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**Theory as method. Introduction to supertheoretical options
for organization and management research**

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Theory as method. Introduction to supertheoretical options for organization and management research

Abstract:

Purpose: This article is devoted to conditions and examples of how theories may be applied as methods in the fields of management research and organization studies.

Design/methodology/approach: An introduction to minimum requirements for a successful refunctionalization of theory as method as well as to nine contributions to a special issue of the Journal of Organizational Change Management on “Theory as method” is provided.

Findings: The review of these nine cases suggests that the use of theories as methods is not necessarily harmful for the former, and particularly not for the more robust among them.

Originality/Value: This article sheds new light on the value of theoretical monism or loyalty and calls for a reassessment of the relative value of expertise in a specific research field, method, and or theory.

Keywords: Functionalism, functionalization, theoretical monism, theory method.

Introduction

As management and organization researchers, we have a vital interest in coherent interactions between our theories and methods. Whereas some theories, such as actor-network theory, game theory, or grounded theory, are casually referred to as research methods (Alcadipani and Hassard, 2010; Fendt and Sachs, 2008; Godfrey and Hill, 1995; Sayes, 2014; Wolfswinkel et al., 2013), the idea that any theory may be considered as methods is unpopular. The dominant view is that of a separation.

As with other dualisms, the mere existence of two sides suggests side-taking. Since the undisputed decline of Parsons-type grand theories, the balance of power between theory and

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3 method has clearly tilted in favour of the latter. Empiricist self-definitions of science and
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5 research prevail. Even those who disagree with abuses of theories as literal pretexts to *explain*
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7 the world typically consider theories as tools to *change* it. In either context, the quality of
8
9 theories is measured against non-theoretical criteria, and theories therefore do not come off
10
11 well. This auxiliarization of theory can be carried to the point where methods appear as
12
13 “workable substitutes” for theories and where “theory-less” disciplines, such as management
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15 history (Durepos and Mills, 2012; Booth and Rowlinson, 2006), “may have an edge on those
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17 with strong theory” (Esping-Andersen, 2000, p. 60; 76). As a consequence of what may also
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19 be branded as theoretical agility or pluralism, not least critical management scholars have early
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21 observed a commodification of theory: “Shopping at Theory, Culture and Society and wearing
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23 Ulrich Beck or Michel Serres’ latest collection. And sometimes we insist that others join in
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25 too, asking them what their favourite Theory is (...). Who is most relevant is most relevant in
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27 talking aim at corporate capitalism—Marx, Althusser or Deleuze?” (Parker, 2002, p. 183). The
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29 proposed treatment for this diagnosis, however, paradoxically is again theory-abstinence: *No*
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31 *theory. No surprise* then “that almost all influential theories within” management and
32
33 organization theory “have been brought in from the outside, not developed within”
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35 management and organization theory (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013, p. 130).

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38 On the other side of the demarcation line, anti-theorism has for long now been countered by
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40 equally eloquent campaigns “against method” (Morgan, 1983). Here the idea is it is not theories
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42 (Pick, 2017) but methods that cage rather than capture the realities of their research fields
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44 because methods tend to preserve older, and not better, theories (Feyerabend, 1970). Perhaps
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46 this is summed up well by Law (2004), who refers to “After Method”, and by Magnusson and
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48 Szijarto (2013) who liken methodology to ideology. Much of this problematic is captured by
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50 debate around the theory-method character of Actor-Network Theory (Law and Hassard,
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52 1999).
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3 Both radical positions have ever since been accused of anti-scientism and provoked serious
4 anti-anti-science backlashes (Bristow & Robinson, 2018), various attempts at triangulation
5 (Cox & Hassard, 2005), and countless forms of retreats to the comfort zones between the
6 extremes. Against this backdrop, the true challenge might be not to choose between but rather
7 develop scientific approaches that can accomodate both concerns. Needless to say that these
8 approaches are particularly relevant whenever we cannot simply make a singular claim, and
9 then step outside society and simply messure whether this claim is true or not.
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19 The importance of the above considerations, controversies, commitments, and compromises
20 notwithstanding, it is hence noteworthy that there has always been a minority of scholars who
21 think that the categorical separation of theory and method is a category mistake (Elias, 1978;
22 Luhmann, 2017) not only because the “separation of method from theory can potentially lead
23 to the misuse of the technique, a misinterpretation of the results, or simply the creation of a
24 mutated version” (Bourne and Jankowicz, 2018, 127) of the original theory. Rather, true to this
25 camp, theories necessarily act as methodologies as soon as they apply their own distinctions or
26 categories not only to their research objects, but also to themselves. As such self-referential
27 theories indicate how their observations—including their self-observations—come about, these
28 observations can be replicated using these theories, which consequently constitute “a
29 knowledge of the way to knowledge” as which Hjorth and Reay (2018, 11) have recently
30 defined “method/ology”. The quality of such reflexive theory-methods would then be not in
31 their robustness against falsification or the richness of the data they are grounded on. Neither
32 would it be in the number of problems solved by or for these theories. Rather, these theory-
33 methods would need to be measured against the scales and scopes of scientific problems they
34 allow to generate (Merton, 1959).
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3 This special issue of the Journal of Organizational Change Management is therefore devoted
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5 to conditions and examples of how theories may safely be applied as methods in the fields of
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7 management research and organization studies.
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10 The subsequent section provides a brief outline of the minimum requirements for a successful
11
12 refunctionalization of theory as method. Introductions to nine use cases of theories as methods,
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14 in the form of nine contributions to this special issue, and a concluding section follow suit.
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19 **Theories as methods: Interplay and function**

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21 Didactical reasons for the categorial separation of theory and method notwithstanding, there
22
23 has been longstanding interest for the various interplays between theory and method (see, e.g.,
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25 van Maanen et al., 2007).
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28 Foundational research in this context was undertaken by Robert King Merton (1968a, 42f),
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30 who held that for any idea to be of theoretical value, it must also generate rather than just solve
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32 distinctive problems for the scientific discourse at stake. In so doing, Merton clearly codified
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34 theories by their capacity to generate follow-up questions pertaining to the generalizability,
35
36 transferability, or measurability of the proposed arguments or explanations. Theories therefore
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38 imply reference to empirical research and thus also appear as methods for the creation of
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40 research problems that may be resolved by research methods of another type. Against this
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42 backdrop, Merton (1968b, 229) observes that
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49 “There is a growing interplay between theory, which states the case for the significance of certain variables;
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51 methodology, which works out the logic of empirical inquiry involving these variables; and technique, which
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53 develops the tools and procedures for measuring the variables.”
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3 As tight as it may be, though, an interplay is not yet an equivalent of the functional equivalence
4 implied in the claim of “theory as method”. But what if a theory were universal enough to
5 generate this interplay by itself?
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10 Merton (1968a, 68), however, would have rejected such attempts at monistic theoretical
11 conquests of methodological terrain:
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17 “Total sociological systems of theory—such as Marx's historical materialism, Parsons' theory of social systems
18 and Sorokin's integral sociology—represent general theoretical orientations rather than the rigorous and tightknit
19 systems envisaged in the search for a ‘unified theory’ in physics.”
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25 Merton was later joined in his rejection of *Parsonian-type* grand theories by another seminal
26 functionalist, although for different reasons. Niklas Luhmann (2012, p. 4f) rejects Parsons’
27 social theory because
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34 “It fails to answer the question of cognitive self-implication (...). Parsons consequently does not himself occur in
35 any of the many boxes of his own theory. And this is ultimately why the theory cannot distinguish systematically
36 between social system and society; it only offers impressionistic, more or less feuilletonistic views of modern
37 society.”
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44 Parsons’ general theoretical orientation and appetite for grand theory, however, is shared by
45 Luhmann (1995, XLVIII), who certainly reassures his readers that his own theory “claims
46 neither to reflect the complete reality of its object, nor to exhaust all the possibilities of knowing
47 its object. But it does claim universality for its grasp of its object in the sense that it deals with
48 everything social and not just sections”. This combination of universal claim and aspiration at
49 self-implication, however, implies that his theory applies to itself: “Theories that claim
50 universality are easily recognized by the fact that they appear as their own object” (id.). The
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3 idea of such universalistic “supertheories” (ibid, 6), therefore, implies that these theories must
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5 work as methods of self-observation, too. Consequently, we find that a theory turns into a
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7 method as soon as it is capable to apply its own mode of observation not only to its object of
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9 observation, but also to itself, or more precisely: a theory becomes a research method as soon
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11 as it can treat itself as an object of observation and, by this virtue, is able to indicate how its
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13 own observations are generated and can be replicated. If a theory has developed this capability,
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15 however, then what is true for its self-referential observations must be true for its hetero-
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17 referential observations either.
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21 As Luhmann’s (1995, 6) “systems theory is a particularly impressive supertheory”, it
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23 particularly recommends itself to explorations of applications of theories as methods.
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25 Moreover, there is an apparent congruence between the functionalist approaches of Luhmann
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27 or Merton on the one hand and the general idea of functionalization in the sense of explorations
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29 of additional purposes on the other hand.
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33 There is hence little surprise that this special issue of the Journal of Organizational Change
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35 Management on “Theory as method. Methodological options for organization and management
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37 research” unites a total of five use cases (Neisig, 2020; Roth, 2021; Sakai, 2020; Valentinov
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39 and Hajdu, 2019; van Assche et al., 2021) of social systems theory as method.
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43 As mentioned earlier, however, Luhmann’s supertheory of social systems claims universality
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45 rather than exclusivity or a monopoly for its grasp of the social world. Consequently, in this
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47 special issue, we also find examples of other theories turned method. These examples include
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49 Bourdieu’s social theory (van Hilten, 2019), “bracketing” as a phenomenological theory
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51 (Dörfler and Stierand, 2020), and institutional work theory (Gidley, 2020). Last not least, one
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53 article is devoted to the role of abduction in the self-transformation of theories in the eyes of
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55 change (Shadnam, 2019).
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Nine cases for theory as method

This special issue includes a number of articles that were presented in the *Management and Organization Theory* track that appeared as part of the *Research Methods and Research Practice (RM&RP)* Strategic Interest Group (SIG)'s domain at the European Academy of Management in Lisbon, Portugal, in June 2019. The idea of practice was included in the *RM&RP* SIG name as an acknowledgement that research is not a neutral activity but—as has been recognised by others in the management and organizational disciplines and beyond (e.g., Bedian, 2004; Collins and Pinch, 1982; 1993; Wilson, 1996)—a social practice that is shaped by historic traditions, prevailing belief systems and social and disciplinary conventions. There have been many important social theorists, both from Europe and elsewhere, that have influenced the development of management thought in its various sub-disciplines. An objective of the *Management and Organization Theory* track was to promote reflection on, and revision of, those ideas to ensure that their relevance was protected in the current social and historic context. Thus, a number of articles in this special issue draw inspiration from a broad scope of disciplines—such as economics, sociology, management and organization studies, or political sciences—and paradigms, such as social systems theory, structuralism, institutionalism, phenomenology, or pragmatism.

In their article “Integrating instrumental and normative stakeholder theories: a systems theory approach”, *Vladislav Valentinov and Anna Hajdu (2019)* demonstrate how social systems theory in the tradition of Niklas Luhmann (1989, 1995) can be instrumental in navigating the tensions between the instrumental and normative branches of stakeholder theory. To this end, the authors recode the classical conflict between the two approaches into the binary theory-language of social systems theory. As a result of the exercise, the authors show that both variants of classical stakeholder theory fail to fully account for the polycontextural nature of the modern, functionally differentiated society. Whereas instrumental stakeholder theory

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3 reduces stakeholder relationships to a strategy of long-term profit maximization, normative
4 stakeholder theory holds that there is a moral obligation to accommodate stakeholder
5 expectations. Thus, the divergent lines of argument appear as orthogonal perspectives within
6 the binary architecture of social systems theory. The instrumental argument insists on the
7 ultimate prevalence of the economic code (payment/non-payment) and thus on an
8 overidentification of an organization (the firm) with one function system (the economy). The
9 normative argument is then drawn in moral rather than economic code as it disapproves the
10 economic reductionism inherent in the former argument. Yet, the normative perspective is
11 reductionist, too, insofar as it overidentifies society with its political system and then fails to
12 systematically reflect whether and when a firm's corporate social responsibility activities
13 should be oriented mainly to political and not to, e.g., religious, scientific, or educational
14 stakeholders (Roth et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, Valentinov and Hajdu call for more
15 awareness among managers and researchers that firms are not segments of the economic
16 system, but rather specific forms of multifunctional organizations in which the codes of all
17 function systems can be managed without morally predetermined default prevalence. As a
18 result, both instrumental and normative stakeholder approaches appear not as competing
19 solutions to one and the same type of problem, but rather as coordinate solutions to different
20 types of decision problems.

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45 *Steffen Roth's (2021) article "Draw your organization! A solution-focused theory-method for*
46 *business school challenges and change"* starts from the assumption that a comprehensive
47 knowledge of popular criticisms and problems of business schools is not required for workable
48 solutions to appear. In drawing on George Spencer Brown (1979), Roth outlines a theory
49 method based on the distinction between true and false distinctions that facilitates the shift
50 from a problem- to a solution-focus. He then shows how this approach is instrumental for the
51 further development of established management tools as well as for research-based teaching in
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3 a diverse range of educational settings. The latter application is exemplified by two classroom
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5 exercises illustrating that business students retain reductionist concepts of management and
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7 organization despite the paradigmatic plurality of our disciplines. Roth concludes that his
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9 theory method acts as a two-way mirror in which the student caricatures of our core concepts
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11 appear as reflections of our disciplines' traditional "economy and society" focus and a
12
13 corresponding overestimation of economic and political problems. Against this backdrop, Roth
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15 promotes a smart specialization strategy, in the context of which innovative business schools
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17 engage in systematic explorations of both old solutions and new problems associated with the
18
19 non-economic and non-political aspects of management and organization.
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24 *Kristof van Assche, Raoul Beunen, Monika Gruezmacher, Martijn Duineveld, Leith Deacon,*
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26 *Robert Summers, Lars Hallstrom and Kevin Jones (2021)* address the usefulness of methods
27
28 as bridging devices. The most important bridging devices in the context of this special issue
29
30 are those that bridge empirics to theory and theory to praxis, although Assche et al. also view
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32 methods as bridging inter alia analysis to strategy, the past to the future, one discipline to
33
34 another discipline and one narrative to another narrative. By highlighting how different forms
35
36 of logic and reasoning may be considered as meta-methods, van Assche et al. (2021) show how
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38 the development of a new theory can inform the development of new technical methods. In this
39
40 case, the theory was Evolutionary Governance Theory, and the particular methods were the
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42 analysis techniques of "path" and "context mapping". Notably, these methods did not only
43
44 provide a bridge between the theory being used and the empirical evidence that was being
45
46 gathered, but they may also be seen as providing a bridge between different disciplines as van
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48 Assche et al (2021) were applying "path" and "context mapping" to the field of Governance
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50 when they had previously been used in the cognate areas of public policy, public
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52 administration, planning and economic development.
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3 *Kosuke Sakai (2020)* zeroes in on how the theory of the functional differentiation of society
4 can be useful in historical studies. In his paper, the author attempts to build a new method,
5 based on Luhmann's semantic analysis, and adapted to a study of modern insurance in the
6 nineteenth century Germany. The applicability of Sakai's approach to historical-comparative
7 studies is well explained, and amounts to a novel contribution to social studies methods,
8 offering a reformulation of a semantic study as a middle-range theory.
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17 *Margit Neisig (2020)* draws on Luhmann's work to "investigate a position for engaged
18 scholarship bridging the gulf between theorizing and practice using Design Thinking." To that
19 end, Neisig seeks to combine Luhmann's social systems theory with the concept of engaged
20 scholarship based on Design Thinking." The paper goes on to illustrate how "such a research
21 position "might be applied to problems of polycentric networks as a theoretical/methodological
22 case." The article begins by laying out an account of a "Luhmannian way of understanding the
23 position of science in society: and various positions on the rigor-relevance gap. This is followed
24 by an outline of "polycentric networks and their collaborative system and shared semantic
25 reservoir." Third, Neisig discusses engaged scholarship with the purpose of assisting the
26 emergence of a shared semantic reservoir for a polycentric network" and how ...they may play
27 out in a Luhmannian perspective with contributions from Design Thinking." In conclusion,
28 Neisig contends that "it is conceptually possible to construct a role for engaged scholarship
29 compatible with social systems theory.
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47 *Viktor Dörfler and Marc Stierand's (2021)* article provides insights into the usefulness of the
48 theoretical concept of bracketing and its application as a method which they illustrate by
49 reference to empirical findings from two different studies of extraordinary achievers. Working
50 within a phenomenological standpoint informed from reading the work of Husserl in its original
51 German composition, Dörfler and Stierand (2021) show how – in the course of conducting
52 research – the concept of bracketing can help to make sense of the subjective ways of knowing
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3 and the subjective elements in what is known. Their aim in doing this is not to bracket out the
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5 subjective in pursuit of production of an impossible objective understanding, but instead to
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7 provide a more comprehensive appreciation of the different dimensions of both the subjective
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9 experience of researching and the subjectivity in the information that is composed. This
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11 approach utilizes researchers' pre-understandings as a source of insight rather than as
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13 something that is considered unhelpful and in need of elimination. Dörfler and Stierand
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15 describe the process of their application of the concept of bracketing to studies of Nobel Prize
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17 winners and Michelin Starred chefs. Their process entails progressing through cycles of
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19 reflexive thinking individually to produce an appreciation of how one's subjectivity may have
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21 influenced the research process and what is known and then working with a collaborator who
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23 has not been involved in the collection of the empirical evidence. The collaborator can provide
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25 a new challenge to the assumptions of the initial researcher until both participants obtain a
26
27 transpersonal understanding of the evidence.
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33 The central focus of *Adriana van Hilten's* (2019) article "A theory of (research) practice makes
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35 sense in sensemaking. Applying Bourdieu's critical social theory to the study of sensemaking
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37 change" is to provide an alternative theoretical approach to extant notions of sensemaking,
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39 specifically Weickian (e.g., Weick, 1996) and Critical Sensemaking (e.g., Helms Mills,
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41 Thurlow, and Mills, 2010) approaches. To that end, the author draws on the work of Bourdieu's
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43 critical social theory to propose a new theory of sensemaking. Through a lengthy critique, van
44
45 Hilten argues that extant sensemaking theory usefully provides "a framework to understanding
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47 how people make sense of things but leaves researchers with methodological choices requiring
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49 apriori decisions of how the theory is to be understood and used." Van Hilten argues that extant
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51 sensemaking accounts "do not provide an avenue to predict or anticipate outcome." She
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53 contends that while sensemaking "is commonly used as the basis for understanding "how"
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55 people make sense of situations, it deals with the process, but not the theory of how sense is
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3 made.” Van Hilten goes on to contend that a “more explicit conceptualization of the
4
5 sensemaking process itself is vital for theorizing how power influences the understandings that
6
7 actors create.” From this positioning, van Hilten goes on to suggest that Bourdieu’s critical
8
9 social theory provides an existing alternative sensemaking approach that incorporates power,
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11 accommodates agency, allows for individual as well as collective sensemaking, retrospective
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13 and perspective sensemaking: This alterative provides a theory of sensemaking (why people
14
15 make sense as they do), and, at the same time, provides the basis for methodology and
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17 analysis.” Van Hilten provides an exploration of the potential of a Bordieuan sensemaking
18
19 approach through a case study of an IT organization. Here she applies key Bourdieusian
20
21 concepts (e.g., habitus, doxa, field and capital) to a series of interviews and documents to reveal
22
23 the potential of a “Bourdiesian sensemaking” approach.
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29 *Devon Gidley’s (2020)* paper continues the methodological explorations. He proposes a new
30
31 approach to organizational studies through intentional breaches of institutional order. In what
32
33 he calls a “researcher initiated institutional disruption (RIID)”, he suggests that it is through
34
35 breaks in the organizational routine and the expected conduct that the institutional features
36
37 emerge the most. While coming with some obvious risks and ethical considerations, RIID is
38
39 an interesting way of testing the institutional boundaries and provoking the emergence of rules.
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43 *Masoud Shadnam (2021)* provides a paper about concepts that – in the context of this special
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45 issue – may be considered as methods of theorising in the management and organization
46
47 disciplines. The paper highlights a need to understand the role that organizational shifts may
48
49 play in the development of new theories of organization. By drawing on Pierce’s classification
50
51 of three forms of logical reasoning – of deduction, induction and abduction – Shadnam puts
52
53 forward three models for developing new theories in organizational research. The first, which
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55 Shadnam describes as “armchair theorizing” because it is not related to empirical reality in any
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57 meaningful way, is reflective of the principles of deduction of inferring new propositions or
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3 theories from existing theories. The second which Shadnam describes as “present capturing”
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5 is linked to inductive reasoning because its objective is to study external reality as a means to
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7 composing a new theory. Shadnam suggests that both of these two approaches have been
8
9 popular amongst writers in the organizational field, but he highlights that there is a third
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11 possibility that remains under-exploited. He calls this third approach “change sensitizing” and
12
13 it is linked to abductive reasoning as it involves an iterative relationship between sensitivity to
14
15 changes in organizations and consideration of the implications of such changes for theories of
16
17 organization. Shadnam then provides guidance in the form of four stages for operationalising
18
19 a “change sensitizing” approach. These stages are: identifying an aspect of organizational life
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21 that has been subject to serious change; experimenting with existing theories to explore their
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23 potential to explain that change; choosing one of the theories that has key tenets that have been
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25 challenged by the serious change to organizational life being investigated; and transforming
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27 that theory into a new theory of organization by modifications that can accommodate the
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29 organizational shift.
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38 **Conclusions**

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40 One important realization from all contributions to this special issue is that certain types of
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42 theory may be used as methods. Another, probably less obvious, finding is that
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44 functionalization does not necessarily change its object. Whereas the repurposing of a glass
45
46 bottle as a hammer may have dramatic consequences for the bottle, the same is not true for a
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48 hammer turned weapon. In the social world, the traces of functionalization are even less
49
50 tangible, prominent witness the Fountain by Marcel Duchamp. The fact that Duchamp decided
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52 in 1917 to refunctionalize a porcelain urinal and turn it into the now world-famous piece of art
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54 had little impact on the urinal’s original functionality. This example suggests that the use of
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3 theories as methods is not necessarily harmful for the former either and particularly not for the
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5 more robust ones.
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8 In the light of the contributions to this special issue, it is also worthy to review the following
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10 oddity: It is perfectly acceptable for researchers to devote the lion's share of their attention to
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12 one specific research field (international management, finance, etc.) or method (structural
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14 equations, digital hermeneutics, etc.). Whereas researchers who do so are likely to be
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16 considered experts in their field or method at some point of their career, however, there is a
17
18 strong inclination to problematize the "theoretical monism" of scholars whose career is or has
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20 been devoted to the design or enhancement of *one* specific theory. Against this backdrop, the
21
22 remarkable capacity of supertheories to act as both theory and method not only sheds new light
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24 the role and value of "theoretical fidelity", but also calls for a reassessment of both the general
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26 relationship between and the relative value of expertise in a specific theory, method, and
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28 research field or topic.
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