To be FAIR: Theory Specification Needs an Update

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Abstract

Innovations in open science and meta-science have focused on rigorous *theory testing*, yet methods for specifying, sharing, and iteratively improving theories remain underdeveloped. To address these limitations, we introduce *FAIR theory*: A standard for specifying theories as Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable information artifacts. FAIR theories are Findable in well-established archives, Accessible in terms of availability and their ability to be understood, Interoperable for specific purposes, such as selecting control variables, and Reusable so that they can be iteratively improved through collaborative efforts. This paper adapts the FAIR principles for theory, reflects on FAIR practices in contemporary psychology, introduces a workflow for FAIRifying theory, which is largely automated by the `theorytools` R-package, and discusses FAIR theories' potential impact in terms of reducing research waste, enabling meta-research on theories' structure and development, and incorporating theory into reproducible research workflows – from hypothesis generation to simulation studies. FAIR theory constitutes a protocol for archiving and communicating about theory, addressing a critical gap in open scholarly practices and supporting the renewed interest in theory development in psychology and beyond. FAIR theory builds on existing open science principles and infrastructures to provide a structured, cumulative framework for theory development, potentially increasing efficiency and potentially accelerating the pace of cumulative knowledge acquisition.

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To be FAIR: Theory Specification Needs an Update

The FAIR Guiding Principles (hereafter: FAIR principles) were established to improve the reusability of research data by making them more Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable (M. D. Wilkinson et al., 2016) for both humans and computers[1]. Since the FAIR principles' inception, scholars have demonstrated their relevance for making other information artifacts more open, such as research software (Lamprecht et al., 2019) and computational workflows (S. R. Wilkinson et al., 2024). This paper argues that the FAIR principles can similarly advance effective and transparent scholarly communication about theory. To this end, we introduce "FAIR theory": a digital instantiation of a scientific theory, published as a self-contained and citable information artifact distinct from the scientific paper, compliant with the FAIR principles. FAIR theory has the potential to improve the efficiency of scholarly communication and accelerate cumulative knowledge acquisition. We focus on applications in psychology, but the principles are relevant across the social sciences and beyond.

The Need for FAIR theory

The so-called "replication crisis" has prompted extensive scientific reforms (Lavelle, 2021; Scheel, 2022). Concern that the abundance of non-replicable findings was caused by undisclosed flexibility in analyses led to widespread adoption of open science practices like preregistration and replication (Nosek et al., 2015). These various practices ensure transparent and repeated testing of hypotheses by committing to an analysis plan in advance. However, recent reviews show that most preregistered hypothesis tests are not supported by empirical evidence (Scheel, Schijen, et al., 2021).

Thus, increased rigor in testing has revealed that the root cause of the replication crisis is more fundamental: Psychological theories rarely provide hypotheses that are

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[1] As the colloquial use of these terms differs in important ways from their definition according to the FAIR principles, we capitalize these terms when we refer to a specific FAIR principle.

corroborated by evidence. Furthermore, theories are often so ambiguous that they can accommodate mutually inconsistent findings, rendering them immune to falsification. As an example, consider "self-determination theory" (SDT), which emphasizes the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in human behavior. Intrinsic motivation was initially defined as engaging in an activity purely for the inherent satisfaction it provides, free from any external rewards or pressures (Deci, 1971). Over time, however, this definition expanded to include motivations driven by the fulfillment of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The implications of these shifting definitions becomes clear when deriving hypotheses about the type of motivation involved in changing an infant's dirty diaper. Under the original definition, one would hypothesize that caregivers are not intrinsically motivated to change diapers, as this is hardly a joyous experience. Under the expanded definition, one would hypothesize the opposite, as the act fulfills the need for relatedness. The expanded definition thus enables SDT to absorb potentially falsifying evidence.

Scholars have raised concerns about the state of theory in psychology for nearly 50 years (Meehl, 1978; Robinaugh et al., 2021). One main concern is that theories lack *formalization* (Szollosi & Donkin, 2021). When theories are ambiguous and hence require either subjective interpretation or additional background knowledge, it becomes difficult do derive precise predictions, and therefore hard to falsify the theory. A second concern is the lack of transparent and participative scholarly communication about psychological theory, which limits its progression and development. Despite these concerns, scientific reform initiated by the open science movement has focused primarily on improving deductive methods. The equally critical processes of theory construction and improvement have been largely overlooked. The present paper addresses this knowledge gap by applying, for the first time, open science principles to psychological theory. We apply introduce *FAIR theory* to facilitate transparent scholarly communication and accelerate cumulative knowledge acquisition.

Theory and Scientific Progress

According to the *empirical cycle* (De Groot & Spiekerman, 1969), a meta-theoretical model of cumulative knowledge acquisition, research ideally follows a cyclical process with two phases, see Figure 1a. In one half of the cycle, labeled the "Context of Justification" by Wagenmakers and colleagues, hypotheses derived from theory are tested on data. In the other half of the cycle (the "Context of Discovery"), patterns observed in data are generalized to theoretical principles, Figure 1b. In this model, theories are the vehicle of scientists' understanding of phenomena. Ideally, they are iteratively updated based on deductive testing and inductive theory construction.
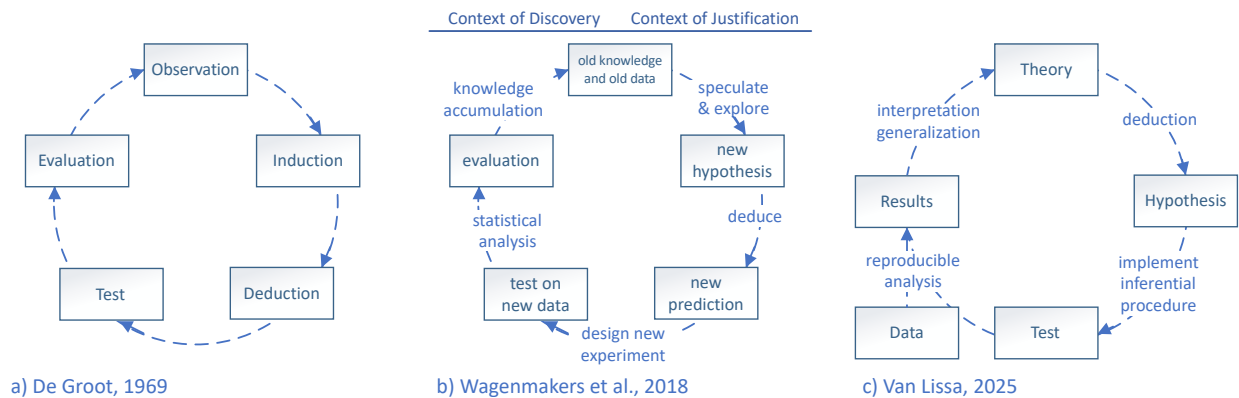
Figure 1
Three implementations of the "empirical cycle" (De Groot & Spiekerman, 1969).

In a progressive research program (Lakatos, 1971), this cycle is regularly completed to iteratively advance our understanding of the studied phenomena. There are, however, indications that contemporary psychology falls short of this ideal. Firstly, because hypothesis-testing research is over-represented in the literature: According to Kühberger et al. (2014), 89.6% of papers published in psychology report confirmatory hypothesis tests. Closer examination of deductive research reveals, however, that the link between theory and hypothesis is often tenuous or absent (Oberauer & Lewandowsky, 2019; Scheel, Tiokhin, et al., 2021). Only 15% of deductive studies referenced any theory, and theory was often not cited in relation to the hypothesis (McPhetres et al., 2021). The remaining

85% of deductive studies lacked an explicit connection between theory and hypothesis. Perhaps some of these ungrounded hypotheses are rooted in implicit theories privy only to the author, in which case it would be straightforward and important to make these explicit (Fried, 2020; Norouzi et al., 2024). Or, perhaps some hypotheses are reported as part of entrenched research practices (Gigerenzer et al., 2004), but are not of substantive interest, such as null hypotheses that exist solely for the purpose of being rejected (Van Lissa et al., 2020). Testing ad-hoc hypotheses not grounded in theory does not advance our principled understanding of psychological phenomena. Collecting significance statements about ad-hoc hypotheses is much like trying to write novels by collecting sentences from randomly generated letter strings (van Rooij & Baggio, 2021).

Theory thus has an uncomfortable and paradoxical role in contemporary psychology: The majority of papers ostensibly test hypotheses, but these are rarely connected to, let alone derived from, theory. Moreover, test results do not routinely contribute to the improvement or rejection of theories. The paradoxical role of theory in psychology is perhaps best described by Meehl's observation that theories in psychology "lack the cumulative character of scientific knowledge. They tend neither to be refuted nor corroborated, but instead merely fade away as people lose interest" (Meehl, 1978, p. 1). The present paper seeks to make theory more tangible and practical by instantiating it as a digital "object" that scholars can access, reuse, and update in their daily workflows.

Making Theory FAIR

Merely publishing theory in a journal article does not make it open; to be open, theory should adhere to established open science standards for specification and archival. We propose to implement theories as information artifacts, and archive these with appropriate metadata in a FAIR-compliant repository (e.g., Zenodo). Metadata are "data about the data". They provide information about the nature and content of an information artifact and are stored in the repository where the version of record of the FAIR theory is

162 deposited. FAIR theories are *Findable* via a DOI or by searching the repository they are
163 archived in; *Accessible* in a machine- and human-readable filetype; *Interoperable* for specific
164 purposes, for example, within the data analysis environment; and *Reusable* in the practical
165 and legal sense, so that they may be iteratively improved by the author or by others.
166 Following the original proposal of Lamprecht and colleagues, we adapt the FAIR principles
167 for theory, see Supplemental Table S1. We reflect on the necessary changes (which are
168 minor), as well as on the current state and future of FAIR theory in psychology. The
169 resulting principles provide guidance for instantiating theory as a FAIR information
170 artifact, and we provide worked examples to encourage their adoption.

What is Theory?

172   Definitions of theory are abundant, and are the subject of extensive scholarly
173 debate. Given that a pluriformity of definitions are consistent with FAIR theory principles,
174 our suggested approach is not limited to any one particular definition. Perspectives on
175 scientific theory have been categorized as syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic (Winther,
176 2021). The syntactic view describes theories as "sets of sentences in a given logical domain
177 language" (Winther, 2021, ch. 2), acknowledging that each domain (a scientific field, such
178 as psychology or physics) has its own theoretical vocabulary. We recognize the syntactic
179 view in Meehl's (1990) hierarchy of ever-more specific "statements" a theory might contain:
180 statements about the types of entities postulated (i.e., ontology), statements about causal
181 connections between those entities, statements about the functional form of those
182 connections, and statements about their specific numerical values (Frankenhuis et al., 2023;
183 Guest, 2024). The semantic view challenges the necessity of distinct domain languages for
184 different scientific fields, and instead advocates for formalizing theories using mathematics.
185 It shifts the focus from theories as collections of sentences to mathematical models. The
186 term "model" is not uniquely defined within the literature; models have been described as
187 "specific instantiations of theories, narrower in scope and often more concrete, commonly

applied to a particular aspect of a given theory" (Fried, 2020, p. 336). This implies that theories and models are not fundamentally distinct, but rather, that for each model, there is a more general theory that subsumes it (one person's model is another person's theory). The pragmatic view holds that there might not be one structure or definition of scientific theories, but instead, definitions differ across scientific domains. It also argues that nonformal aspects (e.g. commonly used analogies) and practices (e.g. experimental designs) can be an important part of scientific theories.

It is best left to the scholarly community to decide which parts of theory, models, or other aspects should be represented as FAIR theory. As the practice of FAIRification becomes more embedded, we expect that it will become increasingly clear what kind and form of information is useful. As a particular FAIR theory evolves, details may be added, and the nature of the information tracked might even change. For example, following Meehl, we could envision a theory that starts out with establishing, through observation, an ontology of constructs relevant for a given phenomenon. After initial exploratory research, the theory might be further specified by making assumptions about how these constructs are causally connected. Over time, more precise *statistical/mathematical models* could be derived by further assuming a specific functional form for relationships (e.g., linear effects) and error families for the distribution of measured variables (e.g., normal distributions). This allows for the specification of statistical models, which make just enough assumptions to allow the estimation of the remaining unknown parameters (e.g., regression slopes) from data. Going even further, a *generative/computational model* could be specified, which is completely parameterized (i.e., specific values of regression slopes are also assumed) such that an interpreter (e.g., the R programming language) can use the model to generate new data. Also, aspects of scientific practice might be added over time - either to the theory itself, or as references recorded in the theory metadata. Examples include experimental designs (e.g., longitudinal designs observing change over time), measurement tools (e.g., different questionnaires used to assess the same construct), or

study subjects (e.g., specific strains of rats).

As an applied example, consider a comprehensive theory of disease spread and pandemics which covers various psychological factors such as adherence to infection prevention protocols (e.g., social distancing), pandemic-related behavior (e.g., panic buying), and pandemic-related distress (Taylor, 2022). The theory may encompass a particular transmission *model* for disease spread including precise parameters for the process of infection (e.g., social distance, average duration of encounters, ventilation) and incubation times.

The Role of Theory Formalization

Concerns about the state of theory in the psychological literature revolve around two issues: theory formalization and theory (re-)use. More rigorous formalization increases theories' falsifiability (Popper, 2002) because it expresses ideas as specific statements, clearly demarcating what should (not) be observed if the theory were true. For example, Baddeley's verbal description of the phonological loop in his theory of working memory stands out for clarity and comprehensibility, yet it allows for at least 144 different implementations depending on the specification of various parameters such as decay rate, recall success, or rehearsal sequence, which were left undefined in the original theory (Lewandowsky & Farrell, 2010). Without committing to specific implementations a-priori, the theory becomes hard to test. Compared to theories expressed in natural language, formal theories facilitate inconsistency checking and evaluation of a theory's (lack of) vagueness. Committing to specific implementations of the different components, their causal connections, and the functional forms of these relationships makes the theory more precise. More precise theories are easier to falsify, which necessitates specific revisions and advances our principled understanding of the phenomena they describe.

FAIR theory imposes no restrictions on the manner in which theories are derived and implemented; rather, it increases the fidelity and ease with which they are

communicated. Thus, FAIR theory does not require theories to be formal. At the same time, formal theories are not automatically FAIR. The FAIR principles can be applied to theories representated in natural language, as well as formal theories represented using mathematical notation, algorithmic pseudo code, or a set of logical clauses. Thus, for example, "grounded theory", derived from qualitative research, can be represented as a FAIR theory if it is represented as plain-text propositions and archived in a FAIR repository with appropriate metadata. Conversely, a formal theory is not FAIR if it is confined to a journal article without any key words to identify it as a theory paper (lacking Findability), represented merely as a bitmap image (limiting Accessibility and Interoperability), or behind a paywall (limiting Reusability). FAIR theory is thus consistent with, but does not require, formalization (also see the section on *Accessibility* below).

Modular Publishing

We envision FAIR theory as an instance of modular publishing (Kircz, 1998). The primary unit of scientific communication has long been the academic paper. In the process of writing papers, scholars often produce many valuable resources, including instruments, materials, data, code, and theory. These resources are often merely described in papers (if at all), and not made available for reuse. Modular publishing is the practice of making each of these resources available as independent *information artifacts*, facilitating their reuse and making them citable (Van De Sompel et al., 2004). Data sharing is an example of modular publishing that is already widely adopted, becoming the de-facto standard in psychology (Tedersoo et al., 2021).

Modular publishing can be achieved by archiving specific resources (including theory) in repositories like Zenodo, which was developed by CERN under the European Union's OpenAIRE program (European Organization For Nuclear Research & OpenAIRE, 2013). To maintain a persistent record of scholarly communication, Zenodo mints DOIs for information artifacts. The DataCite Metadata Schema offers a standard way to document

information artifacts with relevant metadata which increases their findability and
documents their relationships to other resources (DataCite Metadata Working Group,
2024). For example, data can be archived in Zenodo with the metadata property
`resourceType: dataset`. If the data were collected for a specific paper, that relationship
can be cross-referenced with `relationType: IsSupplementTo`. Similarly, a FAIR theory
can be connected to a specific paper by using `relationType: IsDescribedBy`, while the
reverse relationship, documented in the canonical reference paper, is `relationType:`
`Describes`. Other cross-references are useful for documenting relationships between
multiple theory objects: If an existing theory is made FAIR without substantial alterations,
the resulting FAIR theory metadata would cross-reference the existing theory as
`relationType: IsDerivedFrom`. If an existing theory is updated,
`relationType:IsNewVersionOf` could be used to reference previous versions. If a variation
of an existing FAIR theory is created, cross-reference it with `relationType:`
`IsVariantFormOf`. Modular publishing of resources, including theories, increases their
reuse potential and makes them citable without detracting from the conventional academic
paper as a unit of academic communication which allows for argumentation, nuance, and
the author's voice.

Version Control

We can take inspiration from the field of computer science for well-established
processes for iteratively improving information artifacts. Version control systems, like Git,
have long been used to iteratively improve computer code, while managing parallel
contributions from collaborators and allowing for experimentation and diverging
development without losing information. Git tracks line-by-line changes to text-based files,
and maintains a complete history of those changes. It has long been argued that Git is
particularly well-suited to academic work (Ram, 2013; Van Lissa et al., 2021). Git can be
used, for example, to facilitate reproducible research, manage distributed collaboration,

and improve preregistration (Peikert et al., 2021; Van Lissa et al., 2021). Git provides a useful framework for developing FAIR theory, because it enables explicitly comparing versions of a file (or: theory), incorporating changes by different authors, and branching off into different directions (e.g., competing hypotheses) while retaining an explicit link to the common ancestor. This makes it possible for meta-scientists to study the provenance of a theory and determine how well different versions of a theory explain empirical evidence (Van Lissa, 2023). Note that archival of the version of record is *not* a function of Git(Hub). While theory development may take place on GitHub, the version of record should be archived in a FAIR-compliant archive like Zenodo, with appropriate metadata.

Semantic Versioning

Aside from technical solutions, version control is a social process as well. On the one hand, regular updates can improve theories - but on the other hand, it risks breaking compatibility between theories and hypotheses derived from them, or compatibility between one theory and others that depend upon it. For example, if we construct a theory to explain a specific phenomenon, and we cross-reference an existing theory comprising an ontology for our field - that dependency is broken if the ontology is later updated and our phenomenon of interest is removed. In computer science, these challenges are navigated by assigning version numbers. Specifically, *semantic versioning* comprises a simple set of rules for assigning version numbers to information artifacts. Whereas version control tracks changes, semantic versioning communicates what those changes mean to users of the theory, guides the social process of theory development, and signals how much a theory has been changed. We propose the following adaptation of semantic versioning for theories:

Given a version number in the format MAJOR.MINOR.PATCH (where MAJOR, MINOR, and PATCH are placeholders for positive integer numbers including zero), increment the:

- MAJOR version when you commit backwards incompatible changes, i.e., the theory

₃₁₉ now contains empirical statements that are at odds with a previous version of the

₃₂₀ theory

₃₂₁ • MINOR version when you expand the set of empirical statements in a backward

₃₂₂ compatible manner (i.e., the previous version is subsumed within the new version)

₃₂₃ • PATCH version when you make backward compatible bug fixes, cosmetic changes, fix

₃₂₄ spelling errors, or add clarifications

₃₂₅ ## The FAIR Principles

₃₂₆ ### Findability

₃₂₇ Making theories Findable would allow researchers to easily identify relevant theories

₃₂₈ and ground their hypotheses in established theoretical foundations. It further increases the

₃₂₉ impact and reuse potential of theories across disciplines, either through direct application

₃₃₀ (where one discipline stumbles upon a problem that is already well-understood in another

₃₃₁ discipline), or through analogical modeling. In analogical modeling, the structure of a

₃₃₂ theory from one discipline is applied to a phenomenon in another field. For example,

₃₃₃ predator-prey models have inspired theories of intelligence (Van Der Maas et al., 2006),

₃₃₄ and the Eysenck model of atomic magnetism has inspired a network theory of depression

₃₃₅ (Cramer et al., 2016). Findability also enables meta-research on theories, in the same way

₃₃₆ libraries and search engines have enabled scholars to study the literature via systematic

₃₃₇ reviews. In a similar way, it would become much easier to explicitly compare different

₃₃₈ theories of a specific phenomenon, or to study structural properties of theories.

₃₃₉ The four Findability criteria are applicable to theory with only minor adjustments,

₃₄₀ see Supplemental Table S1. First, this requires assigning a globally unique and persistent

₃₄₁ identifier, such as a DOI, to each theory (F1). Of the many services that provide DOIs for

₃₄₂ scientific information artifacts, Zenodo and the Open Science Framework are commonly

₃₄₃ used in psychology. Second, Findable theory is described with rich metadata (F2). This

₃₄₄ includes citation metadata (e.g., referencing a scientific paper that documents the theory,

or a psychometric paper that operationalizes specific constructs). It might further include domain-specific metadata, such as a reference to a taxonomy of psychological constructs (Bosco et al., 2017), ontology (Guyon et al., 2018), or catalog of psychological phenomena. Metadata should also include identifiers for all the versions of the theory it describes (F3); Zenodo handles this by default by providing an overarching DOI for an information artifact which subsumes the DOIs of that artifact's versions.

Finally, metadata should be registered or indexed in a searchable registry (F4). It is important to note that, while many archives are technically searchable (e.g., GitHub, FigShare, the Open Science Framework, institutional repositories), only few are specifically designed for FAIR-compliant archival. Zenodo stands out in this respect. Thus, while using Git for version control and GitHub for collaboration has specific advantages for scientific work (Ram, 2013), the version of record should be archived in a FAIR repository like Zenodo. Using standardized metadata further improves the Findability of theories archived within FAIR repositories. The DataCite Metadata Schema provides a controlled vocabulary for research output, and the `resource_type: model` matches the description of FAIR theory (DataCite Metadata Working Group, 2024). Furthermore, we suggest using the keyword `"fairtheory"` for all resources that constitute or reference (a specific) FAIR theory.

Findability is substantially amplified if intended users of a resource know where to search for it. This is a known problem in relation to research data and software (Katz & Chue Hong, 2024). Regrettably, most academic search engines only index traditional print publications, not other information artifacts. Since the status quo is to publish theories in papers, the FAIR requirements are met if scholars continue to do so, and additionally publish theories as separate information artifacts. The `"fairtheory"` keyword can also be used to signal the presence of theory within a paper. In the longer term, it may not be necessary to write a paper for each theory. If Zenodo becomes more recognized as a centralized repository for information artifacts, researchers may begin to search there more

372 regularly. Conversely, as organizations begin to recognize the value in tracking academic
373 output other than papers, repositories may begin to index information artifacts stored in
374 Zenodo.

375   There have been notable efforts to improve theories' Findability through post-hoc
376 curation. For example, Gray and colleagues introduced a format for representing theories,
377 and posted many examples on their website (Gray, 2017). Similarly, PsychoModels seeks to
378 inventorize theories and models in psychology (van Dongen & Volz, 2025). Post-hoc
379 curation is a notable effort but does not address the root cause of the lack of Findability.
380 Ideally, Findability would be addressed ante-hoc, through documentation with rich
381 metadata and modular publishing. Both approaches can be complementary, however. For
382 example, post-hoc curation could make use of existing FAIR-compliant archival
383 infrastructure like Zenodo. Conversely, the database engineering adage "Lots of Copies
384 Keeps Stuff Safe" (LOCKSS) implies that it is fine to archive theories in multiple places,
385 although it is advisable to make use of automatic integration (as exists between GitHub,
386 Zenodo, and OSF) to avoid the need to maintain information in multiple places, which
387 increases the risk of inconsistencies arising.

388 **Accessibility**

389   Transparent scholarly communication about theory requires that theories are
390 Accessible to all researchers and other stakeholders. If theories are not Accessible,
391 researchers cannot reuse and refine them. Thus, Accessibility can accelerate cumulative
392 knowledge acquisition. Making theories Accessible also allows stakeholders (e.g.,
393 practitioners, policymakers, advocates) to inform themselves of the current scientific
394 understanding of specific phenomena. While isolated empirical findings can appear
395 fragmented and contradictory (Dumas-Mallet et al., 2017), theories offer a top-down,
396 big-picture representation of the phenomena studied in a field. In other words, theories are
397 an important instrument in science communication.

The Accessibility principles apply to theory with minor changes. Firstly, theory and its associated metadata should be Accessible by their identifier using a standardized communications protocol (A1). This can be achieved, for example, by hosting theory in a version-controlled remote repository (such as Git), and archiving that repository on Zenodo for long-term storage. The resulting resource will then have an identifier (DOI) which allows the theory to be accessed using a standardized communications protocol (download via `https` or `git`). Secondly (A2), theory metadata should be Accessible, even when the theory is no longer available, which is also achieved via long-term storage (e.g., on Zenodo). Git remote repositories allow for access control, and Zenodo allows for access control of individual files/resources. In general, it makes sense to retain outdated theories, in order to be able to track the genesis of theories over time, yet, we require the availability of meta data as a minimum requirement.

At present, there are several impediments to theories' Accessibility. One impediment is that, when theories are published in paywalled journal articles, they might not be practically Accessible to all, even if they are in principle Accessible to those who can pay the fee. Open Access publishing increases the practical Accessibility of all academic output, including theory.

A second impediment to Accessibility is more indirect and pertains to a theory's intelligibility to those with practical Access. It has been proposed that good theories have the property of "discursive survival [. . .], the ability to be understood" (Guest, 2024, p. 1). At present, psychological theories are often ambiguous, rendering them difficult to understand (Frankenhuis et al., 2023). Successful communication requires shared background knowledge between sender and receiver (Vogt et al., 2024). Shared background knowledge can come from paradigms held by members of a scientific community (Kuhn, 2009), from education, and from the available instrumentation for observation, measurement, and analysis - or it can be problematically absent. Accessibility is improved by explicitly referring to sources of assumed backround knowledge, and by reducing

unnecessary ambiguity. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the *indeterminacy of translation*[2], which implies that it is not possible to remove *all* ambiguity when communicating an idea (Quine, 1970). This places a theoretical upper bound on theories' ability to be understood.

A third impediment arises when theories have, what we call, a "dependency on the author" (DOA). DOA occurs when a theory cannot be understood by independent scholars, requiring the original author to provide interpretation and clarification. DOA relates to the discourse on "Great Man Theorizing" (Guest, 2024) because it enables gatekeeping: an author could insist that work requires their involvement or denounce work conducted outside their purview as illegitimate, which violates checks and balances of scientific research. DOA also renders theories immune to refutation, because the author can claim that the theory was misconstrued when confronted with falsifying evidence, thus making it a moving target (Szollosi & Donkin, 2021). DOA is inherently problematic, as illustrated by cases where third parties identify logical inconsistencies within a theory (e.g., Kissner, 2008). This example demonstrates that original authors are not the ultimate authority on their theories. DOA thus unduly impedes scientific progress.

In sum, authors should make good-faith efforts to make theories as Accessible as possible, in terms of both availability, intelligibility, and freedom from dependencies that cannot be resolved (including dependencies on the author, or manuscripts that can no longer be accessed with reasonable effort). It is important to recognize that there is an upper bound on interpretability, which means that it is impossible to communicate a theory completely unambiguously. Nevertheless, scholars should strive to reduce unnecessary ambiguity to the greatest possible extent. It may benefit scientific discourse to normalize explicit ambiguity (these are things we don't know yet) and anticipate misunderstanding, to invite others to fill in the blanks and motivate ever further

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[2] Every communicative utterance (e.g., a statement in natural language, a mathematical formula, et cetera) has multiple alternative translations, with no objective means of choosing the correct one.

explication of theory. A theory's Accessibility is increased by reducing dependencies on (implicit) background knowledge, explication of assumptions, formalization, and explicit cross-references to relevant resources such as papers, ontologies, other related theories, measurement instruments, experimental designs (J. Lange et al., 2025).

Interoperability

Interoperability pertains to the property of information artifacts to "integrate or work together [. . .] with minimal effort" (M. D. Wilkinson et al., 2016, p. 2). Firstly, theory and its associated metadata should use a formal, accessible, shared and broadly applicable language to facilitate (human- and) machine readability and reuse (I1). The common practice of instantiating theory as lengthy prose or schematic drawing falls short of this ideal. Instead, FAIR theory should, ad minimum, be instantiated in a human- and machine-readable datatype, as should all information artifacts created while performing scholarly work (Van Lissa et al., 2021). Depending on the level of formalization of the theory, different formats may be appropriate, such as verbal statements in plain text, mathematical formulae, and statements expressed in some formal language. Examples of the latter include pseudo-code, interpretable computer code, and Gray's theory maps (Gray, 2017). While a theory represented as a bitmap image is not very Interoperable, the same image represented in the DOT language (*DOT Language*, 2024) for representing graphs does meet this ideal (an example of such a DOT representation is given below).

Secondly, theory (meta)data should use vocabularies that follow FAIR principles (I2). Aside from the aforementioned Datacite metadata schema (DataCite Metadata Working Group, 2024), in the context of theory, this highlights the importance of establishing standardized ontologies. Thirdly, theory (meta)data should include qualified references to other (meta)data, including previous versions of the theory (I3). The first part of this principle allows for nested theories; for example, a theory that specifies causal relationships between constructs could refer back to an ontological theory from which those

FAIR THEORY

Table 1

Property	X-Interoperability
1) Ontology	Variable selection
2) Causal connections	Model specification, covariate selection, causal inference
3-8) Functional Form	Deriving specific hypotheses
9) Numerical Value	Simulating data

constructs are derived. This can be achieved by cross-referencing the DOI of those nested theories (*Contributing Citations and References*, 2024). The second part of this principle allows for tracing the provenance of a theory; keeping track of its prior versions and other theories that inspired it. This is achieved by using Git for version control and Zenodo for archiving. Git tracks the internal provenance of a theory repository; Zenodo is used to cross-reference external relationships (e.g., papers that influenced the theory, previous theories that inspired it, models based upon the theory).

Recent work points out that Interoperability is not an all-or-nothing property. The concept of X-Interoperability was introduced to answer the question: *Interoperable for what?* X-Interoperability is defined as facilitating "successful communication between machines and between humans and machines [, where] A and B are considered X-Interoperable if a common operation X exists that can be applied to both" (Vogt et al., 2024, p. 5). This revised definition makes it possible to outline a theory's affordances in terms of X-Interoperability. For example, a FAIR theory may be X-Interoperable for deriving testable hypotheses, or for the purpose of selecting relevant control variables, or for the purpose of indicating the conditions necessary for observing a particular phenomenon. If we consider Meehl's nine properties of strong theories (properties 3-8 are grouped because they all refer to functional form), we see how each of these properties incurs certain affordances in terms of X-Interoperability (Table 1).

With regard to the state of Interoperability in psychology, Kurt Lewin's (1943) adage "there's nothing as practical as a good theory" paints a hopeful picture of theories as

useful tools in psychological researchers' day-to-day work. But, as we argued, contemporary practice falls short of this ideal. The examples of X-Interoperability offered in Table 1 illustrate that much can be gained by integrating theory directly into analysis workflows, and by making theory X-Interoperable within software used for analysis. For example, Interoperable theory could be used to select control variables for causal inference (Cinelli et al., 2022), or to preregister a study with an explicit derivation chain from theory to hypothesis, as well as an inferential procedure that would suggest specific modifications to theory after analyzing empirical data (Peikert et al., 2021), or to derive machine-readable hypotheses (Lakens & DeBruine, 2021) which could be automatically evaluated through integration testing (Van Lissa, 2023). Furthermore, theories can be X-Interoperable with each other to enable nesting, or using one theory to clarify elements of another theory. For example, it should be possible to embed a theory about emotion regulation (e.g., Gross, 2015) within a theory of emotion regulation development (Morris et al., 2007).

Reusability

If we take cumulative knowledge acquisition to be a goal of scientific research, then Reusability is the ultimate purpose of making theory FAIR. Applied to FAIR theory, reusability requires that each theory and its associated metadata are richly described with a plurality of accurate and relevant attributes (R1) with a clear and Accessible license for reuse (R1.1). It should further have detailed provenance (R1.2), which is achieved through version control with Git and archival on Zenodo. Finally, the (meta)data which meets domain-relevant community standards (R1.3). The Datacite metadata schema offers an initial template in this regard, and this paper takes one step towards establishing more fine-grained community standards for FAIR theory. This is an example of FAIR metadata extracted from Zenodo.

If we consider the current state of Reusability in psychological theory, there appears to be a norm against theory reuse: *"[Theories are] like toothbrushes — no self-respecting*

523   *person wants to use anyone else's"* (Mischel, 2008, p. 1). As cumulative knowledge

524   acquisition requires reusable theories that are continuously updated based on insights from

525   new data, such a norm impedes scientific progress (De Groot & Spiekerman, 1969). In

526   FAIR theory workshops, we similarly notice a reluctance to reuse and adapt existing

527   theories. Students ask questions such as "Who owns a theory?", and "Who determines how

528   a theory may be reused or changed?". These questions imply a norm against modifying

529   theory without its author's consent, reminiscent of the aforementioned problem of

530   dependency on the author.

531   Licensing theories for reuse unambiguously answers these questions, with the

532   caveats that legislation may vary across contexts and jurisdictions, and that this paper

533   does not constitute legal advice. Two considerations are important when determining what

534   license is appropriate for theory. A first consideration is that copyright law protects

535   authors' rights according to the idea-expression dichotomy (Bently et al., 2010). Copyright

536   does not *"extend to any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept,*

537   *principle, or discovery"* (Section 102, Copyright Act). Copyright thus applies to creative

538   works expressing a theory (e.g., prose, visual illustrations), but not to the underlying

539   theoretical idea. It thus seems that theories expressed in prose or depicted visually - in

540   other words, that fall short of the Accessibility criterion - are more likely to qualify for

541   copyright protection than formal theories. A second consideration is that academic

542   research is covered under "fair use" exemptions to copyright. Given these two

543   considerations - that copyright does not protect ideas in their purest form and that

544   academic use offers exemptions to copyright - it may be counterproductive and possibly

545   misleading to adopt a license that assumes copyright protection to theories. For

546   psychological theories without commercial aspects, we suggest using a licence that

547   explicitly waives copyright and encourages Reusability, such as CC0 (no rights reserved).

548   Aside from legal conditions for reuse, there are also social considerations. For

549   example, while a CC0 license does not legally mandate attribution, the norms of good

scientific practice mandate that scholars comprehensively cite theory and related works (Aalbersberg et al., 2018). Particularly when FAIRifying an existing theory, failing to credit its author amounts to scientific malpractice. Another instrument for guiding the social process of (diffuse) collaboration is to include a "README" file in the theory repository, which informs users about the ways in which they can reuse and contribute to a FAIR theory. A final suggestion is to create or adopt a "Code of Conduct" which prescribes behavioral norms for contributors and users of a theory (Ehmke, 2014).

Making a Theory FAIR

To concretize the FAIR principles, we propose an applied workflow for making theory FAIR. The guiding principle of our approach is to align and build upon existing successful open science infrastructures to the greatest possible extent. At the time of writing (2024), the integration of GitHub and Zenodo makes for a particularly user-friendly approach that meets *all* FAIR principles. Zenodo and GitHub are both integrated with the Open Science Framework (OSF), a popular platform in psychology. Thus, it is possible to create a project page on the OSF to increase the visibility of a FAIR theory amongst users of that platform, while the integration of the OSF with Zenodo and GitHub removes the need for maintaining the same information on multiple platforms. Note that open science infrastructure is an area of active development, and as such, the approach proposed here might change as new tools or databases are developed or existing tools and database change over time. The following conceptual workflow does not require the use of R, but most steps can be automated in R using the `theorytools` package. The package also includes a living document with the latest version of the workflow. We present a brief summary of the workflow at the time of writing here, to illustrate the general principles of FAIRifying theory which can also be implemented using other open science infrastructures.

1. Implementing the Theory

We will use the *empirical cycle* as a running example for this tutorial. The empirical cycle, described on page 28 of De Groot and Spiekerman (1969), is a meta-theory of theory construction. The resulting FAIR implementation of this theory is available at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14552329. The original theory consists of a series of natural language statements:

Phase 1: 'Observation': collection and grouping of empirical materials; (tentative) formation of hypotheses.

Phase 2: 'Induction': formulation of hypotheses.

Phase 3: 'Deduction': derivation of specific consequences from the hypotheses, in the form of testable predictions.

Phase 4: 'Testing': of the hypotheses against new empirical materials, by way of checking whether or not the predictions are fulfilled.

Phase 5: 'Evaluation': of the outcome of the testing procedure with respect to the hypotheses or theories stated, as well as with a view to subsequent, continued or related, investigations.

If we compare this to the levels of theory formalization (Guest & Martin, 2021), it is defined at either the "theory" or "specification" level. We can increase the level of formalization, and present an "implementation" in the human- and machine-readable DOT language (and thereby fulfill criterion I1 of Supplemental Table S1). The implementation below describes the model as a directed graph (see also Figure 1a). Note that the code has been organized so that the first half describes an ontology of the entities the theory postulates, and the second half describes their proposed interrelations. This follows the first two properties of good theory according to Meehl (Meehl, 1990). We can save this implementation of the empirical cycle to a text file, say `empirical_cycle.dot`.

```
599  digraph {

600

601    observation;

602    induction;

603    deduction;

604    test;

605    evaluation;

606

607    observation -> induction;

608    induction -> deduction;

609    deduction -> test;

610    test -> evaluation;

611    evaluation -> observation;

612

613  }
```

614 2. Creating a Project Folder

615 Create a new folder and copy the theory file from the previous step into it. To help

616 meet the Interoperability and Reusability criteria, add two more files: A README.md file

617 with instructions for future users of your theory, and a LICENSE file with the legal

618 conditions for reuse. For guidance on writing the README file, see this vignette. We

619 recommend the CC0 license, but other options are available, see https://choosealicense.com.

620 3. Version Control the Repository

621 To version control our project, we initiate a Git repository in the project folder. We

622 subsequently create a remote repository to host a copy of this local Git repository on

623 GitHub, which will in turn be archived. Note that the repository must be set to "Public"

to take advantage of GitHub's Zenodo integration. Push the local files to the Git remote repository, and keep them synchronized going forward.

4. Archive the Theory on Zenodo

First, create a Zenodo account with your existing GitHub account. Then in Zenodo, go to the GitHub section under your account. Following the instructions on the page, activate Zenodo for your theory repository. Then, create a new release of the GitHub repository. Choose a tag and release title using our adapted semantic versioning, starting with version 1.0.0, if you intend to share your theory with the broader scientific community. After publishing the release, you should be able to see the archived version in your Zenodo account, along with a DOI.

5. Entering Meta-Data

To document our archive as a FAIR theory and improve its Findability requires adding the relevant metadata on Zenodo. See here for an example of the metadata associated with our FAIR empirical cycle, as archived in Zenodo.

- Set the *resource type* to `Model`; this ensures proper archival in Zenodo
- Verify that the *title* is prefaced with `FAIR theory:`; this allows sentient readers to recognize the work as a FAIR theory
- Add the *keyword* `fairtheory`; this aids search engine indexation
- Optionally, submit the theory to the "FAIR Theory Community" to contribute to community building; communities on Zenodo are shared spaces to manage and curate research outputs.
- List the DOIs/identifiers of *related works*. Use the `Relation` field as appropriate. For example:
    - `Is documented by` can be used to reference a theory paper you wrote, in which you introduce this FAIR theory

- Is `derived from` could be used to reference a paper or book chapter that introduced an existing theory that was not previously made FAIR. We used `Is derived from` to reference De Groot and Spiekerman's empirical cycle.

- Optionally, add *References* to related works in plain text. For example, we cite De Groot and Spiekerman in this field.

Automating these Steps

R-users can use the `theorytools` package to partly automate the preceding steps, for example, using following code (see the package documentation for more information):

```
install.packages("theorytools")
library(theorytools)
# Use worcs to check if GitHub permissions are set:
library(worcs)
check_git()
check_github()
# Create the theory repository:
fair_theory(path = "c:/theoryfolder/empirical_cycle",
            title = "The Empirical Cycle",
            theory_file = "empirical_cycle.dot",
            remote_repo = "empirical_cycle",
            add_license = "cc0")
```

The first two lines install and load the `theorytools` package. Lines 4–6 use the `worcs` package to check whether git for version control is installed and a connection to github can be established to publish the theory. Line 8 calls the main entry function `fair_theory` for a local repository in a specified local `path` with a given `title` and the aforementioned dot `theory_file` containing the theory, uploading it to the user's remote

github repository with name given in `remote_repo` and a given license specified in `add_license`.

Changing a Theory

Several authors have reinterpreted De Groot's empirical cycle. An important advantage of FAIR theory is that we can implement different versions of a theory, compare them, and document their cross-relationships. We can take work that has been done before - in this case, the repository created above, and create an independent copy that we can modify as we wish, while retaining cross-references to the original. For example, the DOT graph below implements Wagenmakers and colleagues' (2018) interpretation of the empirical cycle. First, notice that the phases of the cycle have been renamed. This change was not described in the paper. If we assume that the labels are meant to illustrate the phases, not substantially change the ontology, then we can represent it by adding labels to the original DOT graph. These labels suggest a focus on empirical psychology that was not present in De Groot's version. Furthermore, the label "knowledge accumulation" invites the question of exactly *how* knowledge accumulates upon evaluation of a prior experiment. As this lack of cumulative knowledge acquisition appears to be precisely where contemporary research practice falls short, this ambiguity invites further improvement of the theory. The authors explicitly mention a second change: *"We added the Whewell-Peirce-Reichenbach distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification"* (p. 423). The DOT graph below shows our implementation of this version of the empirical cycle, by adding subgraphs.

```
digraph {

  subgraph cluster_discovery {
    label="Discovery";
    induction [label="New hypothesis"];
```

```
700    deduction [label="New prediction"];

701  }

702  observation  [label="Old knowledge and old data"];

703  subgraph cluster_justification {

704    label="Justification";

705    test [label="Test on new data"];

706    evaluation;

707  }

708

709  observation -> induction [label="Speculate & explore"];

710  induction -> deduction  [label="Deduce"];

711  deduction -> test  [label="Design new experiment"];

712  test -> evaluation   [label="Statistical analysis"];

713  evaluation -> observation   [label="Knowledge accumulation"];

714

715 }
```

The first author was inspired by De Groot as well, but again specified the empirical cycle differently. First, in De Groot's formulation, each stage describes a process. This invites the question of what the concrete outcomes of these processes are. In other words: what actually changes when going through the cycle, except the scholar's mind? To address this point, the nodes in Van Lissa's specification (2025) refer to specific deliverables, whereas the edges connecting the nodes refer to processes acting upon those deliverables, see Figure 1c). Second, the processes of induction and deduction are perhaps not as neatly confined to specific phases as De Groot proposed. Theory testing, as takes place in the "context of justification", can be said to involve mostly deductive reasoning. Theory development and amendment, as takes place in the "context of discovery", involves

726 primarily inductive reasoning[3]. However, deriving hypotheses from theory is not purely

727 deductive as auxiliary assumptions must often be made to account for remaining

728 ambiguities in theory, which involves induction. A rudimentary example is assuming equal

729 variances across groups when testing a mean difference between groups, because groups

730 often have equal variances. Similarly, if we consider the claim that observation is

731 theory-laden, then it too involves induction (Brewer & Lambert, 2001). Furthermore, if the

732 testing procedure is not explicitly defined before seeing the data, it incurs some inductive

733 bias as well (Peikert, 2023). These alterations result in the following implementation of the

734 empirical cycle:

```
735  digraph {
736
737     theory;
738     prediction;
739     data;
740     test;
741     results;
742
743     theory -> prediction [label="deduction"];
744     prediction -> test [label = "implement inferential procedure"];
745     data -> results;
746     test -> results [label = "apply to data"];
747     results -> theory [label="interpretation and generalization"];
748
749  }
```

---

[3] Here, "induction" is defined forming general theories based on specific observations. Others have used the term "abduction" to describe "inference to the best explanation" (Peirce, 1960). For present purposes, the terms are interchangeable.

750   The FAIR theory workflow documented above offers several concrete ways to make

751 changes to a FAIR theory object. If you start with an existing GitHub repository, and wish

752 to make some changes to it, this is commonly done by creating a "branch". A branch

753 allows you to make non-destructive changes and can continue to exist in parallel to the

754 main repository. Thus, it is possible to have one main theory with several branches that

755 each contain competing theories derived from it. Figure 1a shows how our example

756 `empirical_cycle` repository contains branches with Wagenmakers' and Van Lissa's

757 implementations. A branch can also be merged with the main branch, thus incorporating

758 the changes it contains into the version of record. If you wish to develop a new version of

759 someone else's FAIR theory, it is possible to "fork their repository". This creates a copy of

760 their repository onto your GitHub account. Both branches and forks can be compared and

761 merged via "pull requests", which are essentially a request to incorporate the changes you

762 have made. Figure 1b shows a comparison of the original empirical cycle by De Groot, and
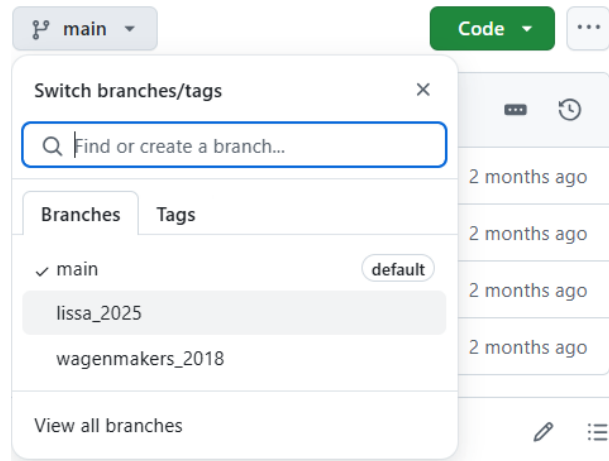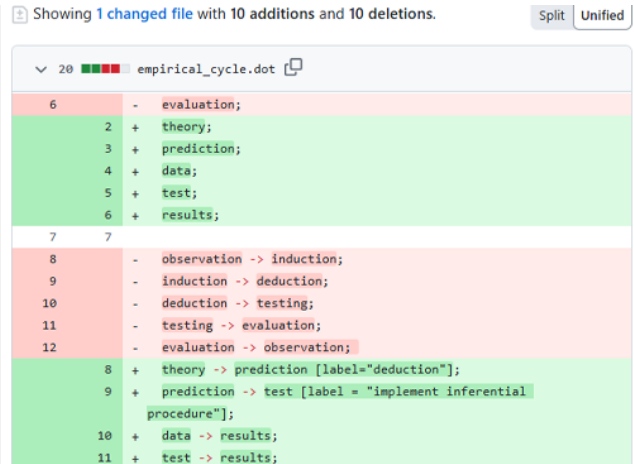
763 the lead author's implementation.

(a) *Branches contain different versions of a theory*   (b) *These versions can be compared*

Figure 2
FAIR Theories on GitHub

Further Uses of FAIR Theory

As uses of FAIR theory are best illustrated using tutorial examples, the
`theorytools` package contains several vignettes that showcase specific applications. At the
time of writing, the package includes a vignette introducing augmented Directed Acyclic
Graphs (aDAGs) as a format for theory specification that meets the requirements of good
psychological theory. These aDAGs are X-interoperable for plotting (using `dagitty` and
`tidySEM`), for automatically selecting control variables, and for simulating data (using
`theorytools`). Another vignette describes how to take Self-Determination Theory (P. A.
M. V. Lange et al., 2012), a theory originally represented as prose, and specify it as a FAIR
aDAG. Another vignette describes how to take the Dunning-Krüger effect and specify it as
a FAIR mathematical formula (Feld et al., 2017). Another vignette illustrates the use of
FAIR theory for covariate selection and causal inference (Pearl, 1995). More vignettes may
be added over time, and users are encouraged to submit their own reproducible examples
as package vignettes.

Discussion

The replication crisis has brought the inadequacies of contemporary theoretical
practices in psychology and other fields into focus. Psychological theories often fall short of
the FAIR principles: they are hard to find and access, have no practical uses in scholars'
daily workflows beyond providing context for a literature review, and are more likely to be
forgotten or replaced than reused. These limitations impede cumulative knowledge
production in our field, leading to an accumulation of "one-shot" empirical findings,
without commensurate advancement in our principled understanding of psychological
phenomena. We argued that applying the FAIR principles to theory offers a structured
solution to these shortcomings. We demonstrated how to create, version-control, and
archive theories as digital information artifacts. We introduced the `theorytools`
R-package to partly automate these processes, reducing the barrier of entry for researchers,

790 and creating a FAIR resource for theory construction tools and documentation that can be
791 updated as best practices continue to develop.

792   Making theory FAIR allows researchers to more easily find a relevant framework;
793 access and understand it; interact with it in a practical sense, for example, by deriving
794 predictions from it, or using it to select control variables; and reuse it, contributing changes
795 to existing theories or splitting of in a new direction. Whereas the idea of theory can be
796 quite nebulous to empirical psychologists, FAIR theory makes theoretical work practical
797 and tangible, incorporating theory into scholars' workflows. Having a concrete object to
798 iterate upon facilitates the systematic improvement and iterative refinement of
799 psychological theories, thus substantially increasing the efficiency of research. While FAIR
800 theory does not directly reduce vagueness, it provides a framework within which scholars
801 can iteratively increase precision and formalization. The FAIR principles also facilitate new
802 ways of collaboration, leveraging tools like Git for version control and Zenodo for archiving
803 to document provenance and facilitate contributions from diverse researchers.

How to Incentivize FAIR Theory Development

805   FAIR theory requires a departure from contemporary practice. Several factors can
806 expedite such a culture change. One key factor is the *recognition and rewards* movement:
807 practices for evaluating scientific output are evolving, with initiatives like the *Declaration*
808 *on Research Assessment* (DORA) and Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment
809 promoting the use of more diverse and meaningful metrics beyond journal impact factors.
810 Modular publishing capitalizes on these changing metrics, and FAIR theory allows scholars
811 to be credited for theoretical contributions (Kircz, 1998). Journals that publish theoretical
812 papers could require authors to additionally publish their theories in a FAIR format,
813 cross-referencing the paper, to expedite its effective reuse and iterative improvement. A
814 second factor is to lower barriers to adopting FAIR theory by building upon existing widely
815 adopted open science infrastructures. For this reason, we advocate the use of Git for

version control, Zenodo for archiving, and DataCite for standardized metadata. Barriers to entry can also be lowered by simplifying workflows, which is the goal of the `theorytools` R-package. Fourth, the availability of Open Educational Materials (OEM) about theory development contributes to doctoral socialization. These materials allow teachers to incorporate theory development into their curriculum without investing substantial time on course development, thus educating the next generation to make use of and contribute to FAIR theory. Finally, community building plays an important role; the international network of open science communities, reproducibility networks, and other similar initiatives provide platforms for disseminating FAIR theories and related methodological innovations. Authors can also share their FAIR theories with other early adopters by submitting them to the "FAIR Theory Community" on Zenodo.

Strengths

One important strength of FAIR theory is that it provides much-needed open science methods for the underemphasized inductive phase of the empirical cycle. Most extant open science methods focus on increased rigor in testing, but provide little guidance as to what to do with the newly collected empirical evidence. By providing much-needed open science methods for theory construction, FAIR theory helps restore the balance between inductive and deductive research and contributes to closing the "open empirical cycle" (Hoijtink et al., 2023).

Our approach aligns closely with contemporary developments in open science, such as modular publishing, interdisciplinarity, meta-research, and team science. The advantage of modular publishing is that authors can be credited for theory development. Given the current emphasis on empirical papers (McPhetres et al., 2021), theoretical papers can be hard to publish. FAIR theories, by contrast, can be readily disseminated as citable information artifacts, thus changing the incentive structure to favor theory development.

Interdisciplinarity benefits from FAIR theory's Accessibility across different fields;

thus, theoretical frameworks can be reused, adapted, or used for analogical modeling (Haslbeck et al., 2021). Meta-research benefits from the fact that FAIR theory enables studying the structure, content, and development of theories over time. In terms of team science, FAIR theory facilitates collaboration by ensuring that all contributors have access to the same information and clarifying any remaining areas of contention or misunderstanding (Van Lissa et al., 2024). Version control provides a framework to resolve parallel developments from multiple collaborators in a non-destructive manner. This facilitates collaboration across geographical boundaries, and adversarial collaboration, where others strive to falsify a theory or identify its inconsistencies, and democratizes collaboration with as-of-yet unknown collaborators via platforms like GitHub, where researchers outside one's network can identify issues or suggest improvements to theories.

Limitations

One important limitation of the present work is that, while we build on well-established information architecture like Zenodo, it is unlikely that the proposed metadata standard is definitive. Community adoption can reveal areas of further improvement. Furthermore, at the time of writing, dedicated indexing systems for FAIR theory are non-existent. Using the Zenodo search function and submitting theories to the "FAIR Theory Community" on Zenodo can help overcome this limitation in the short term.

Another limitation is the learning curve associated with tools like Git and Zenodo. The `theorytools` R-package mitigates this limitation for R-users by automating key steps in the process. Moreover, the initial investment in time can be offset by long-term productivity gains and increased impact of FAIR theory. One barrier to adopting FAIR theory is cultural resistance to sharing and modifying theories, also known as the "toothbrush problem". Education might help address this limitation; with this in mind, we have shared several open educational materials on theory development in the "FAIR Theory Community" on Zenodo, and we encourage others to reuse these and share their materials.

A limitation of scope is that FAIR theory does not directly resolve problems related to strategic ambiguity (Frankenhuis et al., 2023) and lack of theory formalization (Robinaugh et al., 2021). However, our work does establish a framework that allows for and promotes the formalization of theories. The example of the empirical cycle demonstrates how FAIR principles can guide theory formalization and foster cumulative progress. Another limitation of scope is that FAIR theory does not resolve other related issues in psychology, such as the measurement crisis (Bringmann et al., 2022) and lack of standardized ontologies for psychological constructs (Bosco et al., 2017). However, our work here provides a template for addressing such challenges, and any advancements in the areas of measurement and ontology will serve to amplify the value of FAIR theories, particularly when such resources are cross-referenced in the metadata (e.g., on Zenodo).

Future Directions

One important future direction is embedding FAIR theories withing existing open science methodologies. For example, consider how FAIR theory relates to preregistration. These practices are distinct but complimentary. The purpose of FAIR theory is to communicate general principles and expectations about a given phenomenon, and to provide infrastructure for explicitly deriving hypotheses from specific theories and revising those theories in light of empirical results. The purpose of preregistration, by contrast, is to eliminate inductive bias from hypothesis tests and increase trust in the outcomes of a specific empirical study (Peikert et al., 2023). FAIR theories are specified at a level of abstraction that transcends individual studies. FAIR theories can inform - and be informed by - both quantitative and qualitative research. Preregistrations, by contrast, are specific implementations of quantitative hypothesis tests, within the context of a specific study design, analysis plan, and - optionally - a fully reproducible analysis pipeline. These practices complement each other: authors can make the derivation chain from theory to hypothesis more explicit by citing a specific FAIR theory in their preregistration. Moreover,

894 it is possible to preregister an inferential procedure that would require revising the theory

895 after observing data, or even to have proponents and detractors of a theory review a

896 registered report of such a test. In short, combining FAIR theory with preregistration and

897 other existing open science practices has the potential to strengthen the epistemic cycle of

898 prediction, testing, and revision, moving us closer to a cumulative science.

899 Another future direction is the intersection between the aforementioned "theory

900 crisis" and the related "measurement crisis" pertaining to the lack of clarity, consistency,

901 and validity in the operationalization of theoretical constructs (Bringmann et al., 2022).

902 Since FAIR theories can reference other theories and resources, it is possible to attach

903 references to specific measurement instruments (or even theories of measurement) to

904 constructs named in a theory. FAIR theories can also help address "jingle- and jangle

905 fallacies" in psychology, which are ambiguities that arise from using the same term for

906 different constructs, or conversely, using different terms for the same construct (Song et al.,

907 2021). By explicitly referencing operational definitions in FAIR theories, such jingle-jangle

908 fallacies would come to light and could ultimately be resolved.

909 Another future direction for FAIR theory is as an instrument of science

910 communication. Practitioners and the general public are rarely able to read and derive

911 actionable insight from large quantities of empirical papers about a particular

912 phenomenon. Theories are more accessible, because they encapsulate the bigger picture of

913 contemporary scientific understanding. For example, while few people read empirical

914 studies on attachment, attachment theory plays a prominent role in popular scientific

915 books about parenting and romantic relationships. Theory bridges the gap between

916 academic research and practitioners by summarizing actionable insights, relieving

917 practitioners from the need to sift through extensive empirical literature. By providing a

918 mechanism for iterative improvement based on emerging evidence, FAIR theory also

919 supports effective evidence-based decision making.

Conclusion

FAIR theory is a major step forward towards more transparent, collaborative, and efficient theory construction. It provides much-needed open science methods for the inductive phase of the empirical cycle, closing a critical gap in the scientific process.

We invite the reader to ask the rhetorical question raised by our reviewer, prof. Turkheimer, who - reflecting on a long career as a practitioner of theory in psychology - considered "how adopting a FAIR framework would change, improve, or inhibit what I do". We paraphrase his answer here[4], because his lived experience complements our youthful "techno-enthusiasm". Prof. Turkheimer remarked that a FAIR framework would have been very helpful in maintaining meaningful boundaries between a theory and the predictions it makes, in tracking how empirical findings result in changes to empirical claims made by a theory, and in resolving theoretical disputes. *"FAIR theory provides a structured, machine- and human-readable framework that distills and formalizes the core components of a theory. Everything published about a theory can continue to exist in its original form, while a FAIR representation supplements that literature by explicitly outlining the theory's assumptions, logical structure, and testable implications. Importantly, FAIR theory can evolve semi-independently from individual papers, offering a persistent and collaborative object that others can reuse, cite, and refine. Contributing to the development of a FAIR theory thus becomes a new way of contributing to the theoretical literature - much like writing a high-quality review article, but with the added benefit of interoperability, versioning, and reusability."*

We envision a future where application of the FAIR principles makes theories more *useful*, living up to Herbert Simon's ideal, enabling scholars to incorporate theory into their workflows in a tanglible way, providing explicit derivation chains for hypotheses, applying transparent rules to select the right control variables for causal inference, and proposing

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[4] Edited for brevity.

[945] specific changes to existing theories based on empirical results. This paves the way for

[946] more theory-driven scholarship and accelerates cumulative knowledge acquisition in

[947] psychology, the social sciences, and beyond.

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