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CROSSROADS—Organization Research as an Applied Science: Lessons from Fields That Shape Practice and Policy

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Abstract. Numerous calls over decades have urged scholars to pursue research that is more relevant to problems faced by organizations and their members. Yet the relevance and impact of our field remains limited compared with other applied sciences. Whereas individual aspects of our research practice, such as expectations about methods, theoretical novelty, and motivating a study, are frequently discussed in our field, less attention is paid to the publication system. Our perspective is that to bring about a field-wide change would require us to identify and address the systemic sources of the issue. Accordingly, we compare publication systems across applied sciences, contrasting organization research with those of impactful applied sciences, such as health sciences, engineering, economics, and design science. We focus on four fundamental elements of publication systems: balance between evidence and theory, diversity of research types accommodated, system responsiveness to real-world challenges, and relationship between exploration and replication. These elements are interdependent, and understanding them together reveals how publication systems can enable or constrain what gets published and its impact, enabling us to identify pathways to reorient publication systems in our field to become a more impactful applied science.

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Introduction

As an applied science, our field aims to improve organizational effectiveness and solve practical problems (Pfeffer and Fong 2002, Pillutla and Thau 2013, Hideg et al. 2020). However, despite the increasing sophistication in methods and greater emphasis on theory in recent decades, we have not made commensurate strides in relevance and impact. As we see it, the heart of this challenge is the culture in our field that demands novel theoretical advancement from every paper (Aguinis and Cronin 2022), which may inadvertently constrain our ability to address pressing organizational challenges. Previous appeals to enhance our impact as an applied science primarily focus on urging individual scholars to undertake research that is more relevant for the pressing problems faced by organizations and businesses; see, for example, calls by *Responsible Research in Business and Management* or editors of the *Academy of Management Journal* (Tsui 2013, George et al. 2016).

Whereas repurposing our scholarly efforts to increase our relevance and impact as an applied science seemingly

resonates with many, how to translate these calls to practice is less clear. Put differently, urging scholars to innovate and realign their priorities to increase the relevance and impact of their research output, leaving the overall publication system effectively unchanged, has yielded limited results at the field level. Many of the top journals in the field, which anchor and steer our research community, remain “theoretical for its own sake,” in which publication decisions hinge on contributions through theoretical novelty, constraining choices pertaining to our research endeavors (Hideg et al. 2020). The expectation that every paper needs to make a theoretical advancement has led to a proliferation of fragmented and inconsequential theories (Pillutla and Thau 2013) that do not accumulate into a coherent body of knowledge backed by strong evidence (Pfeffer 1993, Cronin et al. 2021). As a result, in general, our collective research output has not made great advances in addressing the phenomena and problems in the purview of our field with greater impact and relevance for the stakeholders of our endeavor (Pfeffer and Fong 2002, Pillutla and Thau 2013).

We argue that to effect a field-wide change would require an approach to identify and address the systemic sources of the problem. Whereas individual elements of our research practice, such as expectations about methods, theoretical novelty, and writing, are frequently discussed in our field, less attention is paid to how the system of evaluation we use enables or constrains different forms of knowledge creation. Publication paradigms and evaluation systems used in academic fields shape how each field develops and validates knowledge. Understanding these paradigms and systems is crucial to enhance the scientific rigor, practical relevance, and impact of organization research as an applied science.

Whereas management scholars might see a struggle to establish strong relevance as an applied science without compromising scientific standing (Wiklund et al. 2019), there are applied sciences that do not seem to be beset by this incapacitating dilemma; one survey indicates that 84% of health practitioners and 51% of engineers read their scholarly journals weekly (Fraser et al. 2020). Because other applied sciences might also face trade-offs such as those we encounter, knowing how their publication systems might enable alternative ways to navigate such challenges can help us better chart our journey toward more relevant publications and scholarship.

Accordingly, we seek to understand how our publication system in organization research differs from those in other applied sciences along four fundamental properties: balance between evidence and theory, diversity of research types, system responsiveness, and the relationship between exploration and replication. By understanding these differences, we can appreciate how publication systems are vital drivers of field development and identify paths to publication systems in our field that can better serve both scientific and practical endeavors.

A Comparison with Other Applied Sciences

The relationship between applied science and basic science fundamentally shapes how fields structure their publication systems. Unlike basic sciences, which seek to expand foundational knowledge, the primary objective of applied sciences is to focus on solving practical problems, such as by harnessing and applying existing theoretical insights to address real-world challenges. This distinction is crucial for understanding how different fields organize their publication systems and evaluate research contributions.

Organization research occupies an unusual position in this landscape. Whereas fundamentally an applied science, it often attempts to also do the job of basic sciences by demanding theoretical novelty in every paper. This creates a tension: should we primarily advance basic

theoretical understanding (the primary concern of foundational disciplines) or focus on applying existing theories to solve organizational problems (the main role of applied sciences)? The emphasis on theoretical novelty in every paper creates a preoccupation with theoretical novelty that, in practice (despite the best intentions), can impede both scientific progress and practical relevance by

- Relegating and discouraging studies that tackle important organizational problems or provide valuable evidence about organizational phenomena without being able to yet clearly spell out how these can advance theory.

- Leading to “contorted, ponderous prose” (Hambrick 2007, p. 1349) and post hoc theoretical framing of empirical findings (theorizing after results are known) being presented as though this occurred a priori to meet publication requirements.

- Erecting barriers between research and practice by privileging (what some in our field see as) theoretical sophistication over practical applicability.¹

To understand how this tension can be navigated differently, we examine how publication systems in other applied sciences can provide ways to balance theoretical advancement with practical impact. We focus on major applied sciences, such as health sciences, engineering, and design sciences, to see what insight publication systems in these fields offer for evaluating and disseminating research and maintaining scientific rigor.

The health and medical sciences provide a compelling example of how applied fields can resolve this tension. In these fields, researchers and practitioners confront immense complexity in how the human body interacts with treatments, environments, and behaviors. This presents a labyrinth of interconnected variables, each potentially influencing outcomes in subtle and often unpredictable ways, similar to what we encounter in organization research. This complexity is compounded by the fact that the effect size can often be small and vary greatly across populations, life stages, and contexts. Yet, rather than requiring each study to advance theory, health sciences have evolved sophisticated systems for accumulating and synthesizing evidence across studies (Guyatt et al. 2008). Individual clinical trials provide rigorous evidence about specific interventions in specific contexts, whereas meta-analyses and systematic reviews identify patterns that inform both practice and theory development (Moher et al. 2009). This approach recognizes that individual studies, regardless of their rigor, can provide only limited evidence to justify theoretical claims. Even as medical journals naturally publish studies that draw on biological sciences for theoretical grounding, these journals prioritize clinical evidence and practical applications over theoretical advancement (Sackett et al. 1996).

Engineering demonstrates a similar pattern in building on physics, chemistry, geology, biology, etc., but focusing publications on the goal of solving technical

problems (Vincenti 1990, Sismondo 2009). Engineering journals regularly publish studies that solve problems by applying existing theories without requiring a contribution back to these theories in the manner of advancing them with every study. This approach enables rapid translation of basic science into practical applications and maintaining scientific rigor.

Design sciences and architecture also provide relevant models for our field given the complexities and challenges they encounter in studying human-made systems (i.e., the science of artificials) (Simon 1996). These fields draw on diverse theoretical foundations—from psychology to materials science—maintaining a clear focus on creating practical solutions. Rather than emphasizing theoretical novelty in every individual paper, design science journals evaluate research based on systematic documentation of design processes and outcomes (Simon 1996). It is this documentation that then mostly builds theoretical understanding over time as informed and developed through accumulated evidence rather than via individual theoretical leaps claimed by single studies. This approach allows theoretical understanding to emerge from a body of evidence rather than preceding it.

Economics provides another instructive example of studying complex social phenomena shaped by human behavior, institutional structures, and market dynamics. Top economics journals devote more space to publishing papers on careful empirical documentation of important economic phenomena even when theoretical implications remain provisional. For instance, development economics journals publish rigorous empirical studies of poverty alleviation programs or microfinance initiatives that document what works in specific contexts, allowing theoretical understanding to emerge gradually through accumulated evidence rather than requiring every paper to significantly advance theory. This is one approach by which publication systems might maintain intellectual standards, enabling thorough engagement with practical challenges through systematic empirical documentation.

Below, we delve into four interrelated differences that characterize the publication system in organization research vis-à-vis those in some of the applied sciences upon which we have touched above. To be clear, our comparative analysis does not seek to idealize other fields by any means. Rather, our aim is to examine how publication systems in other fields might have developed systematic responses to challenges that parallel our own and to see if it is possible to learn from these. The intention is not to replicate their approaches wholesale but to understand how different fields have responded to similar underlying challenges. By examining these systems comparatively, we can better appreciate alternative ways in which applied sciences can balance competing demands and maintaining scientific rigor.

Difference 1: Evidence vs. Theory

The first major difference between organization research and numerous other applied sciences lies in how their publication systems weigh evidence against theory. Whereas our field typically requires theoretical novelty as a necessary criterion for publication, other applied sciences typically prioritize robust evidence and practical implications, viewing theoretical advancement as a valuable but not necessary condition for individual papers to be published as theoretical advancement typically emerges from more accumulated evidence than what a single paper can offer.

This difference creates what we might call a premature theorizing trap in organization research. By requiring theoretical novelty from each study, our field often attempts to extract theoretical insights from individual papers despite the inherently limited evidence that any single study can offer (see also, in this vein, Shaver's (2020) argument for identifying causality through a cumulative body of research). This pressure to theorize with limited evidence with the very same authors involved in theorizing as well as generating the evidence in the same study that "validates" that theory can trigger conflicts of interest and motivated reasoning. More generally, the field's overriding emphasis on theoretical novelty in each paper inadvertently prioritizes theoretical fragmentation over systematic knowledge accumulation.

In contrast, numbers of other applied sciences employ fundamentally different approaches to knowledge development to serve their applied nature. The evidence-centric approach in medicine and health sciences emerged from recognizing that human health results from complex interactions between biological, behavioral, and social factors. Consider how the understanding of cardiovascular disease has evolved. Initial clinical observations identified patterns of disease progression, biochemical research revealed underlying mechanisms, and population studies examined risk factors and interventions. Importantly, each type of study contributed distinct forms of evidence with limitations in one approach often addressed by complementary methodologies in this multimodal approach. Despite well-developed theories about cholesterol metabolism and cardiovascular function, clinical practice guidelines rely primarily on large-scale empirical evidence from diverse populations.

These fields recognize that theoretical understanding typically emerges from patterns observed across papers rather than from individual studies. Meta-analyses, whereas not without their own methodological challenges, provide a way to synthesize findings across diverse contexts and populations to identify robust patterns that inform both practice and theoretical understanding (Moher et al. 2009). When unexpected patterns emerged—such as the protective effects of

HDL cholesterol or the role of inflammation—these empirical findings were published quickly, allowing the field to validate and build upon them before developing theoretical explanations (Moher et al. 2009).

This approach becomes even more crucial when studying interventions with more social elements. Take mobile health initiatives for managing chronic diseases in resource-limited settings. Whereas technology acceptance and health behavior change theories provide useful frameworks, successful implementation depends heavily on local conditions. To address the aim of ultimately improving conditions in those real-world settings, health journals prioritize research on the effect size and their variations in specific contexts.

Similar patterns appear across applied sciences more generally. Engineering journals aim to publish papers that solve problems, valuing practical effectiveness over theoretical novelty (Sismondo 2009). For instance, the development of wind turbine technology has progressed through systematic documentation of design improvements and performance data rather than requiring new theoretical insights about fluid dynamics in every paper. As such, engineering knowledge develops mostly through “epistemic accumulation,” the gradual building of theoretical understanding through repeated evidence coming from different designs across contexts and applications (Vincenti 1990, Sismondo 2009). This approach acknowledges that meaningful advances often require substantial evidence gathered across multiple studies and contexts. Education research, which deals with complex social systems, emphasizes practice-based evidence through implementation studies that provide accumulative evidence for generating crucial insights for practitioners (Bryk et al. 2015). Likewise, in economics, there is a shift toward using natural and field experiments and other field work for policy design and evaluation, reflecting a recognition that complex social and economic systems might behave in ways that can deviate from the initial theories, which can only provide some guidance (Deaton 2010). Theory can guide research direction and interpretation of findings, but theoretical novelty is not the overriding criterion for publication. Table 1 summarizes key aspects in publication evaluation considerations across some other applied sciences. We see these as differing from the situation in organization research, in which publication often requires theoretical novelty from each individual paper.

An evidence-centric approach offers crucial advantages for applied sciences. First, it enables more direct and rapid dissemination of findings that aim to benefit practice, in which theoretical explanations are nice to have rather than a must. Second, it facilitates more effective knowledge accumulation, in which such accumulation across time and contexts helps distinguish enduring principles from qualified, provisional

patterns. Third, it creates tighter coupling between research and practice by producing evidence that practitioners can directly assess and apply, which, in turn, facilitates practitioners’ engagement for further evidence accumulation.

In addition, and perhaps counterintuitively at first blush, evidence-focused publication systems can, in fact, strengthen knowledge accumulation over time in a manner that may be more robust than the path of requiring theoretical novelty from each paper up front. When multiple studies accumulate evidence about phenomena across different contexts, patterns emerge that can inform and justify more sophisticated theoretical understanding. This approach seems particularly valuable for organization research, in which the complexity of organizational phenomena means that theoretical insights based on limited evidence from single studies may not capture the full richness of organizational reality.

Difference 2: Diversity and Richness in Publication Systems

The second fundamental difference is how publication systems accommodate and value different types of knowledge contributions. The emphasis on theoretical novelty in almost every paper in our field creates an overemphasis that constrains the types of knowledge we can develop. Many top journals in our field largely maintain that theoretical novelty is necessary for publication regardless of research purpose or type. This predilection creates a less diverse system that constrains the questions we can effectively study and the forms of knowledge we can develop. When theoretical novelty remains a prerequisite to publish a research paper, scholars may avoid engaging with certain types of research questions even if these are crucial for practice.

In contrast, other applied sciences demonstrate that theoretical novelty and practical relevance need not co-occur in every paper. The rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning has made more management researchers aware of some of these other types of research, such as predictive modeling, which can have value even in the absence of offering causal explanation. For example, numerous other applied sciences publish machine learning models that predict relevant outcomes, identify high-risk factors or populations, or detect anomalies in engineering or medical imaging (Rajkomar et al. 2019). Climate science incorporates sophisticated predictive models to provide important forecasting tools (Reichstein et al. 2019). Naturally, a paper proposing a new algorithm is evaluated differently from one documenting a successful implementation of that algorithm. These fields evaluate such work based on the practical utility of the predictive accuracy, not on theoretical novelty or causal explanation. In organization research as well, machine learning models

Table 1. An Overview of the Main Focus, Approach, and Impact of Some Major Applied Sciences

Applied science	Focus	Approach	Impact
Health sciences	Advancing individual and population health	Applies basic science with a diverse range of empirical methods, including clinical trials, observational studies, epidemiology, and implementation science. Emphasizes rigorous evidence accumulation across contexts and populations.	Informs clinical practices, health policy, and practice through evidence-based recommendations.
Engineering	Solving technical problems and creating useful products	Applies and adapts principles from physical sciences to design, prototype, and iterate practical solutions. Emphasizes functionality, precision, and efficiency.	Evaluated through the effectiveness, safety, scalability, and adoption of technical solutions.
Design and architecture	Creating user-centered, functional, and meaningful artifacts that meet human needs	Uses iterative cycles of ideation, prototyping, testing, and refinement. Draws on human-centered design, aesthetics, and science.	Measured by user adoption, functionality, and emotional/experiential value.
Economics	Understanding and informing economic behavior	Rigorous empirical documentation of economic phenomena through empirical studies, natural experiments, and economic evaluation.	Evidence-based insights informing effective economic decisions through robust and replicable empirical evidence.

that accurately predict employee turnover, customer churn, or business survival during crises could offer immediate practical value even without establishing causality or providing a theory that details the responsible mechanisms. Yet, despite their potential impact on practice, such studies rarely find a home in top management journals. Therefore, primarily on this basis (i.e., that top journal publication is highly unlikely), many scholars choose not to pursue such questions (Aguinis and Cronin 2022), which then hampers our field's practical relevance and real-world impact.

Most applied sciences maintain heterogeneous and richer publication systems with distinct evaluation frameworks for different forms of knowledge creation. This eco-diversity in publication evaluation² reflects an understanding that complex real-world phenomena require multiple forms of knowledge, and these are generated through different approaches and should be evaluated accordingly. Health sciences exemplify a heterogeneous approach through a richer system of publication for evaluating different types of research contributions; see more than 600 guidelines for different types of research at equator-network.com, on which each type follows distinct evaluation criteria appropriate to its purpose and methodology. Consider research on community health worker programs in developing countries. *The Lancet Global Health* publishes multiple types of studies on these interventions: randomized trials testing efficacy, observational studies documenting implementation challenges,

theoretical works examining behavior change mechanisms, and ethnographic research exploring cultural acceptance. An observational study documenting implementation challenges is not expected to demonstrate causality; an implementation study is not required to advance theory. Instead, each contributes different forms of knowledge that is necessary for a better overall understanding of how these programs work in practice.

Applied sciences have also developed distinct evaluation criteria for theoretical advances versus practical applications, enabling a tailored assessment of each type of contribution by developing a set of evaluation frameworks. For example, the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation (GRADE) system provides explicit criteria for assessing evidence quality and recommendation strength (Guyatt et al. 2011), and the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) statement provides guidelines for reporting observational studies (von Elm et al. 2007). Such a diverse system of publication enables both rapid practical progress as well as systematic empirical and theoretical development across the field. These fields maintain scientific rigor not by demanding theoretical novelty from each paper but through systematic approaches that are geared to produce knowledge accumulation for the field across types of studies. Table A.1 at the Supplemental Material presents some examples of the attributes, values, and expectations for various types of research.

A heterogeneous approach that accommodates different research types yields several crucial advantages. First, it enables a field to develop different forms of knowledge—theoretical understanding, empirical regularities, and practical solutions—each feeding and building on others. Second, it encourages diversity by recognizing that different research questions may require different approaches and different timelines to generate useful knowledge. Third, it creates multiple legitimate pathways with different expectations for academic research to be published and influence practice rather than a presupposition that all noteworthy contributions must flow through theoretical novelty; afterward, this might be translated to the practitioners' sphere. In this spirit, our publication system in organization research would benefit from incorporating differentiated approaches to evaluating research, resulting in a richer system of publications as an applied science and maintaining high standards of scientific rigor.

Difference 3: System Responsiveness

The third salient difference lies in how publication systems facilitate the flow of knowledge between research and practice. Real-world problems unfold at their own pace, calling for timely responses from scholars, especially in applied sciences, for those fields to remain relevant. For impactful research, publication systems should aim to match the temporal dynamics of the phenomena in question. This encompasses both the speed of knowledge dissemination and the breadth of participation in knowledge creation. Whereas management journals often operate on extended timelines with high barriers to publish that arise from writing skills (in terms of crafting compelling prose to motivate, frame, and ground a study), other applied sciences have developed more responsive systems that enable both rapid knowledge flow and broader participation in the scientific enterprise.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic provides a compelling illustration of responsive publication systems in action. When the crisis emerged in the 1980s, medical journals rapidly adapted their processes to accelerate knowledge sharing and maintaining scientific standards. *The Lancet* and *New England Journal of Medicine* introduced fast-track review processes, whereas specialized publications such as *AIDS Research and Human Retroviruses* emerged to create dedicated channels for rapid communication (Epstein 1996). These adaptations went beyond mere speed; they fundamentally transformed how knowledge was gathered and validated. The multifaceted types of research published by *The Lancet* also enabled certain types of publications to come out quickly from clinical observations in resource-limited settings to community health worker experiences in affected populations. This responsiveness

proved crucial as improving the understanding of HIV/AIDS required multiple forms of knowledge.

Contemporary challenges demonstrate similar patterns. During the COVID-19 pandemic, top health and medical journals rapidly implemented rapid response systems to meet urgent practical needs by developing expedited review protocols (i.e., 48-hour priority review for COVID papers at *The Lancet*) and encouraging preprint options that enabled crucial findings to reach practitioners in time.

By contrast, many top management journals were absent from engaging in a timely manner with the problems that businesses faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, by one count, the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, and *Strategic Management Journal* collectively had no papers published among the 1,000 most-cited works on COVID-19 in business and management (for more information and discussion, see George et al. (2024)). It also bears noting that some of the earlier and highest impact pieces published by organization researchers appeared in other disciplines outside the mainstream journals in our field, e.g., Kniffin et al. (2021)). This stark difference in response speed and publication approach reflects a broader recognition in health sciences that theoretical advancement and practical relevance need not occur simultaneously; medical journals regularly publish breakthrough empirical findings to enable rapid dissemination of important discoveries. The commitment to rapid knowledge dissemination in health sciences extends beyond expedited reviews. Leading medical journals, including *The Lancet*, required authors to post their manuscripts on preprint servers concurrent with journal submission. This arrangement enabled immediate access to the key points for practitioners and researchers at the point of submission, knowing the prereviewed evidence could be taken preliminarily in informing their research or practice.

Environmental sciences have also developed responsive systems to address urgent ecological challenges. For example, *Nature Climate Change* maintains differentiated tracks that adjust review timelines based on the urgency and scope of submissions. Critical findings about immediate environmental threats—from emerging pollutants to extreme weather events—can move rapidly through peer review, whereas theoretical understanding develops gradually through subsequent research synthesis (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2021). The field has also developed innovative formats, such as research letters, that enable rapid communication of important findings without requiring the extensive theoretical framing typical in organization research.

This responsiveness extends beyond review speed to also encompass broader participation in knowledge

creation. Many applied science journals have pioneered approaches that value technical accuracy over writing sophistication, enabling broader global participation. IEEE Transactions journals, for instance, employ structured review processes that focus primarily on technical merit and practical significance rather than the compelling crafting of text to motivate and frame a study. This approach enables more significant contributions from non-Anglophone researchers and practitioners. Such a perspective recognizes that valuable technical insights may come from practitioners or researchers who might excel at solving problems even if they might not be skilled at theoretical framing or crafting the desired prose gracing much of management research.

In fields in which innovations occur at a dynamic pace and in which researchers and business often work together, as in the case of computer science, more responsive publication systems emerge through, for example, conference proceedings. Major conferences such as the Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems or International Conference on Machine Learning serve as primary venues for cutting-edge research. These conferences combine more rapid review cycles with high participation from industry researchers and practitioners, creating direct channels for knowledge exchange between academia and practice.

Our field's emphasis on sophisticated theoretical framing over timely, practical insights may inadvertently impede both the speed and breadth of our knowledge development. This is particularly problematic for studying complex or emerging phenomena or contexts in which theoretical understanding often lags practical developments. Junior scholars, practitioners, and researchers from non-Anglophone backgrounds helping organizations in emerging markets, for example, indeed struggle to navigate the prevailing theoretical and stylistic requirements at top journals. This stands in contrast to conscious efforts in other applied sciences to democratize knowledge creation. What is more, the time and effort invested in meeting exacting writing and stylistic standards in our field can also come at the expense of taking away that time and effort from our engagement with real-world problems. One might put forth that this is partly a result of the complexity and (inherent) imprecision of organization research as well as less experimental evidence. Economics, which also has slower review cycles—as compared with some of the other applied sciences upon which we touch in this piece—because of some similar circumstances, has partly addressed this by making papers available online (for example in the *National Bureau of Economic Research*) well ahead of print, thereby allowing them to become part of the academic discourse if merited.

Difference 4: Exploration and Replication

The fourth fundamental difference is how publication systems enable exploration and replication (Bettis et al. 2016). Whereas evaluations at journals in our field emphasize well-reasoned theoretical development in which hypotheses must be convincingly derived from but also extend existing theories—consequently imposing constraints on both novelty and validation—other applied sciences have developed publication systems that encourage exploration because they also value replication. This difference shapes how fields approach the discovery of new knowledge and the validation of existing understanding.

Our field's emphasis on deriving hypotheses convincingly from existing theoretical predictions creates a tension. Consider the predicament facing researchers: to be publishable, a study should offer predictions that are both novel but also convincingly derived from existing theory. However, this can often lead to a paradox in that truly novel predictions, by definition, should be difficult to derive convincingly from existing theoretical frameworks. Conversely, predictions that flow naturally and convincingly from existing theory rarely offer fundamental novelty. This tension motivates researchers to engage in mental gymnastics to devise ways—often after the fact—to link their research to and advance a theory or theories, what some have bemoaned as “theoretical salting” (Spector 2024).

Other applied sciences manage this tension through fundamentally different publication systems. Medical journals regularly publish exploratory studies that identify patterns or relationships, essentially assuming the preliminary nature of all individual papers unless otherwise stated. For instance, early observations about unexpected drug effects or novel treatment responses often appear as aha-moment discoveries in journals with researchers openly stating, “I just explored this”—a stark contrast to the requirement for a priori theoretical development and the value placed on a convincing theoretical deduction. Such publications in medical journals then become—and indeed are intended to serve as—points of departure for subsequent research. Because that field (evidently) puts greater value on replication studies than does ours, researchers and journals feel more comfortable publishing preliminary findings, knowing that false positives will be filtered out through attempted replications.

Environmental sciences also demonstrate how such publication systems enable discovery. Ecology journals explicitly separate exploratory observation from theoretical explanation. *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, for instance, publishes “Natural History Notes,” documenting unexpected observations without requiring theoretical justification (Tewksbury et al. 2014). The field recognizes that understanding complex ecosystems often begins with careful observation rather than

theory. Importantly, this openness to exploration works precisely because the field maintains a robust publication system for replication and validation. When interesting patterns are observed, other researchers attempt to replicate them across contexts, gradually building reliable knowledge. Similarly, in data sciences, researchers can publish intriguing patterns they have discovered without needing to explain, in the manner of a grand theory, why they occur. This approach has proved especially valuable as artificial intelligence explores domains in which theoretical frameworks have not yet caught up with empirical capabilities. Such exploration is enabled because of the recognition in the publication system in that field of the value of such efforts.

Economics has increasingly adopted practices that go in these directions as well, particularly in development economics. When researchers discover unexpected patterns in poverty alleviation programs or microfinance initiatives, they can publish these findings without also providing fully developed theoretical explanations in those same studies. The field's emphasis on replication, for example, through randomized controlled trials in different contexts, enables this exploratory approach. It is generally after patterns are shown to be robust and validated across multiple studies that researchers hone in on theoretical explanations (Deaton 2010).

Such systems create a virtuous exploration–replication cycle. Because replication is in place, journals also report exploratory findings. Because such exploratory findings are published, other researchers can then attempt replications. Because replication attempts—both successful and failed—can be published, the field has richer and less skewed evidence about which patterns are robust and which are spurious. This cycle enables both the discovery of novel patterns and systematic validation of knowledge claims as well as down-the-line theorizing (building new theories as well as refining, pruning, and challenging existing theories) based on a rich set of findings.

We see these as differing significantly from the publication system in organization research. Our field's insistence on theoretical derivation of hypotheses in a manner that convinces all reviewers paradoxically constrains both exploration and validation. The paucity of published replications means that we have limited evidence about which of our published findings are robust across contexts, and we have no good sense of the actual empirical support that exists for a theory (because the presumed support for a theory is sometimes based on only a few studies that used empirical practices in design and methods that might have been acceptable at the time but are now outdated). Simultaneously, journals in our field are hesitant to report exploratory findings or results that are truly “abnormal” because the norm of taking a top-tier publication at (high) face value and the absence of a functioning

replication system, as well as a culture that deters authors from stating that their study is primarily explorative, makes them anxious to publish what they see as anything less than exemplary research.

A Systems View: Virtuous and Vicious Cycles in Publication Systems

The four fundamental differences we discuss—in valuing evidence versus theory, system diversity, system responsiveness, and exploration–replication coupling—do not operate in isolation. They are components of an interconnected system in which changes in one affect others, creating different publication systems across fields. This interconnectedness can explain why isolated changes to individual aspects of our publication system, such as calls for replication studies or introducing submission tracks faster review processes, often fall short of generating systemic change. Understanding these interconnections can help us appreciate how different feedback loops and cycles can emerge that fundamentally shape how fields develop as applied sciences.

In most impactful applied sciences, we observe a cumulative knowledge system that creates virtuous cycles of knowledge development. The emphasis on evidence over theory enables initial exploratory studies to be published based on the merit of reporting evidence rather than theoretical sophistication. This openness to exploration, combined with multiple publication venues for different types of research papers, creates a fruitful cycle of knowledge accumulation: interesting patterns can be documented quickly; their replication is then attempted across contexts, and the numerous findings in the literature are synthesized. Accumulated knowledge, often published through meta-analyses, serves as a basis for theorizing, and emerging theories later inform but do not straitjacket researchers in their pursuit of new research questions. The system's responsiveness to address real-world problems based on the urgency and cost of the problems to practitioners ensures tighter coupling between research and practice, whereas lower barriers to entry in narrative writing enable diverse perspectives and evidence to surface. When maintaining scientific rigor, the system's openness to diverse contributions creates multiple pathways for research to influence practice.

Consider how such a cycle operates in medicine or engineering. When researchers of cardiovascular disease or wind turbine efficiency encounter unexpected patterns, the publication systems enable rapid documentation and subsequent verification of these findings. A cardiologist observing unusual treatment responses or an engineer noting unexpected performance patterns can quickly share these observations through research letters or technical notes. The emphasis on empirical documentation over theoretical completeness means that these initial findings enter the scientific discourse

rapidly, potentially catalyzing a cascade of scientific activity as others build on and test these observations. Replication studies across contexts enable meta-analyses to synthesize accumulating evidence to build robust understanding of effect magnitude and variation. This emphasis enables more concrete guidance to practice, in which practitioners need to consider not just if an intervention works on average but whether and how much it might work in the specific context in question. Such documentation of effect sizes and their variations ultimately provides a stronger foundation for theoretical development, grounded in robust understanding of effect magnitude and variation. The GRADE system in medicine and the tiered evaluation frameworks in engineering create explicit paths for different types of contributions to build upon each other to allow such a cumulative knowledge system.

As we see it, the publication system in organization research has different dynamics. The lingering widespread stand that each paper should make a theoretical contribution and introduce theoretical novelty tends to result in fragmented, empirically thinly scaffolded, and sometimes conflicting “theoretical atomization” that may proliferate but not form coherent accumulation. In addition, lengthy review cycles and the aspiration to craft (what reviewing teams see as) theoretical perfection (or clear self-avowedly high bars for theoretical contribution) present obstacles for more researchers to participate in the scholarly conversation, potentially reducing the diversity of perspectives and evidence presented.

Consider a researcher observing an unexpected pattern in organizational phenomena during a crisis or a novel approach to how innovations emerge. It would be highly unlikely in our publication system for studies reporting such findings to find a home in top journals unless researchers pair them with a compelling theoretical storyline. That framework needs to simultaneously demonstrate theoretical novelty (to justify publication) and convincing theoretical grounding (to demonstrate theoretical rigor). As a result, researchers become reluctant to invest in studies that report empirical patterns for which they cannot develop a compelling theoretical account regardless of the potential importance of these patterns. Conversely, the field accumulates theoretical development faster than it can validate it empirically, leading to proliferation of prolix theorization with limited empirical foundation or limited relevance for practitioners.

Breaking the Cycles

Systemic patterns of feedback and interplay across different elements of the publication system suggest that adopting individual practices from other fields—such

as encouraging replication studies or urging editors and reviewers to work harder to shorten review cycles—as stand-alone changes may not secure the types of significant and longed for outcomes in our field. As we see it, the crux is not in any single practice, but in the self-reinforcing dynamics of the publication system. Creating a more impactful applied science in organization research requires us to reflect on how these elements work together to enable or constrain different forms of progress.

The path forward is one that embraces these tensions rather than seeking to resolve them in favor of one or the other. We need a publication system that can reward theoretical sophistication and also empirical documentation, enable rapid dissemination alongside careful validation, and generate both exploratory insights as well as systematic replication. Looking across other applied sciences suggests that such a publication system can work (please see Table 2 for an overview).

Reimagining the Publication System in Organization Research

A more impactful future for organization research can be envisioned by reconfiguring how our field discovers, validates, and disseminates knowledge for real-world impact and also advancing scientific rigor. Our field is beginning to make such changes. For instance, *Organization Science* and the *Strategic Management Journal* (*SMJ*) are publishing more phenomenon-based research in connection with emerging, important organizational patterns (an example from our journal is Boussioux et al. 2024), albeit an expectation of theoretical contribution across publication formats and leading journals still dominate our field. *SMJ* publishes replication studies and data set papers aimed to facilitate further research leveraging those data. The Southern Management Association, adding to the *Journal of Management*, has launched the *Journal of Management Scientific Reports* for replication studies, whereas *Academy of Management Discoveries* “spotlights” work as mini research forums with shorter review cycles for studies that focus on poorly understood phenomena. Furthering such initiatives, journals could establish explicit criteria for evaluating different types of papers, for example, for evidence-focused articles leaning primarily on methodological rigor and empirical significance.

More generally, leading journals could set new article types that recognize various forms of contribution, each evaluated by criteria specifically suited to its purpose. For instance, discovery papers could focus on documenting important organizational problems, phenomena, or unexpected patterns, evaluated primarily on the quality of evidence and potential significance. Implementation studies could examine how our state-of-the-art understanding translates into practice across

Table 2. A Comparison of Publication Systems and Implications for Organization Research

System element	Takeaways from other applied sciences	Organization research	Implications for organization research
Knowledge building process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence precedes theory. • Patterns emerge from multiple studies. • Cumulative evidence informs theoretical development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory often precedes weighty evidence. • Each paper needs to contribute theory. • Limited synthesis across studies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create dedicated paper types for empirical findings without imposition of theoretical novelty. • Avoid premature definite theorizing about phenomena we do not adequately understand. • Enable theoretical development to follow, not precede, cumulative evidence generation.
Publication formats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple types of research. • Different evaluation criteria for different types. • Short formats for rapid communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominated by full research articles. • More homogeneous evaluation criteria around theory contribution. • Limited options for rapid communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple forms of evidence from different contexts can help identify what is specific to specific time periods, places, or conditions. • Develop different evaluation rubrics for different contribution types.
Review process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different tracks based on urgency/type of problems. • Focus on technical accuracy. • Multiple pathways to publication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on theoretical sophistication. • Limited alternative pathways. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop differentiated review tracks with timelines matched to contribution type. • Train reviewers in evaluating different types of contributions.
Replication and exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replication is actively encouraged and enabled. • Both successful and failed replications are published, which, in turn, enable exploration. • Null findings contribute to knowledge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replications are rarely published or seen as equal to other paper types. • Lack of replications induces reluctance to publish studies that are exploratory in nature. • Null findings are rarely reported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish expectations for replications and exploration. • Regular replication studies across times and contexts helps distinguish enduring principles from contingent patterns. • Explicit acknowledgment of temporal and contextual boundaries to know when and where findings apply.
Barriers to entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple entry points. • Value technical accuracy over style. • Inclusive of diverse perspectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High theoretical requirements. • Emphasis on sophisticated writing. • Limited accessibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value clarity over sophistication. • Develop more structured reporting guidelines.
Knowledge translation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid dissemination to practice based on the problem needs. • Direct practical impact valued. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow and hard translation to practice. • Impact measured academically. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value solving practical problems using science. • Report evidence that practitioners would love to read. • Practitioners get timely access to relevant evidence for decision making.

contexts and can be judged on methodological rigor, effect size, and practical implications. Theoretical syntheses could integrate evidence across multiple studies as a basis to develop new theoretical insights and be assessed on their ability to coherently explain accumulated empirical patterns and their variance (for a related point about one journal’s assessment of the academic

and practical impact of a recently launched publication format, i.e., commentaries, see de Bakker et al. 2024). Journals could also develop more nuanced approaches to managing review timelines (whereas some journals ask reviewers if a study’s publication should be expedited based on importance, how often or how much this reduces time to publication is not well-documented),

learning from the success and challenges of fast-track initiatives, such as that by *Management Science*. Rather than a binary choice between regular and fast-track review, journals could implement graduated timelines based on urgency and scope of impact.

Individual scholars and research groups could begin this transformation by being more explicit about the type of contribution they aim to make in each submission so that editors and reviewers can evaluate them accordingly. Rather than expecting every study to contribute by way of theoretical novelty, researchers could focus on discovering and validating evidence for our scientific enterprise systematically, acknowledging that substantive theoretical insights typically emerge from synthesized evidence rather than being a prerequisite for each individual paper. Journals could also create differentiated submission tracks with review expectations in terms of timelines and process matched to the type of contribution. Time-sensitive findings about emerging organizational phenomena or problems could move through an expedited review that is more focused on empirical rigor, for example. In making these suggestions, we are not suggesting abandoning theory by any means. Instead, the kinds of systems we propose would create richer pathways—grounded in systematic evidence and more closely coupled with business challenges—for theoretical development. By allowing theoretical insights to emerge from accumulated evidence rather than requiring them to be the focus and core concern of every paper, we may ultimately develop more robust and useful theories collectively as a field.

Admittedly, such a transformation needs openness, ambition, and risk-taking from journal editors, reviewers, professional associations, and individual scholars alike. But the potential rewards are immense: a field that combines theoretical sophistication with practical relevance; that maintains scientific rigor, enabling rapid response to emerging challenges; and that values both careful theory building and systematic evidence gathering.

If we want to increase our relevance for appeal to stakeholders beyond ourselves, that is, academics, the choice is not whether to change; our field and the world at large constantly evolve, and the growing gap between our research and the phenomena we study makes change inevitable. The choice is how to shape that change deliberately, learning from other applied sciences to create publication systems that recognize and reward diverse forms of scholarly contribution to realize both the scientific excellence and practical impact of organization research as a field.

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Endnotes

¹ We do not undertake a survey of all the articles that, over more than three decades, have dwelled on what they see as our field's important shortcomings. Some salient reservations voiced in these articles include an overenthusiasm and preoccupation with theory and a disconnect from practice that limits impact. Rather than reiterating and explaining the points already made across those articles, we use the opportunity in this piece to expound on our core concerns: how systems of publication and evaluation in other applied sciences can provide ideas for our field to improve its impact and that a shift of this kind is more likely to become a reality if changes are made to multiple aspects of the publication system concurrently (given their interdependence) rather than stand-alone, isolated adjustments to one aspect of the system or calls for individual researchers to do more of their own accord.

² We are aware that such approaches are not entirely absent in our field. The difference is a matter of degree. But it is significant enough to generate clear differences in our field's output vis-à-vis some other applied sciences. Of the journal portfolios in our field, probably the most extensive is the *Academy of Management* family of journals (e.g., Cronin et al. 2025). One of the two most prominent journals in this portfolio is explicitly focused on theory building (*Academy of Management Review*), and the flagship empirical journal (*Academy of Management Journal*) has a heavy emphasis on theoretical contribution and conceptual novelty. Studies with a core contribution of documenting phenomena with speculative or abductive interpretation primarily appear in the *Academy of Management Discoveries*, which—for all its merits—is not held near the same esteem as the other two. The portfolio and the system of knowledge production might represent more a virtuous cycle if the different types of studies (cogs of the overall knowledge production system) received mutually reinforcing and proportionate levels of interest, effort, and recognition. Also, routing some types of studies exclusively to separate journals might make it less likely for researchers to be exposed to approaches other than what they favor if they read primarily the journals to which they send their work, all the more so if there is also a hierarchy in the esteem accorded to the different journals.

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