges from the linear narrative that papers typically present. Shepherd and Sutcliffe (2011) describe a version of this as “inductive top-down theorizing,” in which broad theoretical intuitions are progressively sharpened through engagement with data. The key point is that the explanation is being constructed and tested simultaneously, not sequentially.

The fourth is *conceptual construction*, involving the creative and often difficult work of naming what the researcher is seeing. When does a recurring pattern warrant a new construct? When does a set of observations call for new vocabulary rather than the application of existing terms? This is where builders and expanders diverge most sharply. Builders need to create language that the field does not yet possess. Expanders need to show that existing language is insufficient and to articulate precisely how it must be stretched. In both cases, the researcher must judge whether the phenomenon genuinely demands a new conceptual apparatus or whether existing vocabulary, properly applied, can do the work. Some caution is necessary here to avoid unnecessary construct proliferation, but the opposite error – forcing novel phenomena into ill-fitting existing categories – is at least as costly.

The fifth is *propositional development*, which requires specifying how the concepts the researcher has constructed or identified relate to one another. This is where process models, theoretical frameworks, and relational claims take shape.

Quantitative Research

For quantitative researchers, the analytical work of phenomenon-driven theorizing may seem less intuitive, given that the hypothetico-deductive template begins with theory and derives predictions from it. Yet in practice, many of the strongest phenomenon-driven quantitative studies began with an empirical puzzle, neglected phenomenon, or poorly understood research problem rooted in the real-world context.

A typical first stage in quantitative phenomenon-driven research, then, is *opportunity recognition*: identifying neglected, poorly understood, or puzzling phenomena worthy of scholarly inquiry. Before data collection, opportunity recognition may arise from a practitioner puzzle, an untested assumption, or a domain so neglected that we do not understand it all. Such intuitions are often informed by informal conversations with stakeholders in the field or based on striking examples discussed in the media. In archival data, descriptive accounts may bring to light an empirical puzzle, wherein the researcher observes a pattern that is unexpected, a relationship that reverses in an unfamiliar context, or a distribution that defies what established logic would predict. While, at this stage, initial empirical patterns are assessed against the backdrop of prior research, theoretical agnosticism is imperative to avoid prematurely committing novel phenomena to

preexisting theoretical explanations².

In a second stage, these starting points inform the *research question* and *conceptual construction* through loose engagement with prior literature and theories and deep engagement with the phenomenon. It is at this stage of the inquiry that broad awareness of the adjacent literatures and existing theories, possibly even beyond the realm of management, is key. It ensures the phenomenon is as neglected, poorly understood, or puzzling as claimed, and thus helps to avoid introducing new concepts when existing ones suffice or revealing new mechanisms that prior research has already documented. Moreover, it may open up opportunities to “borrow” conceptual toolkits from adjacent disciplines outside management. While the specific neglected and poorly understood aspects of the phenomenon under investigation may require the creation of new constructs, variables, and measurements not seen in previous research, loose engagement with prior theories may help to surface related concepts and mechanisms that may inform later research design decisions, for instance about control variables or experimental control conditions.

In the third analytical stage, researchers *generate candidate explanations* and *generate hypotheses* in relation to the research question. That is, different from qualitative work, authors build explicit ex-ante expectations about the relationships under investigation to make a strong case for the most plausible explanation amid an array of potential alternative explanations. Through a combination of theory-agnostic logical reasoning and loose engagement with theories that offer candidate arguments and mechanisms, authors carefully build a narrative that explains the processes and causal pathways that underpin the predicted empirical patterns. While these explanations need not adopt existing theoretical terminology, scholars may at this stage borrow from one or more theoretical bodies that enable analogous reasoning or provide foundational building blocks (e.g., psychology; cognition) on which new explanations can be built.

In a fourth and final stage, the research question, hypotheses, and the proposed explanations against plausible alternatives, then, inform the research design. For example, experimental work will need to create discriminating designs that construct experimental conditions capable of adjudicating among competing

² Studies adopting a multimethod setup may use an explore-and-test logic using inductive methods to develop theory about a given phenomenon and subsequently test it based on deductive methods (Wellman et al., 2023).

explanations for the observed phenomenon. A theoretical contribution may arise, either based on the proposed explanation holding firm against credible alternatives, or reaching the conclusion that alternative, possibly preexisting explanations are more plausible instead, even though the nature of the phenomenon and sound ex-ante deductive theorizing suggested otherwise.

In quantitative analytical work, a crucial distinction is necessary. Theoretical agnosticism in the early stages of this process is not a license for undisciplined empirical exploration. What we describe here differs from what the field rightly criticizes as “fishing” or HARKing (hypothesizing after the results are known; Kerr, 1998) in three respects. First, the work is organized around a genuine empirical puzzle (or neglected or poorly understood phenomenon), even if that puzzle only crystallizes through engagement with the data rather than being fully specified in advance. Second, the exploration is principled and transparent, with the researcher documenting their analytical choices and how their understanding evolved, rather than presenting the final result as the only analysis conducted. Third, the theoretical engagement that follows is substantive, not decorative, in that the explanation must account for why the pattern exists, not merely accommodate it after the fact. The difference between theoretical agnosticism and HARKing lies not in the presence or absence of exploration, but in the discipline, transparency, and theoretical seriousness with which that exploration is conducted.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EVALUATION AND DEVELOPMENT

If phenomenon-driven research requires a different analytical journey from phenomenon to contribution, it may also call for an expanded approach to how phenomenon-driven work is evaluated and developed in the review and publication process. Conventional assessment criteria remain essential: reviewers and editors must still assess whether a paper’s claims are credible, whether its empirical foundation is sound, and whether it is moving toward a meaningful contribution. At the same time, because phenomenon-driven work often moves from observation to explanation through a more emergent analytical process, as reviewers and editors, we may need to complement familiar evaluative standards with a more developmental lens. In light of considering reviewers and editors as “professional partners collectively invested in advancing knowledge and strengthening the field” rather than acting as mere gatekeepers (Roberson, 2026: 5), reviewing and

editing phenomenon-driven work well requires not only assessing where the paper has landed but understanding where it is in its journey and helping it get further.

The first principles are sequencing and calibration. This involves evaluating the phenomenon before the theory and calibrating questions to the paper's motivation and the kind of contribution it is attempting to make. Demanding a fully crystallized theoretical contribution in round one risks prematurely foreclosing on phenomenon-driven papers before they can mature. In early rounds of review, the emphasis may be on the phenomenon itself and the empirical grounding. Is this phenomenon real, important, and inadequately understood? Is the empirical evidence credible? Does the paper establish that something genuinely puzzling is at stake, or that the phenomenon has genuinely been neglected in prior research, or is still poorly understood? If not, it is appropriate to say so. But, if the answer is yes (or even maybe), then the theoretical contribution can develop across rounds. What reviewers will look for depends on the contribution type. For builders, the question is whether new theoretical elements are truly necessary. In this context, rather than pushing authors toward existing theoretical language when the phenomenon demands something new, reviewers and editors may push authors to justify why existing theory falls short. For expanders, the question is whether the phenomenon meaningfully stretches existing theory. Here, rather than pushing papers back into a single theoretical home, reviewers and editors may press authors to show that cross-tradition theorizing is warranted rather than convenient. For testers, a critical question is whether the context provides useful theoretical insight. Rather than casting theory-testing in novel contexts as insufficiently ambitious, here it is imperative to encourage authors to specify what the context reveals that prior tests could not. Motivation matters too: a paper motivated by "neglect" does not need to problematize existing theory to justify its existence; a paper motivated by a puzzle should be evaluated on whether the puzzle is genuine rather than on whether it fits a familiar theoretical conversation.

A second principle is engaging with the analytical process rather than just the output. The analytical work described earlier gives reviewers a vocabulary for evaluating how authors arrived at their claims, not just what they claim. Productive developmental questions include: Has the author genuinely let the phenomenon guide the inquiry, or has a theoretical lens been imposed early and left unexamined? Have

plausible alternative explanations been seriously considered and ruled out, or has the author locked into a single candidate too quickly? Is the conceptual vocabulary warranted, or is it proliferating beyond what the evidence supports? These questions evaluate the quality of the theorizing process itself, which is often more diagnostic of a paper's potential than the polish of its current theoretical claims.

A third principle is self-diagnosis and tolerance for uncertainty. Before concluding that a phenomenon-driven paper lacks a contribution, reviewers might ask whether their concern reflects a genuine weakness in the paper or a preference for a more familiar theoretical framing. If the core of a reviewer's critique is that the paper would be stronger if framed through a particular established theory, that may be an ossification signal rather than a quality signal. Similarly, there may be a tendency to abstract upward too quickly until a finding appears to fit what the field already knows. In some cases, however, the paper's theoretical value lies precisely in staying close to the level at which the phenomenon operates.

Phenomenon-driven papers often arrive with the architecture still under construction. Developmental feedback from reviewers and editors, therefore, involves identifying where the paper's theoretical potential lies, pointing toward connections the authors may not yet have developed, and encouraging the level of abstraction needed for the work to travel beyond its immediate empirical setting. This does not replace conventional standards of rigor and contribution; rather, it extends the evaluation toolkit for a form of research in which contribution often emerges through iteration. It asks reviewers and editors to be collaborators in the theorizing process rather than gatekeepers who evaluate the finished product (Roberson, 2026).

CONCLUSION

At *AMJ*, the commitment to shaping the future of management scholarship runs deep. Given the unprecedented pace of change in society and the pressing need for effective solutions to complex multifaceted challenges, management scholarship has a critically important role to play in making sense of the phenomena that are shaping the world. To continue fulfilling that role, we must loosen the theoretical reins where they may constrain our ability to engage with emerging or poorly understood phenomena. The field does not renew itself by asking ever more refined questions of familiar theories alone; it renews itself

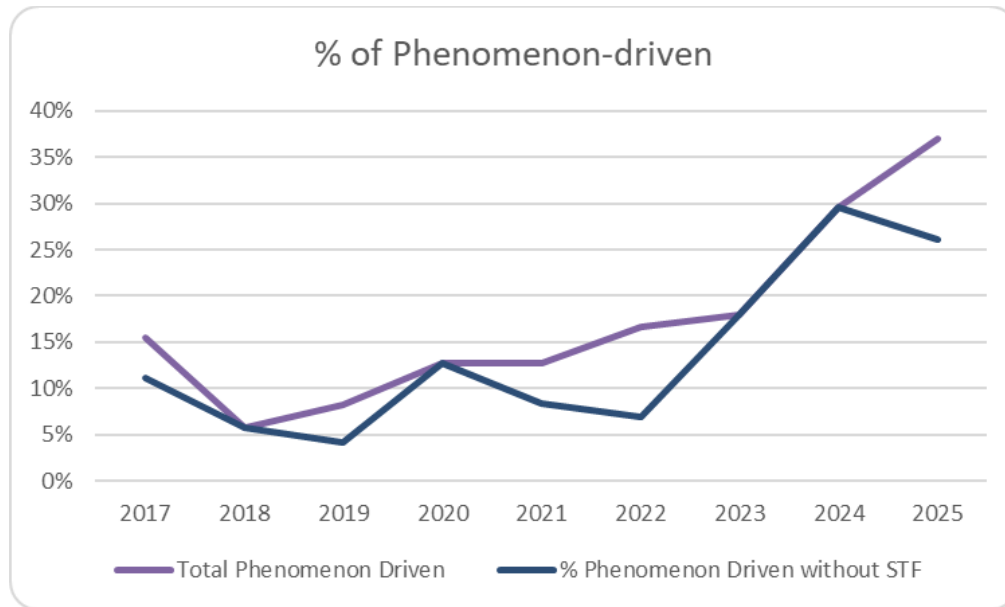
by confronting phenomena that unsettle what we think we know. Phenomenon-driven research is not a retreat from theory, but the wellspring of its regeneration. While *AMJ* is open to *all* kinds of empirical research – and research that is theoretically motivated remains an integral part of its approach to scholarship – in the spirit of the collective stewardship that underpins the current editorial team at *AMJ* (Roberson, 2026), we look forward to working with authors and reviewers to realize the untapped potential of phenomenon-driven research for theoretical renewal.

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FIGURE 1: PHENOMENON-DRIVEN RESEARCH IN *AMJ*



Note. STF = Special Topic Forum. To code articles for this figure, we first asked ClaudeAI to identify articles that are likely to be phenomenon-driven based on the title. Next, with the help of a graduate assistant, we coded each article for whether it was phenomenon driven.

FIGURE 2: A lifecycle model of theory evolution

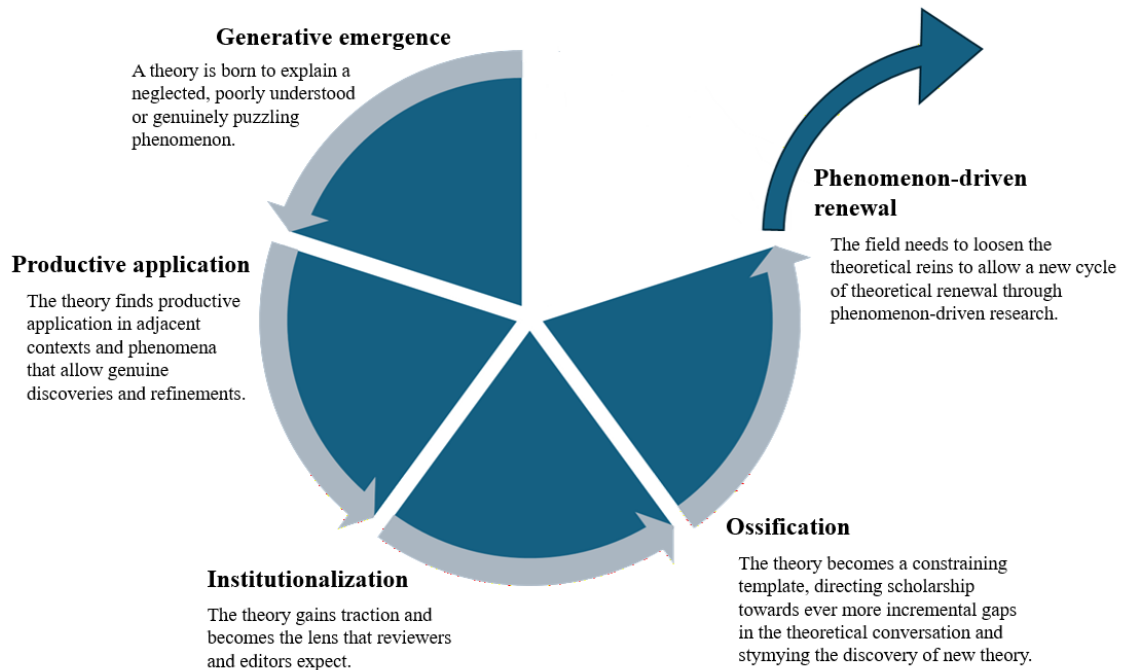
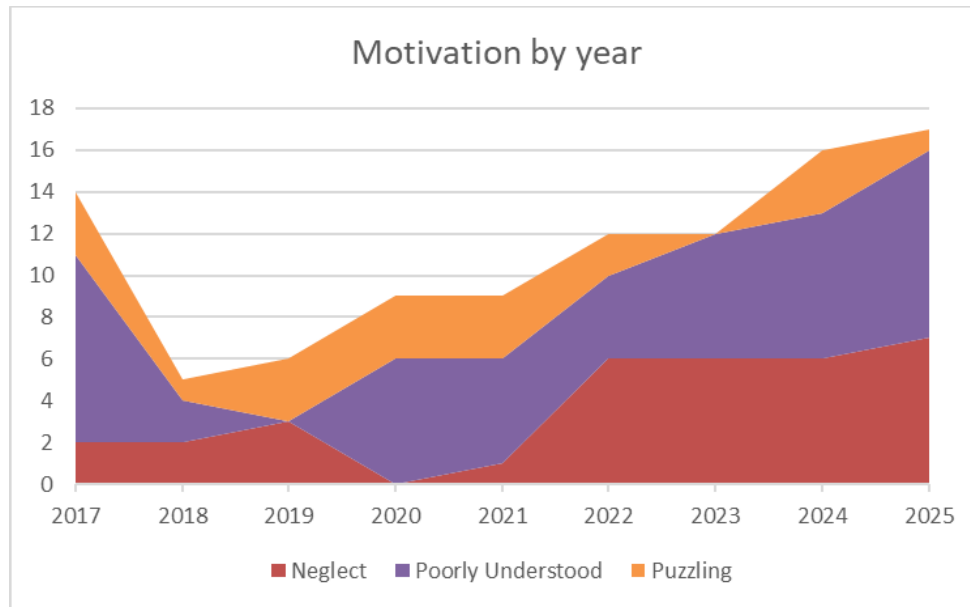
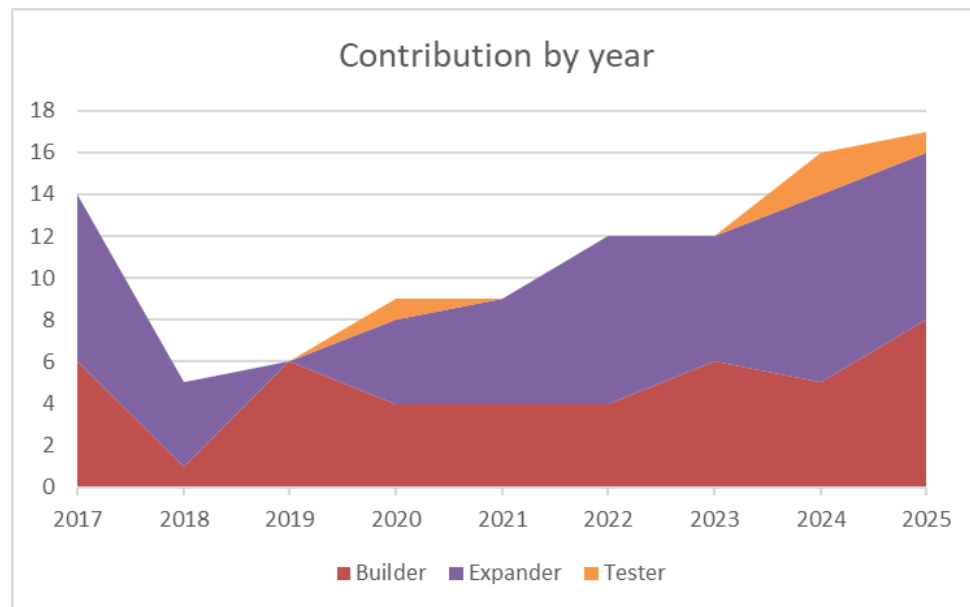


FIGURE 3: MOTIVATIONS IN PHENOMENON-DRIVEN RESEARCH



Note. With the help of a graduate assistant, we coded the motivation for each phenomenon-driven paper based on our analysis of the primary types.

FIGURE 4: CONTRIBUTIONS IN PHENOMENON-DRIVEN RESEARCH



Note. With the help of a graduate assistant, we coded the contribution type for each phenomenon-driven paper based on the Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan (2007) assessment of types with the strongest theoretical contribution.

TABLE 1: Guiding principles for phenomenon-driven research in AMJ

	BUILDERS	EXPANDERS	TESTERS
RESEARCH	Possible motivations across contribution types: Build a compelling phenomenon-driven motivation by showing that the phenomenon has been neglected, is poorly understood, or is puzzling from the vantage point of prior research.		
	Possible contribution pathways: New vocabulary: the phenomenon requires concepts that existing theory does not provide. Mechanism discovery “type I”: the phenomenon reveals the process or causal pathways existing theory has not specified.	Possible contribution pathways: Boundary identification: the phenomenon reveals where an existing theory breaks down. Mechanism discovery “type II”: the phenomenon surfaces the process or causal dynamics – the why – behind previously documented relationships. Cross-tradition integration: the phenomenon cannot be explained by any single “vertical” theoretical tradition and demands that insights from multiple conversations be brought together.	Possible contribution pathway: Testing theory: a theory may hold under conditions where the phenomenon suggests it may not.
EVALUATION AND DEVELOPMENT	Ask: Are the new constructs, relationships and mechanisms authors propose necessary and credible? Potential pitfall: Forcing authors to reframe novel phenomena in established theoretical terms.	Ask: Does the phenomenon reveal a genuine theoretical limit, unresolved mechanism, or need for integration across traditions? Potential pitfall: Directing papers into a single theoretical home when the phenomenon calls for cross-tradition integration or theoretical stretching.	Ask: Have the authors justified why this specific phenomenon allows the field to see something it otherwise could not? Potential pitfall: Treating theory tests in fundamentally different contexts as insufficiently novel simply because they do not introduce new constructs.
	Potential pitfalls shared across contribution types • Favoring motivations based on problematizing prior literature over neglected, poorly understood, or puzzling phenomena. • Demanding a fully crystallized theoretical contribution too early rather than allowing it to emerge across rounds of review. • Prematurely dismissing phenomenon-driven work on the basis that, at a higher level of abstraction, “we already know this.”		