




From the Editors

What Theory Is and Can Be: Forms of Theorizing in Organizational Scholarship

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Abstract

Theory is at the very heart of organizational scholarship and a key criterion for evaluating the quality and contribution of our research. Focusing on conceptual rather than empirical work, this editorial essay highlights the wide range of forms that theorizing might take – and how it, in consequence, materializes in different types of theory papers. Next to the propositional form of theory building, which has so far dominated reflections in the literature, we discuss the particularities of process, configurational, perspectival, and meta-theorizing, as well as various forms of critique. We demonstrate how these forms of theorizing differ in terms of their aims, style of reasoning, their contributions, and the way in which they are written up as papers. In view of the rather different roles that each of these forms of theorizing serve, we propagate, in line with the ethos of *Organization Theory*, a pluralistic stance when it comes to advancing theory in organization studies.

Keywords

management research, organization theory, research, scholarship, theorizing, theory

Theory is core to organizational scholarship. We develop and use theory to make distinctions and order our understanding of organizational phenomena, to form interpretations and explanations, or to develop informative accounts for students, practitioners, and other potential

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stakeholders. In the context of published scholarly work, theory furthermore forms the ‘currency’ in which we trade insights with one another and through which we claim to have developed a sufficiently novel and distinct contribution. And, perhaps just as important, theory may give us personally some sense of belonging and a scholarly identity as we define ourselves and our work in terms of a specific strand of theorizing. Given this central position of theory in our field, it is surprising how little has been written on what theory *is*, as well as on the various processes and components that theorizing consists of. The few texts that exist on the subject involve, for the most part, editorials that either state general expectations for theory papers to be published (Kilduff, 2006; Rindova, 2008) or provide very specific writing-related advice concerning the overall framing and positioning of a theoretical contribution (Barney, 2018; Lange & Pfarrer, 2017; Patriotta, 2017; Ragins, 2012). Instead of giving a direct answer, a well-known editorial even focuses on ‘what theory is *not*’ (Sutton & Staw, 1995), highlighting how authors should not mistake models, hypotheses, or references for theory.

This lack of an explicit discussion about theory and theorizing is not only surprising but also somewhat problematic as it may lead to implicit views and intuitions about theory rather than informed views and more considered perspectives. Researchers may, for example, simply equate theory with a set of explanatory mechanisms (Sutton & Staw, 1995), or with law-like relationships (Whetten, 1989) for a specific phenomenon, which is but one view of theory (Abend, 2008; Cornelissen, 2017a). To the extent that such implicit associations take hold and certain views on theory come to dominate while marginalizing others, the field of organization studies is negatively affected.

Against this background, our aim in this editorial is to address the question of what theory *is*, and how, based on a comprehensive understanding of theory, we can see theory reflected in different forms of theorizing and in different theory papers published in *Organization Theory* and elsewhere. In line with this, our aim is to

offer a pluralistic and inclusive view of theory. In working towards this aim, we also hope to ‘de-mystify’ the notion of theory by offering an accessible overview that takes it away from the heavily coded and technical language that often characterizes discussions on the subject matter. We do this by breaking down the subject into various more readily understood components, including the aims of a theoretical exercise, key building blocks such as concepts and argumentation, and the different genres of writing involved. We show how each of these components links to distinct practices of *theorizing* and to conventional ways of developing and forming a theoretical understanding.

The inclusive and practical understanding of theory that we present here is meant to help scholars and to ensure that we, as authors and as reviewers of each other’s work, value and judge the different forms of theorizing for what they set out to do and bring to the field of organization studies. After all, different forms of theorizing and different theoretical contributions achieve different things for the field; they offer distinctive answers to problems and questions, complement each other in ways that expand our understanding, and, when taken together, stimulate us to remain reflective and open to novel ideas and innovative research questions.

On this basis, we end our editorial by making a case for pluralism in forms of theorizing as opposed to privileging certain forms of theory over others. We briefly highlight how, as a field, we can harness such a pluralistic stance and turn it into a distinctive field-specific asset when it is embraced as an ideal around which organizational researchers work together and complement each other in advancing scholarly knowledge.

Theory as Conceptualization

Theory is effectively an ‘umbrella concept’ (Suddaby, 2014) or a ‘container term’ (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021) – something that was recognized decades ago by Merton (1967, p. 39) when he wrote that

like so many words that are bandied around, the word theory threatens to become meaningless. Because its referents are so diverse – including everything from minor working hypotheses, through comprehensive but vague and unordered speculations to axiomatic systems of thought – use of the word often obscures rather than creates understanding.

While it is certainly true that the term theory has multiple and different meanings, it is still possible to identify some core aspects that are shared across these different meanings.

Leaving aside the way the term is used in everyday language, where it often denotes knowledge that is speculative or untested ('theory versus practice') or personally held (Thomas, 1997), in the academic realm 'theory' refers to the scholarly work that researchers do in pursuit of making informed knowledge claims. The *informed* nature of these claims refers here to the fact that researchers make a qualified assertion regarding how something can generally be understood or explained, or indeed how they argue it should be compared to familiar or more limited understandings. The strength of researchers' claims rests directly on the scholarly work that they have done, and how this has been articulated in a paper; for example, in sharply defining concepts or constructs, in developing a coherent set of explanations, or by offering a compelling point of critique that counters past thinking on a topic. The knowledge claim is in terms of its focus and content also generally understood as clearly marking an academic or intellectual interest that differentiates it from the interests of others such as students, practitioners, or business journalists (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021; Makadok, Burton, & Barney, 2018; Nicolai & Seidl, 2010). Researchers are interested in the *general* structure or character of events in the social world, whereas practitioners and journalists are interested in *specific* cases (e.g. a specific organization, such as Amazon) or in the specific manifestation of something (e.g. a decision by Jeff Bezos as the CEO of Amazon). As Makadok and colleagues (2018) describe this difference,

academics are focusing on the 'forest', whereas practitioners and journalists are understandably more focused on the 'trees'.

Besides a difference in interests, theoretical claims can provide not only other academics but also students, practitioners, and journalists with insights that deepen or extend their understanding by offering them a way to think better or differently about something (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021). Theoretical claims may, for example, show how things generally hang together and how the specific experiences students, practitioners, or journalists have had, or cases they are familiar with, can be understood and explained as instances of a more general pattern or structure.

The work that researchers do to form such theoretical claims involves a range of different activities, such as abstracting, relating, idealizing, synthesizing, hypothesizing, and formalizing (Weick, 1995). Indeed, different forms of theorizing, as we discuss below in more detail, will highlight some of these activities more than others. One type of activity, *conceptualization*, is however core to all forms of theorizing and the theoretical representations or accounts that they give rise to. It is also such a major part of all forms of theorizing that we believe it can for all intents and purposes be considered on pragmatic grounds as theory writ large.

What does conceptualization consist of? Simply put, conceptualization is the act of researchers naming and framing the '*topic*' that they are interested in, or studying, in terms of specific theoretical concepts, as the '*resource*' (Garfinkel, 1960). This inference, or 'conceptual leap', from topic to resource is one that is foundational to all forms of theorizing, but one that has often received little attention as it has often been cast as 'only a preliminary step' to other more specific activities such as formulating propositions or forming an explanation (Krause, 2016, p. 27; Swedberg, 2016).

But because it is such a central activity, and one upon which in fact a whole range of other activities (such as indeed the forming of explanations) depends, it is worth clarifying what

such conceptualization entails. First of all, conceptualization involves an act of categorization through which a researcher decides what the topic is more generally a case of; such as deciding, for example, whether particular instances of talk in an organization, as a topic, can be best conceptualized through the conceptual resource of, say, identity, roles, or discourse. Such conceptual resources may vary in their contents and intellectual development, but generally speaking they provide a set of concepts or constructs (such as identity) as well as a set of relationships between such concepts as part of a larger theoretical discourse or vocabulary (such as identity work). Resources may be ‘given’ by the existing literature around a topic, effectively providing researchers with a readily available set of concepts and vocabularies that they can draw on and mobilize to conceptualize the topic. But it is also possible for researchers to look elsewhere and to deviate from the existing vocabulary structure around a topic (Höllerer, Jancsary, Barberio, & Meyer, 2020). Researchers may conceptualize a topic in a new or different way; for example, by using their own (first principles) reasoning to induce a different theoretical framing or by drawing in concepts and theoretical discourses as novel resources from other domains and literatures (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014).

Conceived in this way, a ‘topic’ refers to a phenomenon in the real or phenomenological world that exists as separate from, and prior to, our conceptualizations (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016). Many conceptualizations indeed involve topics that signify something that directly exists or is experienced as such, for example, conceptualizing platform organizations (as a topic) through the resource of design theory (Vergne, 2020). But the topic in a paper may also involve a previously qualified theoretical subject, such as, for example, conceptualizing organizational sensemaking, as a topic, through yet a further theoretical resource of phenomenology (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). In both cases, however, by categorizing a topic in terms of a resource, researchers move to a theoretical level and ‘bump things up a level of

generality’ (Luker, 2008, p. 138). They abstract out from the particulars of a chosen topic and move, based on how they have categorized it, to a more general way of considering and understanding the topic as a theoretical subject (Suddaby, 2010, 2014). Particular instances of talk, for example, come to be conceptually represented as general forms of identity work in organizations. Such abstraction thus implies at the same time a choice of conceptualizing something in a specific way. Researchers effectively decide to cover the topic from a vantage point and draw on the resource to give this shape and to build up a theoretical conceptualization.

They incorporate concepts,¹ key assumptions, and perhaps some other discursive markers (i.e. labels and qualifiers) from the resource to theoretically qualify and define the topic as a theoretical subject, and as distinct and bounded from other ways of theoretically framing the topic. Such a conceptualization may rest on a direct and seemingly natural theoretical framing of considering the topic ‘as’ an instance of the resource (such as our example of considering individually uttered talk as instances of identity work), but it may also involve an idealization of casting the topic ‘as if’ it followed in some key respects the tenets of the resource (such as seeing individual talk perhaps as an exemplar of Lacanian themes of fantasy and enjoyment). Such an idealization, connecting topic and resource, may perhaps seem less straightforward, but it is a common form of conceptualization that forms the basis of many established theories of organizations (Ketokivi, Mantere, & Cornelissen, 2017), such as seeing organizations, for example, “‘as if’ they follow the value maximization rule of a single economic agent’ (Fama & Jensen, 1985, p. 101), or ‘as if’ they behave as responsible ‘social actors’ who respond to the various demands placed on them by society (Bromley & Meyer, 2021; Lounsbury & Wang, 2020).

While the conceptualization of a topic may start as a hunch or intuitive leap, it needs to be articulated in natural language to enable communication with other researchers. Through the act of writing, conceptualization in fact often

takes further shape. When researchers contextualize their ideas in a paper and present the ‘common ground’ around a topic, it helps them articulate for themselves and others what based on prior knowledge the motivation is for the conceptualization that they propose themselves (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). Their own thinking and reasoning may become sharper in the process, allowing researchers to define concepts more clearly (Suddaby, 2014) and to state a compelling set of grounds for their proposed conceptualization (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013).

In summary, conceptualization is, as an activity, extremely powerful. When researchers use a resource to theorize, they effectively cast a topic as an exemplary instance of the resource. In doing so, they also conceptually integrate the two (seeing the topic in terms of the resource), which in turn enables researchers to make theoretical inferences about the topic. This integration is what allows researchers, for example, to ask theoretically informed questions about the topic and provides them with the means to develop theoretical insights. Without such integration, any form of theorizing would be hard if not impossible.

Forms of Theorizing

Conceptualization is, as already mentioned, an important building block for many different forms of theorizing. For example, empirical hypothesis-testing papers directly build on conceptualization, with hypotheses being the logical entailments of the framing that is offered. In this section, we elaborate these different forms of theorizing in the context of theory papers, recognizing differences in aims and approaches, and helping authors grasp these distinctions.

In our choice of terminology, we here deliberately centre on ‘theorizing’ rather than ‘theory’. The reason for doing so is simple; if we were to base ourselves on a definition of theory and used that as a standard for elaborating processes of theorizing this would direct our attention to certain forms of theorizing only. To illustrate, most classic writings (Bacharach, 1989; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Whetten, 1989)

define theory as an explanation for a set of relationships between constructs and discuss in turn processes of theorizing and criteria for evaluation proper to such a definition. This is a situation that we wish to avoid. We furthermore use the word theorizing differently than how Weick (1995) and Swedberg (2016) have talked about theorizing as ‘interim struggles’ or ‘placemarkers’ before arriving at a formal, grand theory that maximally explains something and has predictive value as well. We rather use the term here as encompassing different practices, each of which produces its own distinct theoretical contributions and knowledge claims. Different forms of theorizing, as practices, effectively provide different forms of understanding – specifically, different forms of explanation, interpretation, and emancipation. And as we will highlight below, their differences are what actually allow us to say more complicated and enriching things than any one form alone could provide, particularly when we truly value and consider the contributions that each of these forms of theorizing has to offer.

This practice-based view of theorizing is consistent with the roots of the word in the Greek *theoria* and its different interpretations. *Theoria* was practised when individuals (the *theoroi*) travelled outside of their city-state and attended spectacles and events such as religious celebrations or athletic competitions. *Theoroi* made a journey or pilgrimage, and having gained these formative experiences, as a resource, returned home as changed persons. Modern scientific understandings appropriated this image suggesting that *theoroi*, as astute, independent observers, are, with the help of the knowledge that they have gained, better able to *explain* how things worked (see Reed, 2011). Gadamer (1975) critiqued this rational-scientific view and defined *theoria* instead as a hermeneutic practice. He framed the *theoroi* as part of their surroundings, using their resources to provide a deep *interpretation* of topics and transforming the understanding of others as well of themselves in the process. Habermas (1972, pp. 303–304) similarly critiqued the rational-scientific view as providing a ‘severance of knowledge from interest’ and as

neglecting the core of the *theoria* metaphor (in Plato and Aristotle) which connected the theoretical imagination to the human interest in *emancipation*.

These alternate conceptualizations of the *theoria* metaphor are instructive; different forms of theorizing, as practices, are tied into different knowledge interests. Consistent with the history and traditions of the human and social sciences (e.g. D'Andrade, 1986; Habermas, 1972; Zald, 1991), we think it is helpful to distinguish between interests that are geared towards explanation, interpretation, and emancipation (see Table 1). All three kinds of interests, as we aim to show, build on conceptualization but do so in different ways and involve researchers using different styles of reasoning consistent with their interest.

With an explanatory interest, researchers engage in forms of theorizing to reveal the fundamental forces and structures of organizational life that lie beneath the surface phenomena, as topics, that we observe, experience, and narrate. In this vein, existing theories are used by researchers to conceptualize and order topics, and they use specific forms of reasoning (such as propositional reasoning) to progressively zoom in on the underlying causal forces or mechanisms that explain the manifestation, dynamics, and outcomes of the topic.

We speak of an interpretive interest when the researcher is concerned with theoretically rearranging processes of signification and representation, the layers of social meaning that shape experiences and actions within organizational life. Based on this interest, researchers use conceptual resources in novel and creative ways to generate theoretical abstractions that provide novel coherent perspectives on a topic and allow us to read and interpret social life within and across organizations differently, or in a more encompassing manner than before. And by reflexively revealing the ways in which social meanings and actions *are formed*, as opposed to reducing them to a causal *force*, this interpretive mode offers, compared to the explanatory interest, a more synthetic approach to knowledge and understanding.

Finally, the emancipatory interest involves yet another approach. Within this form of theorizing, researchers use theoretical resources in critical ways to expose the politics and political constraints that are implicit in organizational life and to highlight the limits to our current ways of thinking about topics. Researchers effectively (re)configure theoretical resources into a well-articulated critique of our current theoretical understandings about topics and theoretically speculate about viable alternatives for reform. Like interpretive theorizing, this form of theorizing produces 'deep' interpretations of topics but does so by expanding the theoretical conversation in a normative direction.

We elaborate these different forms of theorizing below and reference how they take shape in different theory papers. When we speak of different forms of theorizing, this is not meant to be understood in a formulaic manner with each form designating a well-defined 'model' that clearly distinguishes it from other forms. Rather, we use the label more loosely here; more as ideal-typical descriptions of common forms of theorizing, drawing on our experience as editors and on papers published in *Organization Theory*. However, it is important to realize that when writing theory papers, authors may veer between these forms, or may in some instances follow a different trajectory altogether and write up their paper in a rather different form.

Explanatory forms of theorizing

A fundamental premise of explanatory forms of theorizing is that theory is used to identify and establish the fundamental processes and structures that 'underlie' and therefore explain a given topic (Sutton & Staw, 1995). As such, theory draws its strength from coherently conceptualizing a topic, as its referent, and from drawing out with ever greater theoretical precision and nuance a set of explanations for this topic. The assumption here of course is that there are underlying mechanisms, or structures, that explain what happens or has happened within and around

Table 1. Overview of forms of theorizing.

	Propositional theorizing	Configurational theorizing	Process theorizing	Perspectival theorizing	Meta-theorizing	Theoretical provocation	Critical meta-theorizing
<i>Definition</i>	A style of theorizing that identifies and elaborates basic contingencies (as propositions) that explain a topic	A style of theorizing that interrelates interdependencies between concepts (as configurations) that explain a topic	A style of theorizing that plots the sequencing of events and outcomes (as processes) that explain a topic	An interpretive style of theorizing that re-frames our conceptualizations of a topic through an alternative and deeper reading	An interpretive style of theorizing that interrogates the theoretical categories, biases, and assumptions in organizational theorizing as a practice	An emancipatory style of theorizing that aims to provoke interest in topics of social concern and by questioning taken-for-granted assumptions	An emancipatory style of theorizing that critiques the theoretical categories, biases, and assumptions in organizational theorizing as a practice
<i>Knowledge interest</i>	Explanation – the formulated propositions conceptualize relationships of cause and effect and theorize underlying processes and structures as mechanisms	Explanation – the formulated configurations conceptualize alternate causal paths and theorize underlying processes and structures as mechanisms	Explanation – the elaborated trajectories conceptualize alternate causal paths and theorize underlying processes and structures as mechanisms	Interpretation – the (re)conceptualization of a topic fosters renewed understandings and creates opportunities for knowledge development through novel questions or concepts	Interpretation – the deep reading and synthesis of existing categories of theorizing creates reflexivity and provides pointers to alternative ways of studying and knowing topics	Emancipation – the critique of default assumptions around a topic and their implications leading to a theory-informed basis for action and change	Emancipation – the synthesis and critique of existing categories of theorizing creates reflexivity and provides an ardent call for alternative ways of studying and knowing topics
<i>Style of reasoning</i>	Formal-analytical	Formal-analytical	Formal-analytical	Interpretive-synthetic	Interpretive-synthetic	Critical-synthetic	Critical-synthetic
<i>Stance of the researcher</i>	Objective/neutral	Objective/neutral	Objective/neutral	Involved	Involved	Involved-personal	Involved-personal
<i>Level of abstraction</i>	Medium (topic-based)	Medium (topic-based)	Medium (topic-based)	Medium to high	High (universal system)	Medium to high	High (universal system)

organizations, thus granting researchers the possibility of waging theory to form explanations as well as potentially make predictions based on the strength of their explanations.

As a practice, explanatory theorizing proposes what for many will be a familiar way of working in pursuit of such explanations. First, it suggests that for theory to do its work it needs to reference social reality. While theorizing can go beyond the surface of a phenomenon, as a topic, to get to fundamental processes and structures, explanations need to be tied back to, and indeed grounded in, a phenomenon as a topic. As such, explanatory theorizing cannot become too abstract theoretically and needs to stay tuned in its level of abstraction to specific topics. Second, as part of its approach, researchers assume an objective stance of looking from the outside in at a topic, revealing its fundamental operations. They do so by using a seemingly neutral and objective ‘formal’ form of theoretical reasoning (such as propositional or configurational reasoning) where arguments stand on their own ground and as separate from their own values and norms as researchers and human beings. And third, because of its aim of maximizing the explanatory strength of theory, theorizing tends to revolve around a limited and tightly defined set of topics, as a broader problem area, as well as around an equally limited set of corresponding theoretical resources. The hard work of forming ever more detailed explanations discourages researchers from continuously introducing new topics and questions, and also incentivizes them to mine the theoretical resources that they already have at their disposal.

A particularly common style of explanatory theorizing involves the development of explanatory arguments through the *formulation of propositions* (Cornelissen, 2017b). With this style, researchers work from a familiar resource or set of theoretical resources for their basic conceptualization, and elaborate on the back of this framing a set of arguments that are theoretically consistent with such a conceptualization. While the name of the style may suggest a formal language of deducing conclusions from axioms (i.e. stylized theoretical presuppositions), in the

field of organization studies the idiom involves instead a form of deliberate reasoning that explains a topic by parsing it into a set of specific contingent statements (‘if, then’ arguments, or general statements of a logical association between certain constructs) that, as mentioned, are derived from a particular conceptualization and then elaborate and qualify why and how something generally happens. An example of this style in *Organization Theory* is the paper by Roulet and Pichler (2020), in which they develop a set of theoretically driven propositions to explain when and how through the discursive strategies that an organization employs following a misconduct accusation it can strategically shift the blame to others or even deny that any form of misconduct has taken place.

Another common style of explanatory theorizing involves *configurational theorizing*. In this style, researchers intentionally aim to theorize about how multiple concepts or constructs combine into distinct configurations that explain why and how something occurs (Furnari et al., 2021). Configurational theorizing aims to account for ‘multifaceted interdependencies’ between concepts or constructs which contrasts with a propositional style which tends to focus in a more linear manner on ‘bivariate relations’ (Furnari et al., 2021). With this style, researchers thus intentionally complexify things by working from alternate conceptualizations while ‘anchoring’ themselves on a topic (Furnari et al., 2021). These possible conceptualizations can be given by literatures and prior research, but also require that researchers use their own imagination and reasoning to figure out why and how concepts may be coherently connected around a topic. Once they have made this leap and have identified coherently linked clusters of concepts, the subsequent step is for researchers to link and name the underlying processes at work so that they can offer a clearly specified set of underlying ‘mechanisms’ as explanations. A good example of this style in *Organization Theory* is Fisher’s (2020) paper on the socially complex, interactive process of entrepreneurs establishing new ventures and seeking to gain legitimacy for their endeavours. The article demonstrates how different features (such as

audience diversity, optimal distinctiveness, market category evolution, and legitimacy thresholds) contract into different configurations that present different pathways for entrepreneurs to achieve legitimacy.

A final style of explanatory theorizing that we wish to highlight here is *process theorizing*. With this style of theorizing, researchers explore when and how something comes about, but do so from a temporal perspective. This process idiom² is like the propositional and configurational styles focused on identifying generative ‘mechanisms’ that explain why something occurs (Cornelissen, 2017b). However, compared to the other two it is less uniformly focused on explaining a particular ‘outcome of interest’ (Cloutier & Langley, 2020) and focuses more broadly instead on the enabling conditions and processes through which something emerges (see also Pentland, Mahringer, Dittrich, Feldman, & Wolf, 2020). In their paper in *Organization Theory*, Cloutier and Langley (2020) highlight four types of process theorizing that researchers may use: a linear style that focuses on specifying linear stage-based models; a parallel style that elaborates how two linear trajectories are connected (through for example co-evolution or bifurcation); a recursive style that specifies ongoing cycles of adaptation or reproduction (through for example ongoing interactions or system dynamics); and a conjunctive style that deliberately breaks down pre-established distinctions and dualisms and focuses on the continuous emergence of organizational entities and events (often captured with performative images of entanglement, meshwork, or assemblage). The first two types, they remark, are still geared towards explaining an outcome of interest, whereas the latter two styles imply a strong process view that is focused on explaining ‘temporally embedded interactive contingencies that might drive events and activities in different directions’ (Cloutier & Langley, 2020, p. 5).

In short, explanatory theorizing involves researchers using different styles of formal reasoning to develop theory that aims to

explain a topic. Building on prior theoretical work, researchers use these styles to elaborate and further qualify a set of theory-informed explanations. Because of this link to past work, most contributions tend to be written up as scientific articles that have a standard structure of first introducing a topic, followed by a theoretical background section, one or more sections on the development of the core arguments, and ending with a discussion of the paper’s contributions and implications for theory (see Barney, 2018; Lange & Pfarrer, 2017; Makadok et al., 2018). When we in turn assess the contributions of such explanatory papers as reviewers and readers, we tend to judge them among other things on the strength of the formal reasoning in the manuscript, such as the theoretical motivation for the proposed conceptualization, the overall coherence of the arguments, and the clarity of concept definitions (Suddaby, 2010). We also tend to assess these kinds of papers on the extent to which a manuscript is seen to significantly advance our current explanations of a topic. Such advances can be about constructively complicating a given set of explanations, as forms of configurational and process theorizing tend to do, or about addressing boundary conditions and zooming in further on the details of a specific ‘mechanism’.

Interpretive forms of theorizing

A second form of theorizing takes its inspiration from interpretivism. It takes as its main premise that theorizing should provide a deep reading and understanding of the circumstances in which people find themselves, working through the layers of meaning that constitute our experience of organizations. Instead of trying to establish a general, coherent, and referential set of theorized mechanisms, interpretive theorizing suggests a different approach. In fact, it does not directly aim to answer questions of ‘what is’ or ‘what determines’, but rather aims to approach such questions indirectly, as effectively mediated through processes of social construction.

As a practice, interpretive theorizing involves researchers being reflexive and asking themselves why, as scholars, we think of topics in particular ways (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011), and whether there may be value in re-signifying our forms of understanding in alternative yet coherent ways. Re-signifying is an interpretive activity by which a researcher recontextualizes a topic, and our previous ways of theorizing about it, into alternative, deeper meanings that are historically and socially situated. This re-signification effectively involves moving from one set of social meanings (such as our current theoretical writings on a topic) to another set of social meanings (such as what such writing signifies more generally); from the 'surface' meanings that are easily inferred to the 'deep' meanings that require much more interpretive work to identify and access. Interpretive theorizing not only allows for, but in fact stimulates, theoretical abstractions and creative forms of reframing as these may suggest possible new ways of thinking about our theorizing, and of how we may study certain topics (Geertz, 2000). Indeed, a hallmark of interpretive theorizing is its openness to alternative conceptualizations and to bringing in new topics. Where explanatory forms of theorizing tend to be 'programmatically' in advancing a particular strand of theorizing around a given set of topics that have historically defined a field, interpretive theorizing encourages researchers to introduce new topics that better reflect and capture our present-day experiences of organizations.

A first style of interpretive theorizing is what we label *perspectival theorizing*. When researchers write a perspective piece, they introduce a new topic into our theoretical conversation, re-signify prior theorizing, or do both as a way of showing the promise of a novel line of inquiry. Oftentimes, the topics they suggest are based on significant developments or events (for instance, robotization of work, the gig economy, or so-called 'grand challenges') and which they show through their conceptualization are not yet adequately reflected in prior theorizing about similar problems (see, for instance, Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). The objective of such pieces

therefore is to generate a fresh theoretical perspective that jumpstarts research into a relevant but hitherto largely neglected topic. Where some perspective pieces are built around the introduction of a new topic in this way, others depart primarily from a re-signifying of prior theorizing on an already given topic, such as leadership or routines (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). In these cases, the objective of the paper is to redirect a line of inquiry into an interesting and theoretically promising direction; such as, for example, Arora-Jonsson and colleagues (2020) reframing competition as an organizational as opposed to a strictly economic phenomenon, or Glaser and colleagues (2021, p. 1) offering a 'performativity-inspired biographical perspective' on algorithms as opposed to seeing them as 'self-contained computational tools'. The main challenge for researchers writing such a perspective piece is to show simultaneously the limitations of prior theory and theoretical assumptions (as the surface-level, default reading), as well as the promise of an alternative, re-signified framing that offers an alternative, more holistic or deeper understanding of the topic (as the proposed deeper reading). Delivering on both fronts in the same paper by coherently linking alternate theoretical readings is generally difficult (Geertz, 2000). A good example of a paper that has succeeded in doing this is Vergne's (2020) novel theoretical take on platform organizations. In his perspective piece, Vergne critiques prior theorizing in economic strategy and law and reformulates classic decision-making and organizational design theory to make it amenable to the study of such novel organizational forms.

A second style of interpretive theorizing is *meta-theorizing*. This form of theorizing turns the attention of researchers away from our ordinary theoretical activity at the surface level to the enterprise of organizational theorizing itself. The style has researchers going beyond linking theoretical resources to topics and reflecting more deeply on what these theoretical categories themselves signify, what they believe instead organizational theorizing should be aiming for, and how it ought to be conducted. Being reflexive at this level has researchers

reflecting on the deeper assumptions and unreflective, tacit biases – what Gadamer (1975) calls ‘prejudgments’ – that have guided past theorizing; biases which form threats and challenges to the validity and strength of our knowledge claims. They may reflect for instance on the root assumptions or value orientations that are implicit in our current theoretical resources. Benschop (2021), for example, surveys the dominant root assumptions on gender, class, and race that have influenced research on inequality, technology, and climate change, and offers a re-signification of such categories using feminist theory. Through re-signification, meta-theorizing offers at once a synthesis of past research as well as a deeper reading of the theoretical resources that have been routinely used. Such a synthesis may as a theoretical abstraction be somewhat less ‘close to the ground’ (Winch, 1958) but it has, as in the above example (Benschop, 2021), direct downstream consequences for the practice of organizational theorizing.

In short, interpretive forms of theorizing involve researchers using a set of interpretive techniques to reflect on our current theoretical resources and to imagine from within our system of theorizing alternative ways of studying topics. Such techniques are less formalized and codified than the styles of reasoning common to explanatory theorizing. They also assume an active role for researchers in being reflexive and in using processes of theoretical abstraction, speculation, and thought experimentation (Kornberger & Mantere, 2020) through which existing theory is recast and potentially new theory is being generated. In this way, interpretive theorizing can be an important source of theory building and of injecting new theory and topics into the field.

Reflecting this potential, when we judge the contribution of theory papers in this tradition, we may think of criteria such as coherence, differentiability, and generativity. For example, we may ask whether the theoretical re-signification that is offered is coherent (i.e. is the deeper reading that is offered internally logically consistent, and does it also coherently recast

surface-level categories?); whether it differs enough from prior readings and understandings that already exist in the field; and whether it generates sufficiently new insights and further conceptual material to direct further theorizing and research. Finally, it is worth noticing that papers that are written in the tradition of interpretive theorizing tend to follow less of a standard template than those in the explanatory tradition. Papers will of course centrally feature a synthesis of theoretical resources as well as a proposed re-signification, but in some cases these parts may be written up as separate sections, and in other instances may be meshed into one single section (see, for instance, Benschop, 2021). We also noticed that in some cases perspective papers may still be structured and written up as somewhat analogous to a scientific article (see, for instance, Cooren, 2020), whereas in other cases the paper is more essayistic in nature involving a more continuous flow between sections.

Emancipatory forms of theorizing

The third form of theorizing that we discuss here is critical, *emancipatory theorizing*. This practice has, compared to the other two, a more overt political role in challenging existing systems of belief, in our theories and in the world of practice, and to subvert such systems towards emancipation and potential reform. Essentially, emancipatory forms of theorizing involve researchers bringing to bear the critical force of well-articulated theoretical utopias (i.e. images of how things could be or should be) upon those belief systems, drawing out how either in the realm of our theorizing or in practice such beliefs lead us astray, divide or undermine people, or otherwise limit what may be possible.

Emancipatory theorizing has many commonalities with interpretive theorizing. It similarly reaches to a ‘meta’-level, recognizes the historical and social nature of our theoretical knowledge, and employs re-signification as a key technique. Both forms of theorizing are also critical in that they interrogate a current state of affairs and question received wisdom.

Indeed, they employ as we will show many of the same theorizing practices, but with a notable difference between them (Habermas, 1972).

The key difference to other forms of theorizing is that emancipatory theorizing is shot through with a concern for ideals and values in theory and practice. It shows this concern by revealing the structures of domination and human constraints that are inscribed into our current beliefs (which may variably be expressed as suppressed forms of consciousness, ideas, discourses, or bodily behaviours), and by trying to make a real, practical difference through identifying the potentialities and possibilities for emancipation and reform. Emancipatory theorizing is simply more normative in nature than interpretive forms of theorizing and focuses on what the theorizing may practically lead to or change. This normative orientation marks a shift in the role of the researcher, who is not just a member of the research community but is her/himself involved in the quest for emancipation, and thus ‘positioned and active’ (Deetz, 1996, p. 197). Indeed, papers in the tradition of emancipatory theorizing tend to be written up as critical or provocative essays that reflect the involved role of the author through an active voice and tone. A further notable difference is that whereas interpretive theorizing focuses on theoretical abstraction and synthesis, emancipatory theorizing is bent on using theory to create ‘an opening’ (Deetz, 1996). The emphasis is on ‘the generative capacity (the ability to challenge guiding assumptions, values, social practices, and routines)’ of theory compared to a focus on theoretical coherence and ‘representational validity’ as in interpretive theorizing (Deetz, 1996, pp. 197–198).

While emancipatory and interpretive theorizing differ in terms of their overall intent, they do, as mentioned, share many of the same theorizing practices. Indeed, the two styles of emancipatory theorizing that we have chosen to highlight here parallel the two interpretive styles that we have discussed previously. The first emancipatory style of *theoretical provocation* is similar to perspectival theorizing in many ways – but with a different purpose and contribution. Likewise, *critical meta-theorizing* is similar to

(interpretive) meta-theorizing, but equally with a decidedly more normative orientation.

A *theoretical provocation* operates like a perspective piece in that it either highlights a problematic development in society, as a new topic that we should discuss and embrace as organizational researchers, or problematizes and questions our existing ways of theorizing, or indeed does both in the same paper. The difference with perspectival theorizing is that a theoretical provocation has a clear utopian referent, condemning a current state of affairs and making the case for action towards a better alternative. An example of a theoretical provocation that is largely centred around the introduction of a new topic is Spicer’s (2020) paper in *Organization Theory* on the rise of ‘bullshitting’ in organizations and society. Spicer theorizes about how bullshitting as a language game has an exponentially expanding and largely negative impact on organizations and for employees trying to find meaning and purpose at work. Besides this topic, one can think of many other societal developments, such as precarious labour, workplace racism, inequalities in pay, gender discrimination, and other forms of societal exclusion that are not yet sufficiently covered in our theorizing. Theoretical provocations may bring such topics into the conversation, with the emancipatory drive in many instances being to uncover and reveal aspects of marginalization, exclusion, and suppression in organizations and society.

Besides covering new topics, theoretical provocations often involve a strong critique of past theorizing as well. Such papers problematize in particular the emphases, values, and moral orientations that have been implicit in the theoretical resources that we have been using (Hamann et al., 2020). Their critique, in other words, is levelled at the deeper-level paradigmatic, ideological (i.e. political, moral- or diversity-related), and root-metaphor assumptions of a theoretical resource (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). For example, in *Organization Theory*, Nyberg (2021) documents the rise of corporate power and its corroding influence on democracies (as a topic) and criticizes the way

in which the predominant orientation in our theorizing on the topic (through resources such as ‘corporate political activity’ and ‘political CSR’) has made us blind to this process and more than just innocent bystanders. Nyberg (2021) offers, in turn, a compelling re-signification of corporate involvement and influence using theories of power and democracy, and in doing so provokes us into a different stance and into asking different questions to protect the institution of democracy and civic life in general. Another illustration of a theoretical provocation is Janssens and Zanoni’s (2021) critique of past diversity theorizing and research. They problematize the ideological assumptions and root economic images of the firm underlying much diversity research which, they argue, makes prior theorizing incapable of conceptualizing the obligations that firms have towards diversity in the networks of economic activity (such as global supply chains) in which they are embedded. Janssens and Zanoni (2021, p. 1) present in turn a thought-provoking re-signification that offers ‘re-conceptualizations of diversity and open[s] up possibilities for new conversations and politics of action to make diversity research matter for social change’. Both papers make an ardent call for researchers to ‘see’ things differently; from a different vantage point and with a different set of values guiding our theorizing and research. Many provocations combine, as in these examples, a critique with an implicit or explicit appeal towards an alternative way of theorizing as the utopian ideal. However, it may also be possible for a provocation to ‘just’ or primarily reveal an objectionable state of affairs (as a dystopia) through a critique or polemic (e.g. Tourish, 2020), providing that as a theoretical provocation it is well argued and offers sufficient depth and insight in itself.

A second style of emancipatory theorizing is *critical meta-theorizing*. This style is analogous to interpretive meta-theorizing but has a more distinct emancipatory character. One way in which this becomes evident is in the way in which it critically interrogates and synthesizes past work from a value-based vantage

point, deconstructing and mapping existing strands of theorizing and bodies of literature based on their paradigmatic or ideological assumptions. Another noticeable difference is how critical meta-theorizing tends to draw on theoretical resources and figures from social theory and political philosophy (for instance, post-colonialism, post-modernism, Marxist thought, feminist and queer theory; Foucault, Habermas, Deleuze, etc.) as part of its critique and synthesis of prior work and in the re-signification that it proposes. These resources are drawn in to provide the ‘deep’ reading that illuminates the limiting or harmful assumptions in past work and are then leveraged to create an opening towards change. In this way, the researcher brings together the intellectual force of social theory and political philosophy with the utopian and emancipatory possibilities that are present in our prior theorizing about organizations. A telling example of such critical meta-theorizing is the article by Banerjee and Arjaliès (2021) in which they use post-colonial theory to deconstruct Western ideas such as the Anthropocene and Gaia which have been proposed as ways of overcoming the separation between human organizations and the natural environment. Through their deconstruction, they show how these much-touted ideas effectively perpetuate Western Enlightenment ideas of rationality that carry colonial legacies, further separate humans and organizations from their environment, and foster instrumental and economic ways of ‘dealing with’ nature. They call in turn for alternative decolonial imaginaries to guide further research on sustainability and the ecological crisis in organization studies. Their paper also demonstrates an important point about critical meta-theorizing: that such papers do not just score points or argue on the basis of the intellectual authority associated with particular sources (i.e. particular strands of social theory and political philosophy or certain social theorists), but put such sources to use as part of offering a compelling critique and a strident call for reflection and action (see also Hamann et al., 2020).

With its distinct normative orientation, emancipatory theorizing plays an essential role in the production of knowledge. It confronts us with ourselves, making us aware of the values and norms that we have been perpetuating in our theorizing and how this has been affecting the world around us. It also provides us with openings towards change and helps with finding ways of making our theories and our scholarship more equitable, diverse, decolonized, and pluriform (among other ideals that are worth pursuing).

In this way, papers in the emancipatory tradition urge us to think differently and involve us, as readers, in a normative thought experiment that has a direct bearing on our existing ways of doing things. They thus do their job well when they coherently expose and illuminate the root assumptions and limits of established ways of thinking in theory and practice. These papers may furthermore be judged on their ‘generative capacity’ (Deetz, 1996) or ‘performative potential’ (Cabantous, Gond, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016) in how they motivate readers into action and change their research practices. Obviously, this potential cannot be gauged on the basis of whether following the essay any specific actions have been realized (Cabantous et al., 2016), but by assessing whether the essay itself succeeds in having us ‘see’ (Deetz, 1996) the world differently – in other words, whether it has as a written essay itself an ‘illocutionary force’ (Austin, 1962) and thus the strong potential to influence others into action.

At this point, it is opportune to emphasize that papers written in an emancipatory tradition need to be judged using different criteria (such as ‘generative capacity’) than how we would judge, say, forms of explanatory theorizing. In fact, expecting a parsimonious specification of underlying ‘mechanisms’ or the development of a precisely defined set of concepts or constructs, which for many represents the pinnacle of theorizing (Sutton & Staw, 1995; Whetten, 1989), would in this case not make much sense, as the main work that a critical essay does, and the contribution it makes, is fundamentally different.

What this means more generally is that as organizational researchers we should be cognizant

of these different forms of theorizing. We need to be appreciative of their differences and judge them on their own terms. This recognition also implies that we should not, as readers, reviewers, and editors, automatically fall back on a given set of criteria that may be intuitive and self-evident to us, but read and evaluate theory papers for what they are and aim to do – and only then marshal relevant criteria to judge the paper as well as suggest areas for a paper’s development.

Doing so is of course easier said than done. As organizational researchers, we have often been trained and socialized into particular forms of theorizing and may indeed have developed our own preferences for particular contributions along the way. But even so we can be aware of our own heuristics as well as engage openly with a theoretical paper that we are reading or reviewing; that is, thinking through what the authors are trying to do, and evaluating and appreciating the paper in those terms. This would not only ensure a fair reading of any theory paper, but also that as reviewers and readers we do not work from a position of assuming that theoretical contributions are limited to only one or a few forms of theorizing and through our judgements inadvertently squeeze out other forms.

The Case for Pluralism

Different forms of theorizing come, as we hope we have demonstrated, with different aims and knowledge interests. As such, these different forms also come with distinct criteria for judging their contribution and ‘value’. We have highlighted some of these differences in the previous section. In so doing, one of our aims has been to alert organizational researchers to the importance of not conflating a set of criteria that apply to one form of theorizing with norms and values that apply to other forms. Such a pluralistic ethos of appreciating different forms of theorizing is not only important for individual researchers and for how we write, read, or review a specific paper. It is also an ideal that extends to the entire community of organization studies and its place as a discipline within the

broader social sciences. At this communal level, we suggest, our theoretical base will be enriched when explanatory, interpretive, and emancipatory forms of theorizing all have their place; when researchers exchange ideas using different forms of theorizing; and when the theory and knowledge base around a particular subject is not defined by a limited set of assumptions, or by only one form of theorizing alone – as effectively a form of ‘absolutism’ in ideology and form (Ghoshal, 2005). ‘The only alternative to any [such] form of ideological absolutism lies in intellectual pluralism, which is likely to lead both to better research and to broadened usefulness’ (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 88).

Given that Ghoshal wrote down his views more than fifteen years ago, it is worth asking whether we, as a community and field of scholarly inquiry, have embraced such intellectual pluralism in our theorizing. And have we, in the process, become collectively more reflexive about our theorizing, the kind of knowledge that we produce, and the claims that we put forward and diffuse through our teaching and engagement with stakeholders in society? It is perhaps hard to provide a single and discrete answer to these questions. Some have indeed argued that organizational theory has become increasingly stale and banal (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Delbridge & Fiss, 2013), with current theories offering idealized, mechanical pictures of organizations that do not match developments in society (Barley, 2016) and that are based on a one-sided managerial view of productivity and efficiency (Petriglieri, 2020). Others have been far less gloomy in their assessment; recognizing the diversity of theoretical traditions in the field (Meyer & Boxenbaum, 2010) and the opening up of mainstream journals to different forms of theorizing and theoretical contributions (Suddaby, 2014). There is also the recognition that the field is characterized by a continuing debate about the knowledge that it produces for itself and for society (Cutcher, Hardy, Riach, & Thomas., 2020). Besides perennial bouts of doubt about its relevance, the field as a whole seems to harbour enough reflexivity and debate so as to avoid researchers from *en masse* becoming committed to a singular form of

theorizing and in ways that limit its potential to speak to and address problems in society.

From our perspective, the field of organization studies has a unique opportunity to further foster and harness the value of ‘intellectual pluralism’ (Ghoshal, 2005). As a field, it allows for diversity – although we realize that such openness may often be limited to recognizing from the comfort of one’s own position that other traditions also exist. Inclusiveness is a prerequisite for pluralism in theorizing. However, pluralism requires a further step – that we, as researchers, also believe that other traditions of theorizing have something substantial to add and in distinct and critical ways help further our common knowledge base. With this additional step, we not only see the value of other traditions, but also start to recognize how different forms of theorizing play distinct roles and complement each other in the pursuit of knowledge. In this way, theoretical pluralism can be turned into a distinctive asset when it becomes embraced as a field-specific value or ideal around which researchers work together and complement each other in their efforts to create knowledge and address problems for stakeholders in society.

When researchers embrace this ideal, they actively consider theoretical work steeped in a different tradition and engage in an open exchange and conversation with one another. Looking beyond the confines of their own form of theorizing, such an open conversation has researchers reaching out and going out of their way to read contributions in other forms and then think through the consequences for the topic and for their own work (Cutcher et al., 2020). The result, we believe, will be a joining up that is more than the sum of its parts; forms of critique will provoke thoughts and spur new forms of theorizing, and explanatory and interpretive forms of theorizing will together create a more enriching and nuanced picture of our phenomena of interest. And when these forms are taken together, they provide us with a much sounder basis for educating our students and for engaging with stakeholders in society – bringing nuance and force to our claims in ways that matter while ensuring that we do not overclaim.

We see *Organization Theory* as playing an important part in supporting and fostering such pluralism in forms of theorizing. As part of its mission statement, the journal is open to ‘different forms and styles of theorizing’ and does not privilege one form of contribution over the other (Cornelissen & Höllerer, 2020). As editors of the journal, we welcome different forms and contributions as outlined in this editorial, and actively support authors through the review process in developing their arguments and their own voice in line with their chosen form and style of theorizing. This can be in the form of a scientific article, helping authors hone their argument and develop the strongest and most impactful contribution, as well as in the form of a provocative essay, where we support authors in developing their critique. By fostering such pluralism in forms of theorizing, we aim to strengthen theory and theorizing in our field and to support the continued vitality of organizational research as it tackles important topics within society.

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Notes

1. We use the broader term of ‘concepts’ here as opposed to the more specific label of ‘constructs’ (Suddaby, 2010). Concepts are abstract theoretical terms ‘that specify the features, attributes, or characteristics of the phenomenon in the real or phenomenological world that they are meant to represent and that distinguish them from other related phenomena’ (Podsakoff et al., 2016, p. 3). Constructs are essentially concepts (Podsakoff et al., 2016; Suddaby, 2010) and are thus included in this definition. However, the term construct itself often also has a more particular meaning as involving definitional work in support of the particular purpose of empirically measuring and testing concepts (Bacharach, 1989; Osigweh, 1989; Suddaby, 2010).
2. The focus here is limited to process theorizing within the explanatory tradition. Process theorizing may however also be more phenomenological or post-modern in orientation (see, for instance, Beyes & Holt, 2020; Hernes & Schultz, 2020) in which case it is more likely to be developed and written up through one of the interpretive or emancipatory forms of theorizing that we will discuss in the text.

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