

Navigating Phenomena vs. Theory in Setting Up a
Research Agenda
AOM, 2023

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Agenda

AGENDA

- Rows vs. columns distinction
- Why it matters
- Based on my own experience as an editor, author and referee
- Based on what I learned from others: my advisors, my co-authors, my friends
- N=1 so take it with a grain of salt!



Between 2005 and 2009, Portugal has put in place deregulation reform to foster entrepreneurship

And if you were asked to evaluate the impact of the reform on labor outcomes

....and if you had two options

A) Frame around entrepreneurship

B) Frame around theoretical mechanisms that underpin institutions


Are you a “rows” or “columns”
scholar?



The “Rows” approach

Institutional Approaches	Behavioral Theory of the Firm
Labor Market Inequality	Industry Exit
Deregulation Reforms	Internal Venturing
Corporate Governance	Managerial Risk Taking

Phenomenon-based mindset



The “Columns” approach

Institutional Approaches	Behavioral Theory of the Firm
Labor Market Inequality	Industry Exit
Deregulation Reforms	Internal Venturing
Corporate Governance	Managerial Risk Taking

Theory/discipline based mindset

”Rows” vs. ”Columns”



Is my research motivated by a distinct empirical phenomenon?

	No	Yes
No	Flop	
Yes		Difficult

Is my research motivated by a distinct theory?

”Rows” vs. ”Columns”

Is my research motivated by a distinct empirical phenomenon?

	No	Yes
No		
Yes		

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1. Depends on the community: its norms and tastes

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1. . Depends on the community: its norms and tastes

Is my research motivated by a distinct empirical phenomenon?

Is my research motivated by a distinct theory?

	No	Yes
No	Flop	Entrepreneurship
Yes	?	Difficult

1. . Depends on the community: its norms and tastes

Is my research motivated by a distinct empirical phenomenon?

Is my research motivated by a distinct theory?

	No	Yes
No	Flop	Strategy, Econ
Yes	Sociology, OT	Difficult

Is my research motivated by a distinct empirical phenomenon?

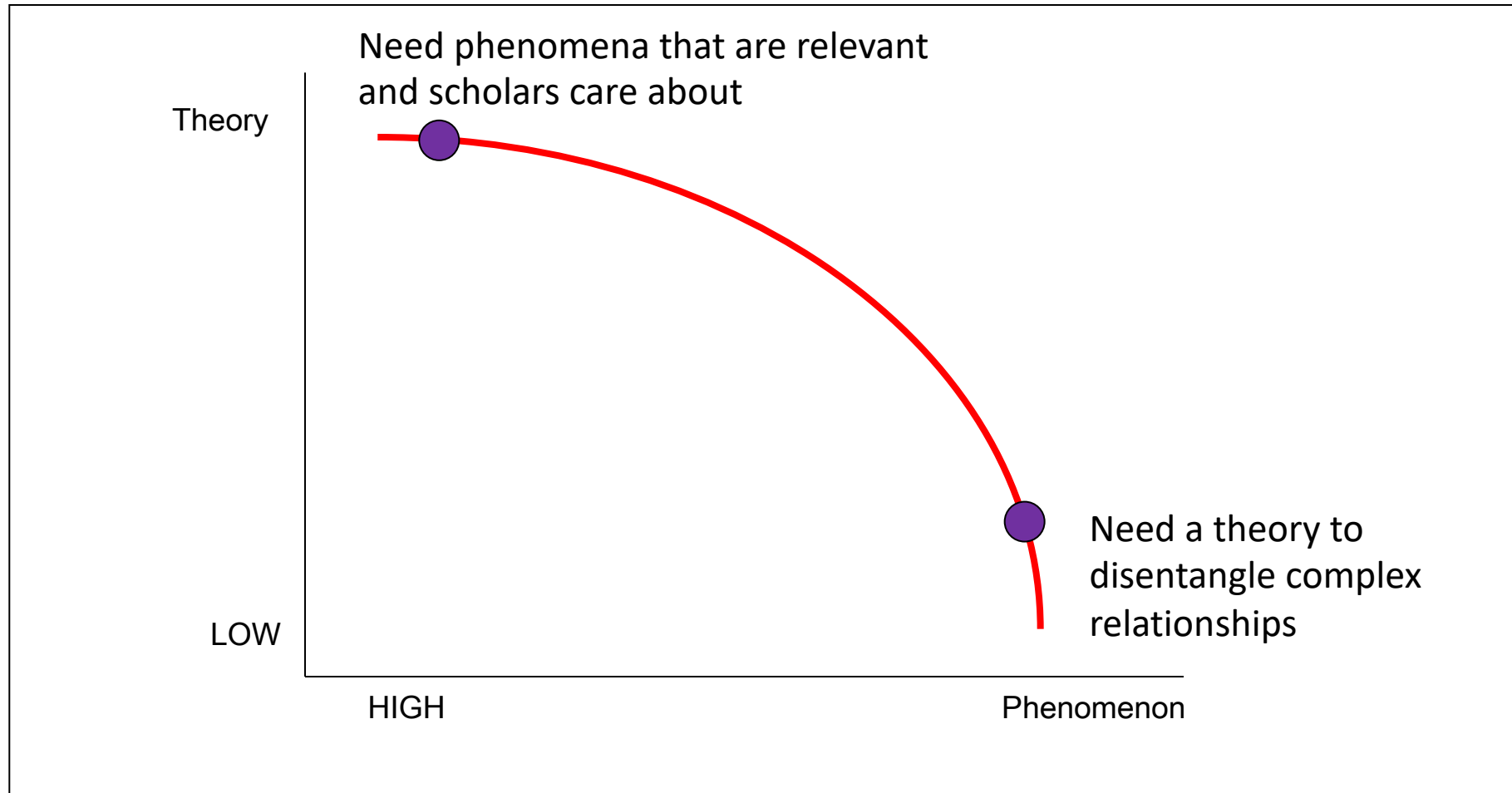
Is my research motivated by a distinct theory?

	No	Yes
No	Flop	MS
Yes	ASQ, AMJ	Difficult

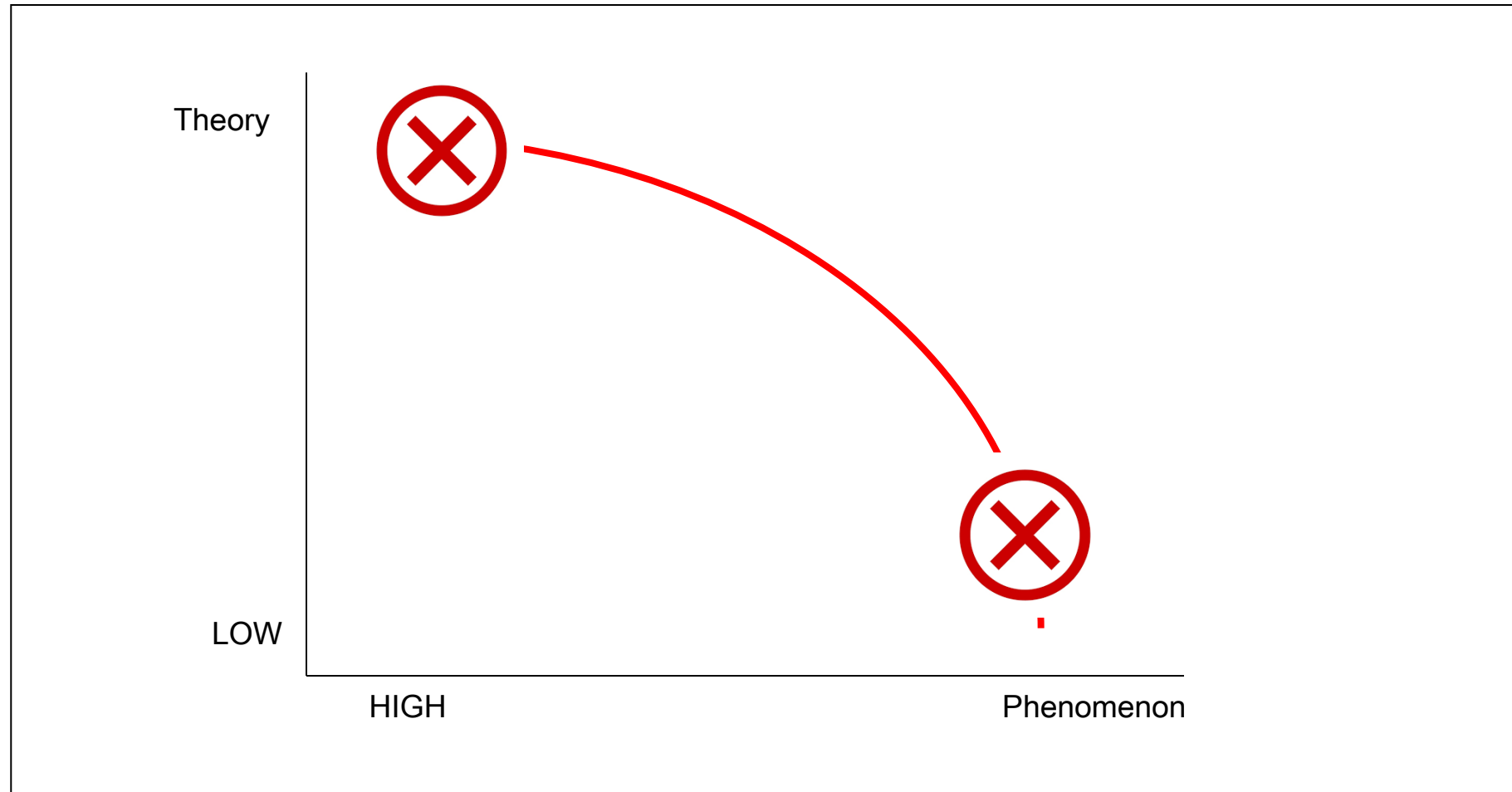
SMJ, OS

2. **Product market fit matters! Frame papers in ways that match the taste and the norms of the audience and the journals**

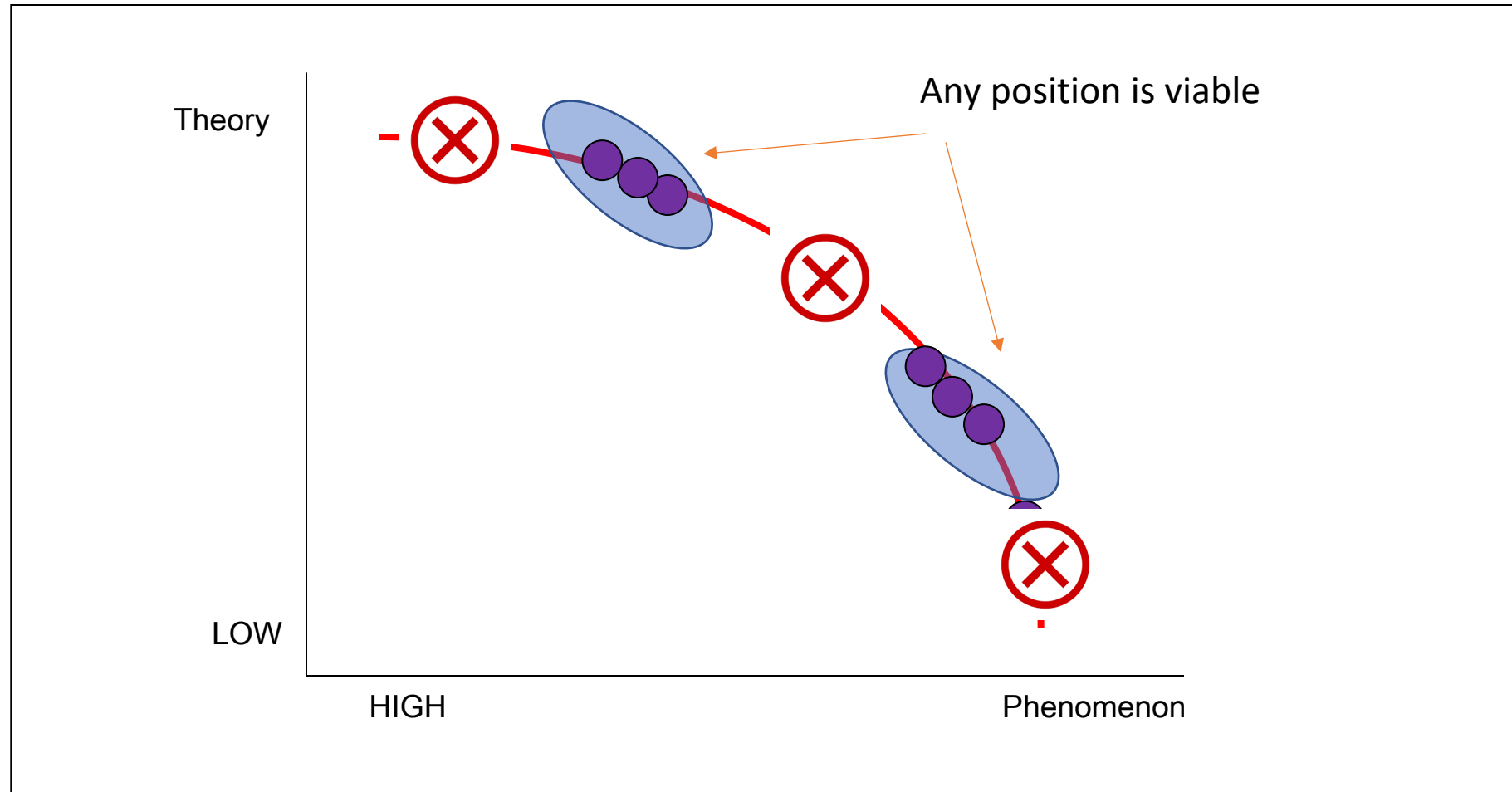
In reality it's a continuum...



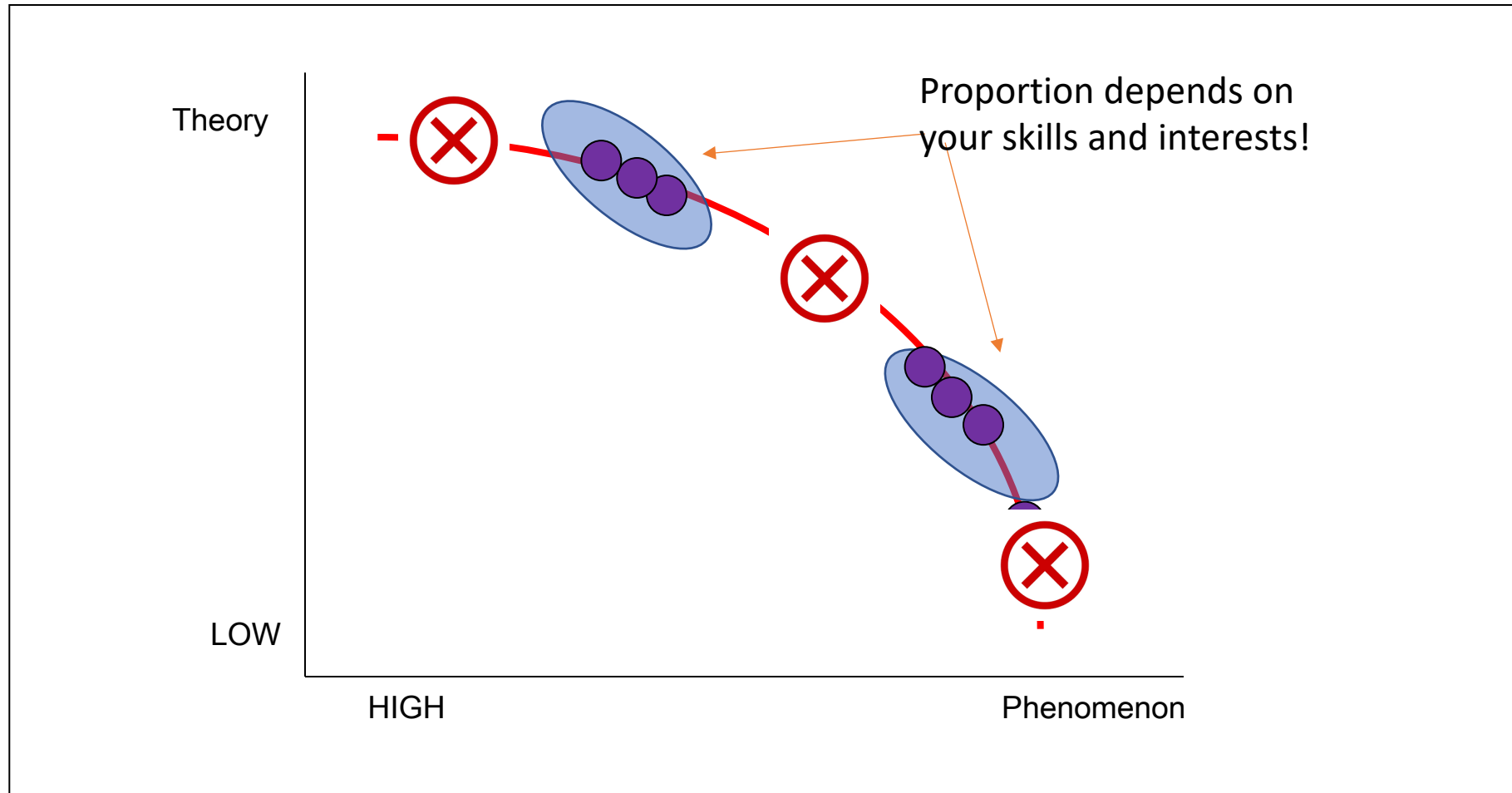
In reality it's a continuum...



In reality it's a continuum...



In reality it's a continuum...



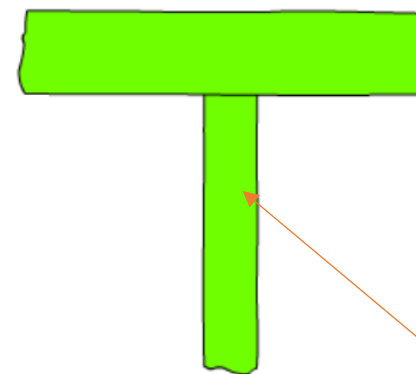
...results in different profiles in academia



"I-shaped"
Expert at one thing

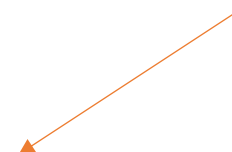


Generalist
Capable in a lot of things
but not expert in any

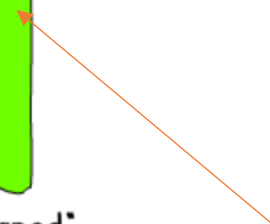


"T-shaped"
Capable in a lot of things
and expert in one of them

Horizontal stroke
shouldn't be too long



Vertical stroke
should be long
and clear



10,000 hours to master your craft.



Better get started.

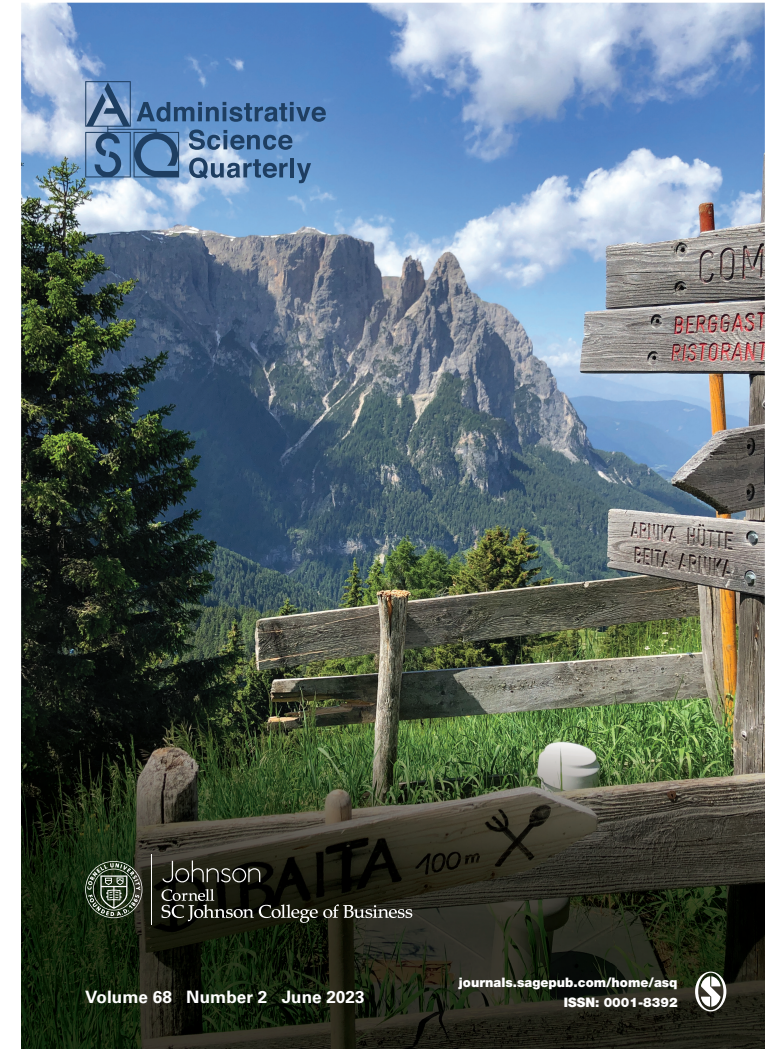


There are several advantages to being T-shaped

- You can juggle a lot of different balls in the air and never get bored
 - but there is one area you understand really well
- As an editor and reviewer, you feel comfortable handling a lot of different papers (not just from your area)
- You can see recombine and innovate
- You can get along with different folks

What is a theoretical contribution

- How to tell a compelling story
 - Why does this matter?
 - What have we learned that we didn't know before?
 - How do we need to update our priors?
 - Frame a paper with a foreground and background theory, not a kitchen sink approach
- Data and Analysis
 - Do you have great data? Are you using the best analytic techniques?
 - Do you have the right data to answer your question?
 - Do your data actually show what you're claiming they show?



Remember the 5 Cs

- Frame and reframe your work – build up the case for your argument
- The 5Cs as Building Blocks of your paper;
 - provide a Common Ground,
 - offer a Complication,
 - draw out why this is of Concern,
 - and provide a Course of Action leading to a Contribution (FTE: Sense and Structure/Lange & Pfarrer, 2017)

EDITORS' COMMENTS: SENSE AND STRUCTURE—THE CORE BUILDING BLOCKS OF AN AMR ARTICLE

"There's more than one way to skin a cat," the old saying goes.¹ Even as we write that, we're imagining coming across a future conceptual exploration of the subject, perhaps in an academic journal devoted to all manner of cat studies. We note the title of this imagined article—something like, "Equifinality in feline pelt removal: A critical examination"—and begin reading. The authors invite the reader in by laying out a noncontroversial starting point. We nod our heads in agreement with the authors as they describe the *common ground*. Yes, cats can be skinned in different ways. That's intuitive, and the authors emphasize the common wisdom of that idea by describing how it has been developed in the academic literature. But, after establishing that common ground with the reader, the authors proceed to throw in a *complication*. They say, "Although that idea about cat skinning is taken for granted, little thought is given to what good it would do you or your cat to separate it from its outer covering." Aha; now we're intrigued. We're beginning to imagine how little utility—and compassion—there would be in a skinless cat, and feel further drawn into the story.

The authors proceed to point out why the complication they've raised is of *concern*. They note that the cat skinning literature, with its increasing emphasis on process over outcome, has become divorced from the real-world consider-

We close our imagined article and note to ourselves how it featured the five core building blocks that we recognize in virtually all *AMR* articles. We have alliteratively named them—common ground, complication, concern, course of action, and contribution—and will elaborate on them below. We call these the core building blocks, because, simply stated, an *AMR* article, or any quality scholarly article in our field, cannot be complete without them. In making that contention, we note it is not an idea original to us. Rather, we are drawing on work by Davis (1971), Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997), Huff (1999), Minto (2002), and Grant and Pollock (2011), among others, who have talked about how academic writers must find a starting point that will be understandable and agreeable to the reader, and then proceed to challenge the reader's thoughts and assumptions. What we can offer here is a distillation of these ideas and an application of them to effective writing in *AMR*.

We start by providing further explanation of the five core building blocks. We then discuss how those building blocks fit into the structural elements of an article. Following that, we illustrate the building blocks in action in a set of exemplary *AMR* articles. We conclude by describing some ways in which these building blocks could be useful for authors submitting to, or reviewing for, *AMR* or another academic journal.

And finally.... •

- We often think of rigor, but it's a question of responsibility
 - An estimated cost of an A-journal article: \$400,000 (Teneweisch and Ulrich, 2014)
 - Multiplied by the count of articles in 4 and 4* journals
 - Global annual expenditure on business research: **\$ 4+ BN**
- Avoid moving from “publish or perish” to “**publish and perish**”

WILL VIDEO KILL THE CLASSROOM STAR? THE THREAT AND OPPORTUNITY OF MASSIVELY OPEN ONLINE COURSES FOR FULL-TIME MBA PROGRAMS

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"Rows" vs. "Columns"

Is my research motivated by a socially relevant empirical phenomenon?

Is my research using theory rigorously?



"Rows" vs. "Columns"

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Is my research using theory rigorously?

	No	Yes
No	Flop	
Yes	?	DESIRED



In Summary

- "Rows" vs. "Columns" is not about a dichotomous distinction: it's about where you place yourself on the continuum
- The specific position may depend on many factors, including tastes, skills or even career stage
- You need to decide whether to develop a generalist, specialist or a T-shaped profile, although some of it may be outside of your control
- Increasingly, we need to focus on responsible research
 - Explain socially relevant phenomena with rigorous theories
- Big responsibility but also a quest for novel insights!



***Thank you and
good luck!***