

## TWO REFLECTIONS

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Over the years there has been quite some debate in the field of organization studies around issues of theory development. One of the latest incarnations of this debate was a special topic forum in *AMR*, 2011, which followed upon earlier, similar special topic forums in 1989 (Van de Ven, 1989) and 1999 (Elsbach, Sutton & Whetten, 1999). The starting question for the 2011 edition was ‘Where are the new theories of organization?’ (Suddaby, Hardy & Huy, 2011). It seems appropriate to take this as the starting point for a conversation about the future of organization studies.

The editorial introduction says that the collected papers did not offer new organization theories (Suddaby, Hardy & Huy, 2011: 236). To my ear, there resounds some regret—if not disillusion—in the formulation. “In retrospect,” Suddaby et al. say, “this was perhaps an overly ambitious expectation on our part,” but then they quickly add that “the articles that make up this special topic forum, however, offer an arguably more interesting interpretation of our call.” The articles give “critical accounts of current organizational theory” and offer “novel ideas about the process of theory construction” (ibid).

I would like to reflect on the ‘critical accounts of current organizational theory’, and on the ‘novel ideas about the process of theory construction’. [1]

### **i—“critical accounts of current organizational theory”**

Suddaby et al. (2011) distill three points of critique of the current status of organization theory. As a first point of critique, Suddaby et al. note that “most of the research conducted ... is rooted in theories borrowed from other disciplines” (p.236). [2] There are no “*indigenous* theories of organization” (p.237, original emphasis). Apparently this is a problem, because as long as the practice of borrowing theories from other disciplines continues to take place, “we also import core questions, assumptions, and metaphors, each of which has the potential to create blind spots for ... researchers” (p.237). The call is thus for the study of organization to be a discipline, to become a discipline, or to finally accept the consequences of aspiring to be a discipline; a discipline moreover that is tightly related to managers and contemporary management practices.

The second point of critique is that “current ... theories have failed to keep pace with changes in the size, complexity, and influence of modern organizations” (p.237). Rather, Suddaby et al. suggest that “Extant ... theories are too simplistic and static to fully capture the dynamic changes in the size and complexity of modern organizations” (p.238, in relation to the Smith & Lewis paper), and that their “slavish adherence to scientific rationality” is “the primary reason that organizational theory has become detached from the reality of organizational life” (p.238, in relation to the Sandberg & Tsoukas paper). The suggestion is that the alleged ‘simplicity’ of organization theory and ‘slavish adherence to scientific rationality’ is related to its reliance on theories from other disciplines, in particular in how these theories from other disciplines are emulated.

This gets us to the third point of critique, that in importing and adapting—‘translating’—theories from other disciplines these theories are “neutered and sanitized ... rather than radicalized and extended” (p.239). Suddaby et al. continue to say that “Organizational theorizing is inherently cautious” (p.239), if not conservative, for various reasons. One is that in the faces of a vast, diverse, and rapidly growing body of relevant literature, and of increasing pressures to get published, researchers tend to choose topics and to write in styles that are relatively mainstream; there is a discouragement to develop “exciting, disruptive, and challenging new theories” (p.239, in relation to the Shepherd & Sutcliffe and Alvesson & Sandberg papers). This trend is enhanced, according to Suddaby et al., by how journals go about publishing—that is, in “highly predictable and routinized bureaucratic processes” and by “widely shared norms about publishing” (p.240). In these ways, our academic community has become a highly institutionalized field. Another reason is that even if one is daring enough to challenge or contradict the established theories in the field—these “sacred canons” (p.240)—one still has to relate to them, and thereby one makes them visible and reproduces them, thus confirming their status as 'sacred canons'. “When we try to position ourselves as different from X, better than Y, and going beyond Z, we are helping to reinforce and legitimate X, Y, and Z” (p.240). The obligations that theories demonstrate continuity with past theorizing and be connected to the established literature would limit the possibility to develop novel and different theories, and hence stifle theoretical innovation, as Suddaby et al. seem to argue (cf. McKinley, Mone & Moon, 1999).

It may well be the case that Suddaby et al. exaggerate just a little bit in their second and third points of critique [3], but let us assume for the sake of the argument that the analysis is justified, not too far off the mark, and gives a fair account of the current status of organization theory. And let us be plain, there is sufficient reason not to dispute the thrust of their arguments. Nevertheless, from this vantage point, I take issue with the first point of critique. Let me specify. I do not really care whether organization theory is 'indigenous'—whatever that qualification may mean—or borrowed from other disciplines, but I do take issue with the corollary that organization theory should be, become, or aspire to be, a discipline. On the contrary, it should

(re)establish and affirm itself as a heterogeneous field of inquiry, and resist attempts and forces that seek to render it a discipline.

First, I propose that the discussion around second and third points of critique suggests that organization theory is already—*de facto*—highly disciplined, as there appears to be closure around these two core questions that define what is a discipline: “in what way?” knowledge projects and research endeavors in the field are executed, and “by what right?” they are legitimated (cf. Butler, 2009).

Second, I propose that the second and third points of critique have become and continue to be salient, *because* organization theory is already highly disciplined. And therefore, third, I would argue for organization studies to shake off the shackles of discipline.

The second and third points of critique are indicative of organization theory being highly disciplined, as they suggest closure around these two questions. In relation to the first—“in what way?” its knowledge projects and research endeavors are executed—there is a tendency to view organizations of all sorts as embodiments of one archetype, at the expense of an appreciation of their differentiation. And this tendency may be a root cause for organization theory not being able to “keep pace with changes in the size, complexity, and influence of modern organizations”. This tendency, as well as the “slavish adherence to scientific rationality”, are signs of organization theory being a discipline. They are answers, recurrent practices, prescriptions if you like, about the way in which organization theory is and should be advanced. Also the third point of critique, addressing the conservative tendencies in organization theory, suggests that there is a well-established mainstream: which topics to choose, how to write down the results of inquiry, how to relate to the classics, are all answers to the question “in what way?” organization theory is and should be advanced.

“By what right?” is organization theory legitimated? Apparently it is so by its supposed relevance for managers and contemporary managerial practices, as the reason for Suddaby et al. to ask for *new* organization theory is the failure of *existing* organization theory to exhibit such relevance. They say: “Perhaps the most glaring consequence of a lack of indigenous theory is the growing chasm between ... research and managerial practice” (p.237). Their normative grounding for organization theory seems to be managerial relevance. Organization theory would derive its legitimacy from speaking to managers and contemporary management practices. The assertion might also be based on the recurrent use of a theory's 'utility' as understood to imply managerial relevance (e.g. Hambrick, 2007; Van de Ven, 1989; Corley & Gioia, 2011) as its main if not sole thrust.

Thus, I would argue that organization theory *is* already highly disciplined, and that this may well be related to its alleged inability to “capture the empirical complexity of contemporary organizations” (p.237) and its alleged “conservatism” (p.239). I am not sure if I like the idea that

organization theory is or should be a ‘discipline’, as I tend to believe that closure around these two questions—“in what way?” are knowledge projects and research endeavors executed, and “by what right?” are they legitimated (cf. Butler, 2009)—favors incremental expansion of knowledge along the lines of mainstream research, reduces the possibility of critique and the questioning of *doxa*, and thereby significantly limits the possibility of theoretical innovation.

While being a discipline may have benefits to some fields of study, it also has drawbacks. [X] Here I focus on the drawbacks for organization theory in particular. First, organization theory, by becoming a ‘discipline’ or reinforcing its disciplinary character through the development of indigenous organization theory—and methods as well?—would create ‘blind spots’ of its own and merely substitutes these for the ‘blind spots’ associated with imported ancestor theories. But now, being a discipline—autonomous, independent from its multiple ancestor theories—the possibility is gone to discover, to critique and to challenge the blind spots associated with one ancestor theory from the different premises of another ancestor theory (cf. Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011). In this sense, there is reason not to curtail intellectual promiscuity.

Further, ‘organization’ as an object of study is too broad a category to be meaningfully disciplined, also in epistemological and ontological terms, and leave alone to be disciplined through the idea of managerial relevance. ‘Organization’ contains all sorts of tensions, ambiguities and oppositions. To name but a few: choice and constraint, agency and structure, subjectivity and objectivity as well as inter-subjectivity, individual and group as well as collective, change and stability, verb and noun, process and state, power and interest, domination and resistance, institution and network and hierarchy, etcetera, etcetera. Organization can hence be accessed in many different ways (e.g. Kilduff, Mehra & Dunn, 2011)—yet always to provide partial theories (Merton, 1968)—and it is precisely the possibility to compare, contrast, and challenge across different possible ways of accessing organization that makes the field interesting and vivid, and which may be a source of new theorizing.

Organization theory should hence be less of a discipline, and rather more of a domain, a field of study, with loose and permeable boundaries, with multiple sources of legitimacy and a plurality of methods, fluid and heterodox, autonomous and independent by its possibility to escape time and again from the hegemony of being one discipline.

The position paper could end at this point, neatly within the allotted page limits. However, I feel that the statement made so far is unfinished. If no further qualifications are made, we may end up with a level of fragmentation at which we can no longer speak of organization theory as a ‘field’, with its connotations of ‘community’, ‘common meaning system’ and ‘frequent and fateful interaction’ (Scott, 1995). Such fragmentation is related to the age-old debate about the epistemological and ontological premises underlying the study of organizations, as well as the

social sciences more broadly, and also to the second contribution of the special topic forum, “novel ideas about the process of theory construction”.

## ii—“novel ideas about the process of theory construction”

The contributions in the special topic forum offer novel ideas about theory development. When considering the set of papers, it strikes me that they tend to be of an operational, procedural kind—a ‘how to’, a ‘technical’ approach, guidelines of some sort—similar to previous occasions when theory development was debated. This is fine as it is. Guidance in these matters is always welcome, and all the more a greater variety in the guidance—we all have our heuristics and preferences when it comes to making sense of data and to differentiating our arguments from those already published. However, there is the implicit suggestion that one may freely choose among the alternatives offered. This implicit suggestion resonates with the risk of fragmentation just mentioned and is the starting point for my second reflection.

I derive this implicit suggestion in the neutral presentation of Figure 1, “Map of different Theorizing Approaches” (p.241). The prospective theorizer has apparently a choice of ‘theorizing within one literature’, or to do so ‘across multiple bodies of literature’. S/he may also choose to start ‘theorizing with implicit assumptions of the literature’, i.e. to challenge them, or to accept them and instead start ‘theorizing with explicit constructs of the literature’. Given these initial choices, there are further choices because some of the cells in the two-by-two contain more than one approach, and arguably, the cells can be further filled in with yet other approaches.

I also derive this implicit suggestion from how the Kilduff et al. paper is presented. Suddaby et al. argue that “Kilduff and colleagues propose that organizational theorists should avoid entrenched knowledge silos and should instead adopt a broader view of what we consider ‘science’ by promoting and combining various epistemologies—that is, the fundamental logics that govern the production of new knowledge” (p.241). I agree in principle with the need to ‘avoid entrenched knowledge silos’, but wish to add nuance.

Where have been all the debates about the appropriate epistemological and ontological ‘positions’ for organizational theorizing? Gone, apparently, the argument that the logical empiricist ‘position’—as well as related positions such as positivist, post-positivist and realist ‘positions’—are inappropriate for the “sciences of man” (Taylor, 1971). Gone the sharp distinction between ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’ and the argument that the latter is more appropriate to study ‘behavior-as-action’ (Von Wright, 1971). Gone the good old days of “paradigmatic controversies” and “contradictions” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The good news is, of course, that qualitative and interpretive research approaches have gained a respectable standing in our field (e.g. Bluhm et al., 2011). [4] Highly ranked journals increasingly publish qualitative research and *AMJ* even has appointed a dedicated editor for qualitative research—if I am well informed. Moreover, ‘mixed’ methods—ambiguous as the

term is—are on the rise. Hence, there is currently much more balance in the appreciation of organization theories from various epistemological and ontological traditions, than there was some time ago. But now, we run the risk of exaggeration in the opposite direction. Rather than scorching one another for being associated with a particular epistemic community—which was a bad thing, indeed—we risk ending up at a free lunch, where anything goes, and distinctions seem no longer to be relevant because we have become indifferent of one another, rather than having developed our tolerance in its meaning of critical engagement (Furedi, 2011).

We need not review the methods disputes in the social sciences in general, or in organization studies in particular. Suffice to say—whatever its historical roots and its subsequent development—that it can be reduced to a difference between 'explanation' insofar as this is meant to mean *causal* explanation and 'understanding' insofar as it emphasizes the importance of subjective meaning for the understanding of social action and structure (Von Wright, 1971; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Our position, here, is that the rift between the former, more positivist inclined researchers and the latter, who have a more interpretive inclination, is unproductive and up to a point false (Abbott, 2004). Their respective epistemological and ontological premises are different, but not necessarily opposites, just as knives and forks (and spoons, and chop sticks) are different in lending themselves for particular ways of enjoying a meal. But they are not mutually exclusive.

In relation to the existence of various and varying epistemological and ontological positions, notably between positivist and interpretive inclined researchers, theory—organization theory—can thus be and has been argued to be many things (Corvellec, 2013). [5] If one accepts that theory can be many things and that such diversity is a good thing for its advancement, or perhaps even for the advancement of society (Popper, 1966), it does not necessarily follow that exchange of ideas across epistemic communities may, or will, occur. There must be some common ground and recognition across epistemic communities. I propose to find these in the following ways.

First, common ground under the various epistemological and ontological positions that one can assume may be found in an interpretation of doing research as seeking answers to questions that are of interest to at least some scholarly community. [6] Answers that are of interest, pursued with rigor and imagination (Abbott, 2004), advance theory by complementing existing theory in major or minor ways, and perhaps even by refuting existing theory and proposing alternative theory (Davis, 1971; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). Interesting answers are 'different' in some meaningful way (Barley, 2006). The purpose, or the consequence, of finding such answers is to enhance the 'common pool of explicit knowledge' (Konrad, 2008) by making knowledge claims regarding some phenomenon, or puzzle, as it is usually formulated in a research question. Theory—understanding, explaining, interpreting, and similar expressions—is an account or an argument about such a phenomenon or puzzle—not in the sense of being part of a monologue,

but in the sense of being part of a conversation (Abbott, 2004)—which enhances or changes the common pool of explicit knowledge. To the extent that researchers from different epistemic communities share an interest in some puzzle or phenomenon, this may be a first element of common ground between them.

Second, and extending the previous, theory is both a simplification and an abstraction of the concrete, specific puzzle at hand, and thereby partial, incomplete, provisional. This is because—unlike in most of the natural sciences, at least not in the archetypal incarnation that is traditionally used as the model for positivist social sciences—we cannot assume that the object of study is independent from the observer, that it is stable and invariant under observation. The puzzles and phenomena that we study are in the social world, and that is complex, variant, ever changing. Human beings—individually and collectively—possess agency, empowered by knowledgeable and reflexivity (Giddens, 1984) albeit in different amounts, in various qualities, in varyingly so in different situations. Therefore, there is always the possibility that the researcher and the act of doing research in itself influence the social entity that is being studied, due to positionality on the part of the researcher and reflexivity on the part of the entity studied (e.g. Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). At best, we can therefore only hope to develop theory on puzzles and phenomena that are bounded in space and time, as well as by all sorts of assumptions, i.e. to develop theory of the middle range (Merton, 1968). We contend that precisely this situation is a second element to find and seek common ground across the various epistemic communities.

Hence, discussion, exchange and communication between different epistemic communities is possible to the extent that they share an interest in some puzzle or phenomenon, and that it is acknowledged that their answers are situational, bounded in space and time, limited due to underlying assumptions, and hence open to challenge and debate. I propose that it should be justified, and open to challenge, which epistemological and ontological positions are appropriate for a particular research project. In my view this is hardly ever done in organization theory, and because it is so rarely done there is little discussion, exchange and communication between the different epistemic communities.

The object of study in organization theory is widely varied, covering about everything between behavior-as-action—associated with *Verstehen*, ‘understanding’, the ‘sciences of man’—and behavior-as-non-action (as well as naturally occurring phenomena)—associated with causal explanation and *Erklärung*. The distinction may seem to be clear cut, but it is not. Not all behavior is behavior-as-action, and the boundaries between behavior-as-action and behavior-as-non-action are up to a point fluid and open to interpretation, as “there are many intermediate, hybrid, or ambiguous cases” (Weber, 1968: 24). The point is not that “future research may be able to discover non-interpretable uniformities underlying what has appeared to be specifically

meaningful [behavior-as-]action, though little has been accomplished in this direction thus far” (Weber, 1968: 7-8), as this would reduce action to unexplained variance under invariant and universal natural laws. It would render action-as-behavior into action-as-non-behavior. The point is that “behavior which is intentional under one description of it [behavior-as-action], need not be intentional under another. It thus makes a difference to the explanation of a given item of behavior how it is described, *i.e.* understood as being an action” (Von Wright, 1971: 26. He builds on Anscombe’s book *Intention*, published in 1952).

For example, there are “processes and phenomena which are devoid of subjective meaning, in the role of stimuli, results, favoring or hindering circumstances”, which “cannot be related to intended purposes” (Weber, 1968:7). Such ‘processes and phenomena’ may be relevant to organization theory. One might, for example, ask how individuals, groups, collectives assign meaning, interpret, integrate such ‘processes and phenomena’ into their lives, or one might ask how and what sort of response individuals, groups, collectives tend to espouse when such ‘processes and phenomena’ occur or are present. Either choice can be appropriate and legitimate, but needs to be justified for the research project at hand, because up to a point it is a matter of interpretation or assumption—which may work better or less well for explanation—as to whether behavior is better understood as action or as non-action.

I would argue that advancing knowledge in organization theory is helped by discussion, exchange and communication between different epistemic communities—and that we see too little of this. The possibility for productive discussion, exchange and communication depends on the recognition of a common ground between them, as well on the recognition that some behavior can be meaningfully interpreted as action and as non-action. The plausibility of explanation of some sort—interpretation, causality, understanding—crucially depends on careful justification which sort of epistemology and ontology might be appropriate. The ‘pure type/ideal type’ positivist researcher starts from the premise that the object of its study is stable over time and space, that it is universal. Well, as far as we are dealing with human behavior in a social context, it needs to be shown, or at least be made plausible, to what extent it actually can be interpreted as non-action. The ‘pure type/ideal type’ interpretive researcher, by contrast, starts from the premise that the object of study is not stable over time and space, that it is not universal but unique, and that it is only accessible through understanding of subjective meaning. For this researcher the challenge is to show why and how human behavior in a social context can be interpreted as action.

#### Notes

[1] My reasons for doing so are personal. They relate to my attempts to make sense of organization theories as they vary in their epistemological and ontological bases. For a long period of time I had little reason to engage with these issues but that has recently changed. I can no longer evade the issues when I will be responsible for editorial decision making to a far greater extent than previously. Against this background, there is a non-



negligible risk that whatever it is that I may have to offer as reflections is ill-grounded in the literature, naive, or of little interest—or worse, all three at the same time—but it is a risk that I need to take. I appreciate a conversation—this one—as a setting where one may take such risks, as I understand the engagement with the other in a conversation to be one of friendly exchange.

- [2] Suddaby et al. (2011) alternately use ‘organization’ and ‘management’ theory. I understand ‘organization theory’ and ‘management theory’ to refer to the same body of literature, as it is often referred to as ‘management and organization theory’ (MOT), ‘organization and management theory’ (OMT), or ‘management and organization studies’ (MOS). For ease of reading, I leave out the word ‘management’ if ‘organization’ can be read.
- [3] The editorial to a special topic forum needs to make a point in which the assembled papers are highlighted and commended. And arguably, Suddaby et al. wish to be provocative. There should be some exaggeration.
- [X] In areas of medicine and the natural sciences, where the object of study is relatively invariant over space and time, adherence to disciplinary modes of research can produce significant advances. We might, however, elaborate on Kuhn and Lakatos, perhaps even Feyerabend, to point out how disciplinary research has its limits.
- [4] Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2012) wrote a text book on interpretive research designs, because they find that there is insufficient understanding and appreciation of interpretive research among students, those deciding on research grants, and perhaps reviewers and editors as well.
- [5] Another source of variety is related to researchers pursuing different purposes in developing or using theory, including prescription based on moral or instrumental considerations (de Bakker, Groenewegen & den Hond, 2005), emancipation (Habermas, 1972; action research), and critique (critical management research), in addition to the academically more mainstream purposes of seeking and enhancing explanation and understanding.
- [6] Or practitioners, policy makers, decision makers, managers, workers, etcetera. We believe that our argument does not change in a fundamental way if we consider all the potential parties that may have an interest, or for whose interest, research might be done.

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