Flipping Lewin on his head: There is nothing as usefully theoretical as a good practice☆

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ABSTRACT

This research calls for recognizing how good practices improve theory construction. Most thinking is non-conscious and automatic, people are not able to retrieve and report their actual beliefs, feelings, and likely actions, and the whole complexity of situation and context drives automatic thinking. Therefore, researchers need to conduct true field experiments observing phenomena as they actually occur in real-world contexts. In addition, case-based analysis allows for capturing asymmetries often found in the real world and modeling of contrarian cases. Examples of unobtrusive experiments that meet these requirements are discussed.

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There is nothing so practical as a good theory (Lewin, 1951).
There is nothing so theoretical as a good method (Greenwald, 2012).

1. Introduction

The first axiom related to matching theory–method–practice by Lewin (1951) and the second axiom by Greenwald (2012) do more than just connect theory, method, and practice. The achievement of "good theory" and "good method" suggests the possibility of constructing "bad theory" and implementing "bad method." Lewin (1951) proposes that good theory can stimulate implementing good practice. Greenwald (2012) proposes that good method can stimulate construction of good theory. However, research by additional scholars (Bass, Tigert, & Lonsdale, 1968; Fiss, 2007, 2011; Gigerenzer, 1991; McClelland, 1998; Woodside, 2016) suggest directly or imply that the researchers need to consider possibly mismatches among theory, method, and practice as well the possibility of pervasive bad practices in one to all three activities. Given that most studies in knowledge and innovation include sections on all three topics (i.e., theory, method, and practice), research on bad versus good theory, method, practice, and matches and mismatches among the three, may offer useful insights into how to avoid bad and achieve good/useful matches in research studies. The present study attempts to advance such a meta-research agenda focusing on the match/mismatches among bad/good theory, method, and practice.

Following this introduction, section two presents some details in the literature on theory, method, and practice relationships that focuses on bad/good matches. The third section focuses on how good practices improves theory construction; thus, "turning Lewin on his head." The fourth and fifth sections include reviews of particularly good practice–method–theory matches — field experiments designed to achieve good practices (i.e., control for sources of invalidity and avoiding the collection of participants' self-reports on beliefs, attitudes, and conations). The sixth section concludes and offers suggestions for future meta-research studies.

2. Theory, method, practice matches/mismatches

While good theory in economics typically includes variable-based hypotheses, good theory in knowledge/innovation (K/I) management typically includes case-based hypotheses or testable propositions. "Good theory" includes a useful set of hypotheses/propositions and rationales that is foundational for formal modeling via matrix algebra or Boolean algebra tools (e.g., multiple regression and/or fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA)). "Useful" is a key concept in this definition. Multiple regression analysis (MRA) is a variable based tool; fsQCA is a case-based tool. Both MRA and fsQCA are more than just tools; they each express very different theoretical stances about theoretical causes to outcomes. Gigerenzer's (1991) famous statement expresses this principle, "Scientists tools are not neutral."

The majority of research studies in K/I mismatch theory and data analysis. Each K/I study usually includes a case-focused (typology) theory and then goes on to attempt to test this theory using variable-based tools (e.g., MRA or analysis of variance) with a discussion section after a presentation of findings when the researchers attempt to switch back to case-based reasoning. Variable-based analysis often focuses on comparing the relative sizes of effect of independent terms (i.e., standardized b-coefficients) in MRA models. Case-based analysis often focuses on testing for the accuracy of algorithms in predicting case outcomes

(e.g., firms with high financial performance). Given that individual cases are complex wholes, the case-based research stance is that relative sizes of influence of independent terms in a model are irrelevant to the issue of identifying cases having particular outcome characteristics. Fiss (2007, 2011) may have been first to formally identify the pervasive use of this theory-tool mismatch in management research. Fiss (2007, 2011) calls for matching case-based theory with the use of case-based tools to test the efficacy of these theories. Prior to Fiss (2007), while not expressing the theory–method "mismatch," Bass et al. (1968), McClelland (1998), and Ragin (1997) recognized the troubling situation and offered solutions ranging from making adjustments to variable-based analysis (Bass et al., 1968), to discretizing data by quintiles and working with quintile-based algorithms (McClelland, 1998), to replacing matrix-algebra tools for Boolean-algebra tools (Ragin, 1997) to fully match theory-method in research.

This discussion supports the following conclusions. Mismatches of theory–method–practice do occur. Their occurrence may represent the dominant logic in management and K/I research. Theory–method–practice matches are possible to attain by planning to do so at the start of a study. Thinking consciously/actively about achieving such matches helps to overcome the bad practice of mismatching the three steps. Practice often precedes theory and method but any of the three can be the first step in research. Planning on matching the focus in the three steps helps to achieve good research — research that contributes to two or more of the four objectives of K/I science. Fig. 1 is a visual of the core concepts of theory–method–practice and research contribution objectives. Fig. 1 suggests six possible sequences of theory–method–practice. Fig. 1 shows the possibility that a study might focus its coverage on one of the three or a combination of two to all three steps. Fig. 1 shows four research outcome objectives: achieving accurate/use description, explanation, prediction; and/or control. Most studies focus on one to three, not all four, possible research objectives (e.g., Skinner's (1972) work in behavioral psychology focuses on control of the behavior of individual cases via operant conditioning).

3. How good practice improves theory

The research here calls for recognizing how good practices improve theory construction (sequences 5 and 6 in Fig. 1). According to Greenwald (2012, p. 99), the value of theory is to provide "parsimonious understanding" and useful guidance in practice beyond the laboratory. Research benefits from extending Greenwald (2012) view to extend the value of sound theory to include modeling that provides deep understanding and consistently accurate prediction of outcomes on additional samples of cases. In Lewin's (1951) field theory, behavior in

real-world applications depends on the situation (i.e., context) and that analysis should take into account the situation as a whole rather than deconstruction of the different components of the situation.

Most behavior is automatic, non-conscious, and situationally controlled, including the "automatic effect of perception on action, automatic goal pursuit, and a continual automatic evaluation of one's experience" (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999, p. 462). Automatic, stereotyped behavior is the most prevalent and efficient form of behaving (Cialdini, 2007) and keeps the individual grounded in his or her current situation (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). In fact, the novelty, transience, diversity, and acceleration of modern life require people to increasingly rely on automatic responses to sanely deal with the complexity of this world (Cialdini, 2007).

With automatic thinking, people often make judgments and choices before they have even processed attributes of the situation consciously (Cialdini, 2007). Informants have little or no direct access to higher cognitive processes such that they are sometimes unaware of stimuli influencing their responses, the responses themselves, and/or that the stimuli impacting the responses (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). In addition, when researchers ask informants questions, answers differ depending on how the requester frames the questions (Woodside, 2004), personal biases of the person being asked (Woodside, 2006), and "weapons of influence" — reciprocation, commitment and consistency, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity — present in the decision situations (Cialdini, 2007).

Since most thinking is non-conscious and automatic, theory needs to arise from observing these phenomena as they actually occur in real-world applications. Since humans have poor ability to retrieve and report their actual beliefs, feelings, and likely actions, true field experiments need to replace or bypass verbal survey reports of thinking processes (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Finally, the whole complexity of situation and context drives automatic thinking, recipe or case-based (versus variable-based) methods of analysis are necessary to describe the whole accurately since the whole is not necessarily the sum of parts.

Following this discussion of a practice-to-theory stance is a brief description of field experiments that capture automatic thinking. In the contexts of fashion and luxury brands Lee, Ko, and Megehee (2015) demonstrate that luxury versus non-luxury self-display enhances status and produces advantages in human social interactions. Advantages of wearing a luxury (versus non-luxury versus no) brand logo associate positively with preferential treatment in hiring situations, and the ability to solicit more and larger charitable donations. Additional research that flips Lewin on his head is likely to result in contrarian findings to hypotheses in normative theory. Woodside, Schpektor, and Xia
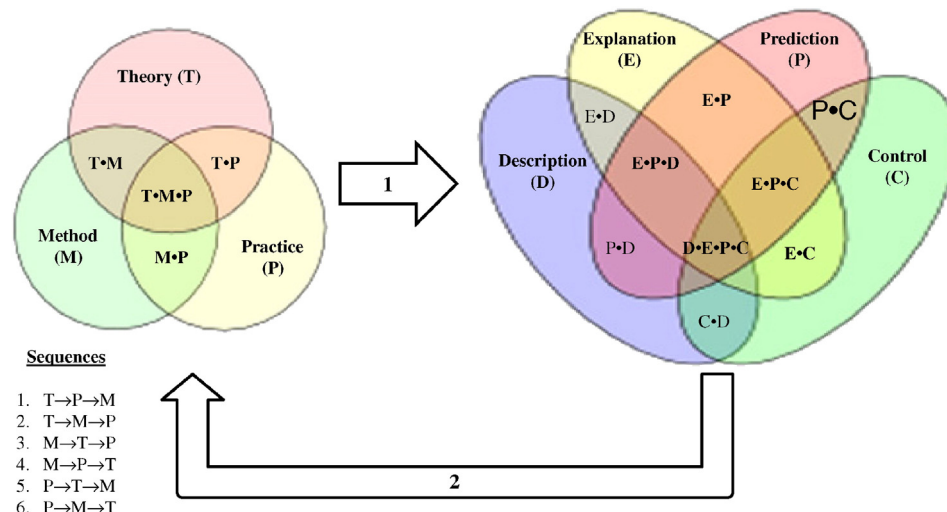

Fig. 1. Meta-theory on configurational theory, method, and practice impacts on knowledge configurational outcomes.