




Must I Grow a Pair of Balls to Theorize about Theory in Organization and Management Studies?

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Abstract

This essay is a provocation to debate. I argue that work in organization and management studies addressing how to theorize and construct ‘good’ theory is inherently masculinized and embraces a limited pluralism that ignores alternative, reflexive and more human ways of theorizing. As I will illustrate, most of the articles on the topic of theorizing about theory are written by men, and espouse forms of theorizing that are based on a masculinized rationality that privileges abstraction, a logic of objectivity and proceduralization. And while journal editors espouse theoretical pluralism, we are often exhorted to develop ‘theoretical balls’ by conforming to limited definitions of theory that privilege particular ways of knowing and theorizing which are considered imperative to getting published. I argue that there are other equally compelling ways of ‘theorizing’ that focus on who we are as human beings and how we experience self, life and work. I begin with a critique of the literature on theorizing theory, moving on to argue that this currently limits theorizing more humanly and imaginatively, due to ontological blindness, epistemological defensiveness, hegemonic masculinity and myopic self-referentiality. Finally, I offer alternative ways of theorizing and interpreting theory from a more human and reflexive perspective.

Keywords

imagination, pluralism, qualitative research, reflexivity, theorizing

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Introduction

In our time, human beings have become somehow lost to themselves: in an age in which ‘science is our passion’ we have become distanced from the understanding of ourselves and the world which is, in some way, genuinely closest to us.

(Simon Glendinning, 2007, p. 11)

As Joep Cornelissen, Markus A. Höllerer and David Seidl (2021) note, theory is at the core of scholarship and certain views of theory dominate and marginalize others. I agree. The theme of my essay builds on this point, arguing that despite intentions and efforts to broaden theorizing in organization and management studies (OMS), particular definitions of ‘good’ theory and ways of theorizing continue to be privileged and to perpetuate the silencing of alternative and more diverse voices. I argue that the root of the problem is that theorizing about theory is inherently masculinized. Most of the articles on the topic are written by men and espouse forms of theorizing based on a masculinized rationality characterized by abstraction, proceduralization and disciplinization – forms of theorizing seen as imperative to getting published and by implication being promoted. Those of us interested in different ways of theorizing are exhorted to conform by (metaphorically) ‘growing theoretical balls’ – hence my title.

In this essay, I’m also responding to Leanne Cutcher, Cynthia Hardy, Kathleen Riach and Robyn Thomas’s (2020) call to engage in reflexive theorizing – and I add . . . not just theorizing more reflexively but *being more reflexive about our own ways of theorizing* because there is a lack of reflexivity around the enactment of these privileging and disciplining practices and how they are situated in particular ontologies and epistemologies. In reading the literature around the topic of theorizing about theory in OMS, I became increasingly frustrated by calls to be imaginative and open to the mystery, to embrace complexity, and celebrate the vibrancy of organization theory, after all, we have institutional theories, categorization, network theories,¹ and

Foucault . . . What else do we need? And this is reflected in the disciplining practices and micro-aggressions of influential gatekeepers and reviewers who require authors to theorize and write in ways with which they are familiar.

I’m not an ingénue, I’ve been dealing with this situation for 25 years and worry about what’s happening to early career researchers who feel pressured to research, theorize and write in particular ways. Despite claims by journal editors exhorting pluralism, I argue that it’s a limited pluralism, because what is seen to be good theory has to conform to ‘mal-estream’ social science (Mary O’Brien, 1981). This has meant, as Simon Glendinning so aptly notes in the quote above, that we have become lost to ourselves – to what it means to be human.

So, I’m left with the question: *Despite all this rhetoric around pluralism, why are mainstream/malestream ways of theorizing still privileged over more human ways of theorizing?* Why are papers incorporating alternative forms of rigorous research and interesting perspectives still viewed by others as not having ‘theoretical balls’ because they don’t conform to normalized ways of theorizing and writing? My purpose therefore in this essay is to confront the ongoing issues around the masculinized, abstract and hegemonic nature of theorizing about theory in OMS.

I begin with a critique, focusing specifically on articles that address theorizing about theory – articles that define the characteristics of ‘good’ theory, how theorizing should be done and therefore evaluated. This overview is important in understanding how particular forms of theory and theorizing became institutionalized and privileged. I then discuss potential reasons why efforts to make the field more open have had limited impact. Finally, I re-imagine a more human OMS by offering alternative ways of theorizing: alternatives I believe *are* important to the vibrancy and relevance of organization theory because they offer ideas that resonate and provoke us to understand ourselves and our lived experience in different ways.

Theorizing about Theory: Masculinized Rationality

The dangerous man [sic] is the one who has only one idea, because then he'll fight and die for it. (Francis Crick, molecular biologist²)

To clarify an important distinction, *theory* is the end product of *theorizing*, therefore how theory is defined influences what is viewed as acceptable theorizing – an activity intrinsic to our research. I argue that theorizing about theory in OMS continues to be rooted in an ideology of masculinized rationality, based on taken-for-granted masculinized values and language, and mainly done by men. To emphasize my point, I include the first names of authors throughout. Masculinized rationality is a form of social and academic control, creating an imperative that perpetuates the logic of abstraction through an emphasis on objectivity, proceduralization and the disciplinization of knowledge. It's a form of 'rationality' that shuts out alternatives – alternatives that embrace more human, fluid and open forms of theorizing situated in issues that are 'genuinely closest to us' (Glendinning, 2007).

Critiques of masculinized rationality and its impact on knowledge have been addressed for many years in feminist philosophy and epistemology (e.g. Lorraine Code, 1991; Sandra Harding, 1982). It has a long *history* traced back to the work of Aristotle, Augustine and seventeenth-century philosophers such as Descartes who espoused the 'pure light' of universal reason from which the emotional, sensuous, intuitive and imaginative are excluded (see Genevieve Lloyd, 2015, for an overview). Masculinized rationality embodies 'attributes such as being strong, mechanical, assertive, objective, and controlled' (Laura Bierema, 2009, p. 69) – attributes which are standardized in research practices. Although the gendered nature of early organization theory is acknowledged (see Anne Ross-Smith & Martin Kornberger, 2004), we rarely turn the mirror on ourselves to examine how masculinized rationality underpins theorizing about theory in OMS.

As I will illustrate, masculinized values and language are firmly embedded in work around theorizing about theory and therefore influence what is considered 'good' (i.e. legitimate, acceptable, publishable) theory by informing current expectations of journal editors and reviewers in significant ways.

Abstraction: 'Strong' theory based on a logic of objectivity and causality

Over the years, a number of journal special issues, editorials and articles have proposed protocols for building, developing and evaluating the quality of theory. Implicit is the assumption that 'good' theory is an abstraction of essential commonalities that can be generalized across contexts. This is evident in the emergence of a hierarchical classification of theories based on masculinized language differentiating between weak, middle-range and strong theories. *Weak* theories are viewed as basically descriptive with no abstraction (i.e. not good). *Middle-range* theories (Robert Merton, 1949/1968) lie between abstract theories of social systems and descriptions of particulars that incorporate some form of abstraction allowing propositions to be developed and tested (i.e. seen as a bit of a compromise). *Strong* theory answers questions of why events, actions, structures and so on occur and theorizing is the work of identifying causal relationships, underlying processes, systematic reasons for occurrences, expressed in 'convincing and logically interconnected arguments' (Robert Sutton & Barry Staw, 1995, p.278) (i.e. the best). Abstraction or strategic reduction (Paul DiMaggio, 1995) is therefore essential to 'strong' theory. Additionally, Sutton and Staw clarify what theory is not: not a list of references; not data (which just describes and doesn't explain patterns); not diagrams and figures (which are just 'stage props'); and not lists of variables, constructs, or hypotheses (which do not explain how and why).

Articles addressing what makes a strong theoretical contribution often hold abstraction at the core, which means theorizing by

identifying properties, measuring dependent and independent variables, and conducting a causal analysis (Samuel Bacharach, 1989; Lawrence Mohr, 1982). Former *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) editor David Whetten (1989, p.493) stated that ‘theoretical insights come from demonstrating how the addition of a new variable significantly alters our understanding of the phenomena by reorganizing our causal maps’. From this perspective, subjective experience is transformed into ‘objective’ knowledge, as seen, for example, in conventional research in organizational behaviour and leadership where propositions are constructed and predictions made. Theoretical abstraction continues to be reinforced through editorials such as that of former AMR editor Roy Suddaby, which stated that a key factor in determining whether an article is accepted is building *strong* theory through construct clarity, where a construct is a conceptual abstraction and clarity relates to ‘*robust categories that distill phenomena into sharp distinctions that are comprehensible to a community of researchers*’ (2010, p. 346, my italics).

Over the last 30 years, process scholars have argued the need to move away from generalized abstractions, arguing instead that because organizations constantly evolve over time and in different ways, we therefore we need to explain why something occurs within an organizational context (Anne Langley, 1999, 2007; Brian Pentland, 1999; Haridimos Tsoukas & Robert Chia, 2002). However, even within process theorizing, objectivism and masculinized language are still present because process theories ‘*penetrate the logic* behind observed temporal progressions [. . .] identify the *generative mechanisms* that *cause* observed events to happen in the real world, and the particular circumstances or *contingencies* when these *causal mechanisms* operate’ (Andrew Van de Ven & Marshall Poole, 2005, p.1385, my italics). Practice theories also foreground explanations of human activity within contexts, and although eminently practical and relevant, often suffer from the criticism of being too descriptive (i.e. ‘weak’ theory). In studying practices as ‘the

primary building blocks of social reality’ (Martha Feldman & Wanda Orlikowski, 2011, p.1241), our humanness is still absent. More emergent and contextualized – yet still objectivized – approaches to theorizing are also evident in institutional theories, which examine how social, cultural and historical mechanisms and belief systems influence how organizations adapt, conform or are changed over time.

While process, practice and institutional theories have helped open OMS to more qualitative and inductive studies, broadening ideas of ‘good’ theory to include middle-range and contextualized theories – it is still a limited pluralism. Theorizing is still mainly proceduralized through a process of objectification, and a need to develop typologies that identify the conditions of causality (Joep Cornelissen, 2017): embodying masculinized values and defining evaluative criteria situated in rhetorical practices aimed at growing ‘strong’ and ‘true’ (Haridimos Tsoukas, 2005), ‘rational’, ‘penetrating’ and abstract theoretical balls. Only recently has the strong/weak hierarchy in process theorizing been problematized and an alternative framing offered (e.g. Charlotte Cloutier & Anne Langley, 2020).

Proceduralization: Disciplining imagination

Originality and novel predictions are key to getting published in elite journals (Kevin Corley & Dennis Gioia, 2011; Gerald Davis & Christopher Marquis, 2005), so one might interpret this as a need for imagination in theorizing. Yet theorizing from the strong theory perspective often centres around minimizing imagination because it leads to ‘flawed scholarship and theory’ unless combined with rigour (Lex Donaldson, Jane Qiu & Ben Luo, 2013, p.154). And when imagination is acknowledged, it is often disciplined through proceduralization, as I will explain.

In contrast to what he called mechanistic theorizing, Karl Weick (1989) argued that theorizing is often ‘intuitive, blind, wasteful, serendipitous, creative’ (p.519) and he introduced the notion of theory construction as disciplined

imagination. Discipline means a consistent application of selection criteria to trial-and-error thinking, and imagination involves selecting diverse problem statements and conjectures in thought trials. This idea of disciplined imagination took flight in a number of articles that followed, which argued for the need to theorize without a boilerplate by constructing mysteries, creating breakdowns, contestation, counterfactual reasoning, by becoming conjunctive (i.e. joining ideas and concepts together), and by generally being more reflexive about our theorizing (Mats Alvesson & Dan Kärreman, 2007; Joep Cornelissen, 2017; Michael Pratt, 2009; Roy Suddaby, 2014; Haridimos Tsoukas, 2017). But while we are exhorted to engage in more imaginative theorizing, this is *still* viewed more in terms of imposing a frame or procedure that disciplines our imagination, rather than allowing us to respond to and work with the contours of the living/lived experience of people.

I suggest that theorizing imaginatively, as Karl Weick says, involves intuition. It means being open to what's happening around us by embracing surprising narratives, doubts, idiosyncrasies and emotions – features that resonate, may lead to new questions and ideas, and provoke us to rethink our ways of being, doing and relating. . . our ways of being human. Imagination is *NOT* about using comprehensive typologies, mechanisms or taxonomies of radical theorizing, identifying key elements of a good narrative, fitting ourselves into modes of reasoning, using a decision tree to embrace mystery, selectively borrowing theories from other disciplines, blending theories, and decision process models for elaborating theory (e.g. Joep Cornelissen & Rodolph Durand, 2014; Greg Fisher & Herman Aguinis, 2017; Sucheta Nadkarni, Marc Gruber, Katy DeCelles, Brian Connelly & Markus Baer, 2018; Cliff Oswick, Peter Fleming & Gerard Hanlon, 2011; Jörgen Sandberg & Mats Alvesson, 2020; Dean Shepherd & Roy Suddaby, 2017). Many of these tools are offered seemingly without any sense of irony or self-reflexivity around how they proceduralize imagination. Indeed, returning to Karl Weick (1989), he argued that a good theory

is plausible, 'high in *narrative rationality*, aesthetically pleasing, or correspondent with *presumed realities*' (p.517, my italics). In other words, theory doesn't need abstract typologies or models if it's an interesting narrative and makes sense to others.

Pluralism? To summarize, while definitions of 'good' theory and how to theorize have been proposed for over 30 years in OMS and editorials claim to encourage pluralism, in my and others' experience, disciplinization occurs as we are still expected to conform to masculinized, abstract and proceduralized forms of theorizing that encompass largely unquestioned values and definitions of causality, abstraction, rationality, replicability, construct clarity and generalizability that are seen as central to developing 'strong' theoretical balls. These values are institutionalized because many of their proponents played and still play a key role as journal editors, running paper development workshops and organizing publishing machines in their institutions – which are all based on one idea of theory and theorizing (Francis Crick, op cit.) that fails to acknowledge and appreciate alternative approaches.³

Herein lies a reflexive contradiction (or to be blunt, a lack of walking the talk) – *as academics we are expected to show servility and conform to the institutionalized norms, routines and processes of work that institutional theorists claim we have the agentic power to change!!* And, although OMS is an applied discipline and relevance and impact debates are intensifying in some countries, we are still expected to theorize by coding qualitative data, imposing academic constructs, and categorizing rich human narratives and lived experience, i.e. making a theoretical contribution through abstraction and proceduralization (*a process of institutionalized isomorphism??!*). Thus, we seem to be no nearer to achieving pluralism than we were in the 1980s.

Longstanding criticisms of abstraction, especially in sociology, have not really permeated OMS. Much of the work on theorizing theory cited above exemplifies Charles Wright

Mills' (1959) criticism of grand theory as highly abstract, unimaginative and obsessed with arid typologies and concepts. They are, as John Shotter (2016) observed for many years, beside-the-point and encompass an after-the-fact itemized objectivity, looking back on completed events with the aim of finding an order, a pattern, or a set of dynamics that can be instituted according to rules or recipes. This way of theorizing, while having a role to play, culls out alternative, more imaginative and human ways of knowing and theorizing, including rich thick narratives that might resonate and shed insight on everyday life and work. The contrast is articulated metaphorically and powerfully in Nicole Biggart's (2016, p. 1384) comment that 'Houses are not just physical boxes with differing thermal mass, but homes with social, cultural and historical meaning embedded in neighbourhoods', i.e. lived and living spaces. Our humanness and living/lived experience are lost in the drive to explain our world in the form of propositions, assertions, models, typologies, processes, categories, abstract constructs and so on.

While our history defines us and helps explain how practices and values develop over time – it's important to question their continued relevance. I now offer potential reasons why – despite claims of embracing pluralism – specific forms of theorizing and theory based on masculinized rationality are currently still valorized.

The Ghost in the Machine: Ontological blindness, epistemological defensiveness, hegemonic masculinity and myopic self-referentiality

'The ghost in the machine' – disembodied minds in unanimated bodies – is a term initially coined by Gilbert Ryle (1949) in his critique of Cartesian dualism. It is now used in debates around whether computers should have an artificial intelligence beyond human intelligence, the fear being that the ghost in the machine will develop its own consciousness and outthink humans. This metaphor is relevant to my

argument, not just in terms of the mind/body dualism, but because I suggest that theorizing about theory has become the ghost in the machine that's taken on a life of its own and feeds upon itself to the exclusion of alternative forms. Largely uncontested and unquestioned forms of theorizing theory prevail. I suggest there are at least four key contributing and inter-related issues: ontological blindness, epistemological defensiveness, hegemonic masculinity and self-referentiality. (And please note: I'm resisting the current fad to combine two words in a snappy term such as *blont* or *defpis*).

Ontological blindness

What we count as theory, how we theorize, and what we do as theorists is fundamentally influenced by our beliefs about the nature of social and organizational 'realities' and what it means to be human in the world, i.e. ontology. I suggest that much of the work around theorizing theory pays little overt attention to ontology or else identifies features of 'reality' without fully engaging with its positioning. When combined with a lack of understanding of alternative ontologies and their implications for methodology and theorizing, this results in a form of ontological blindness. Much of the work cited in my critique is based on an objectivist ontology where institutions, systems, mechanisms, processes, language, narratives, bodies and so on are treated as real objects or materialities that exist and can be categorized and represented accurately.

There are, of course, nuances. For example, some process theorists talk about an ontology of emergence, flux, open-endedness, movement and so on (e.g. Hardimos Tsoukas & Robert Chia, 2002). Nevertheless, when ontology is acknowledged, it is still mainly objectivist. For example, in institutional theory 'actors' are still seen as abstractions at many levels (e.g. Hokyu Hwang & Jeannette Colyvas, 2020). Similarly, even claims of social constructionist approaches to theorizing talk about 'phenomena' and engage in a form of objectivation that is manifest 'in products of human activity that are available

both to their producers and to other men [sic] as elements of a common world' (Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann, 1966, p. 34) – what I call a conservative social constructionism or what John Shotter called a form of social constructionism still infected by Cartesianism.⁴ As Paul Ricoeur (1992, pp. 74–77) observed, an ontology of the impersonal event ignores human agency. Predominant understandings of theory and theorizing do not allow for ontologies that explore and stay close to the intentions, interpretations and feelings of research participants. These are often viewed as 'weak' forms of theorizing because they do not abstract first- or second-order codes, categorize findings, or construct models. Stine Grodal, Michel Anteby and Audrey Holm (2021) argue that 'qualitative analysis is at its core, a categorization process', but categorization is an abstraction that dehumanizes experience, minimizes research participants' interpretations of their own lives, and is *clearly not interpretive!*

Rarely, in articles on theorizing about theory are subjectivist or intersubjectivist ontologies and forms of theorizing addressed. As I will illustrate in the section on 'Re-imagining OMS', subjectivist 'theorizing' recognizes how our human interpretations as ordinary people and academics are situated, unique, fluid and personal. Intersubjective forms of knowing and 'theorizing' are embedded and emerge *between us* as we (all research participants) generate multiple meanings and insights around our experience of social, organizational and environmental issues. These forms of theorizing perhaps suffer from being seen as too subjective, emotional or personal (not concerned with 'facts'), or too idiosyncratic to be theory in the conventional sense because they don't identify central categories.

Articles on how to theorize from hermeneutic and phenomenologically oriented ontologies are rare in OMS, especially in 'top' journals. And those that are, rarely escape the seduction of abstraction and proceduralization – for example, conjunctive theorizing and analytical openness is about making 'connections between diverse elements of human experience through making those *analytical distinctions* that will

enable the *joining up of concepts* normally used in a compartmentalized manner' (Tsoukas, 2017, p. 132, my italics). Hermeneutic theorizing based on first-person (subjective) or shared (intersubjective) experience – 'experience as it is *lived and felt*' (Leah Tomkins & Virginia Eatough, 2013, p. 261, my italics) – is often perceived as being theoretically 'weak'. As one editor commented when rejecting my now-published reflexive, autoethnography about the political struggles of scholars engaged in doing non-mainstream work, I needed to bring in career theory in order to make a contribution, i.e. grow some theoretical balls.

What seems to be misunderstood is that research based on subjectivist and intersubjective ontologies employs different ways of 'theorizing' than objectivist research (Ann Cunliffe, 2011). There is a lack of understanding of – or an unwillingness to accept – how theorizing and the nature of our theories rest upon our ontological assumptions and differ because of them. This ontological blindness privileges mainstream objectivist research and 'strong' theories as the unquestioned norm, while marginalizing scholars engaged in alternative ways of knowing and theorizing who have to explain and justify their ontological position – which, in my experience, is often misunderstood. Subjectivist and intersubjective ontologies focusing on individual and shared lived experience, meaning making, and embedded in situational particulars, are often seen as unfettered relativism or as too idiosyncratic to generalize across settings (Joep Cornelissen, 2017).

As I will argue and illustrate below, it makes no sense to talk about generalization from subjectivist and intersubjective ontologies. Rather it is consistent to talk about *resonance* – presenting insights that may connect, reverberate and provoke others into reflecting on an issue. And I believe resonance is far more powerful than theoretical generalization because it is provocative, personal, and allows us to interpret those insights in ways that are meaningful and significant to us and to our situation – in ways that, as Glendinning (2007) notes, are genuinely close to us.

Epistemological defensiveness

Ontological blindness leads to epistemological defensiveness in the sense of the disciplining gatekeeping activities that occur to ensure that particular types of knowledge, theorizing and theory are perpetuated. These types of theorizing are often articulated by journal editors who exhort us to read their editorial on what makes a theoretical contribution or how we can make our constructs clearer, because constructs ‘are the foundation of theory’ (Roy Suddaby, 2010, p. 346). Some editors and reviewers are open to alternative ontologies, epistemologies and ways of theorizing – others are not. Reviewers may request authors to grow theoretical balls by using theory N, F or W, create a causal model, or cite A, B or C (usually a northern hemisphere, western male who takes a structural, institutional, critical approach) . . . who may or may not be relevant to our ontological, epistemological or theoretical positioning.

I believe that at the heart of epistemological defensiveness is the old debate around realism versus relativism. Relativism is still often conceived of pejoratively as ‘anything goes’, where ‘there is no such thing as truth; everything is a matter of rhetoric and power; all viewpoints are relative’ (Terry Eagleton, 1991, p. 165) – and consequently ungeneralizable. More thoughtful and substantive interpretations have emerged, conceiving of relativism as understandings situated in our experience of particular contexts, times, places and communities; where there are multiple ‘truths’; and where meanings and knowledge/knowing are relative to the moments and manner in which they are constructed – both in the everyday interactions of people and the academic practices of the researcher. This broader view of epistemological relativism challenges absolutism and abstraction by bringing back the ‘lost human’ (both researcher and research participants) and our embedded experiences, i.e. embracing pluralism.

The realism/relativism debate is often connected to the need for rigour – with rigour being associated with realism and its masculinized rationalities. It’s interesting to note that the

etymology of ‘rigor’ from Latin and French is stiffness, rigidity, harshness. . . a form of procedural rigour we see in ‘ballsy’ theorizing about theory. Jacqueline Mees-Buss, Catherine Welch and Rebecca Piekkari (2022) argue that templates and the Gioia methodology might demonstrate procedural rigour but in doing so restrict the development of plausible, interesting and insightful theories. They propose instead a more fluid hermeneutic approach to generating theory – one based on an epistemology of *interpretive rigour*. This is a key issue because interpretive rigour reflects the subjective and intersubjective ontological roots of interpretivism. I suggest that interpretive rigour is more fluid and open, about: (a) consistency between ontology, epistemology, theorizing and writing; (b) being thorough in eliciting participant accounts and genuine (staying close) to participants’ interpretations; (c) engaging in critical- and self-reflexivity around what we do and in acknowledging our positioning and impact as researchers; and (d) writing tentatively but persuasively.

Perhaps the suspicion of relativist (situated, subjectivist, intersubjective) forms of knowing is the reason why feminist, hermeneutic, phenomenological, living narratives, post/decolonialist epistemologies and similar forms of theorizing that problematize knowledge, address living human experience and experiences of inequalities, are seemingly invisible. Emma Bell, Susan Meriläinen, Scott Taylor and Janne Tierni (2020) note that feminist forms of theorizing are very rarely published in the ‘top’ ‘malestream’ journals in our field and are viewed as dangerous because they ‘undermine the epistemological resilience (Kristie Dotson, 2014) of dominant ways of knowing that serve a minority at the expense of the majority’ (p. 178). Feminist writers theorizing about theory question dominant forms of knowledge that are based on disembodied objectivity and neutrality, embracing instead situated *knowledges* – which accept that where a person is socially located impacts epistemology and therefore researchers should embrace multiple perspectives (e.g. Karen Ashcraft, 2016; Karen Barad, 2007; Judith Butler, 1997;

Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989; Angela Davis, 1981; Donna Haraway, 1988; bell hooks, 1981; Helena Liu, 2018; Jenny Rodriguez, Evangelina Holvino, Joyce Fletcher & Stella Nkomo, 2016). Theorizing from standpoint and intersectionality perspectives means highlighting diverse lived experiences of marginalized people – ‘not through abstraction’ (Patricia Hill Collins, 2001, p. 259). The importance of social location and also relationships is also present in indigenous ways of knowing, which are embedded in specific communities, people and oral traditions (Lloyd Lee, 2017). While this may be criticized as relativism, it is *knowledge from a human point of view* (Ana-Maria Crețu & Michela Massimi, 2020), which raises questions around what is known, by whom, how it is known or becomes known, and for what purpose? In other words, ontological, epistemological and ethical questions which are of concern to posthumanist, postcolonial, decolonial, phenomenological and narrative theorists who foreground a reflexive consideration of how we see and conduct ourselves in our world.

Subjectivist, intersubjective and non-westernized/non-malestream ontologies, epistemologies and ways of theorizing therefore challenge the chimera of objectivist knowledge as being replicable, generalizable and predictive, emphasizing instead the importance of more situated, contextualized, personal and fluid forms of knowing and theorizing. Paying attention to different ontologies and epistemologies, to indigenous ways of knowing and being, and to non-western authors challenges the ongoing ‘epistemic coloniality’ (Eduardo Ibarra-Colado, 2006) and epistemic injustice that Penelope Muzanhenamo and Rashedur Chowdhury (2021, p. 1) elaborate in relation to ‘white supremacy within a historically racist academia’. As they note, Black scholars are ‘othered’ and Black scholarship disenfranchised based on judgements about social identity, whereas ‘White male middle class academics [are] historically positioned as the true elite experts’ (p. 2). They argue – as I argue here – that we need to advance diverse epistemologies. We should be open to forms of theorizing that convince not through normalization, but through

authenticity, plausibility and criticality: particularizing everyday life, contributing to common concerns and provoking critical reflection (Karen Golden-Biddle & Karen Locke, 1993). I will address how we may theorize in this way in the second part of my essay.

Hegemonic masculinity

I thought I had written a more-or-less ‘universal’ set of experience-derived rules for improving young scholars’ chances of getting their work published (Gioia, 2019). But, apparently my presumed universalist rules carry the heavy hand of guyness. (Dennis Gioia, in Trisha Greenhalgh, 2019, p. 484)

Building on my critique, I suggest, theorizing theory operates as a form of hegemonic masculinity (Raewyn Connell, 1987) that privileges, excludes and disciplines in insidious and overt ways. Hegemonic masculinity is the cultural expression and the maintenance of unequal gender relationships of dominant forms of masculinity over both women and subordinated men (James Messerschmidt, 2018). While there are multiple masculinities, dominant forms are legitimized and consented to through social institutions and in social groups in practical, relational and discursive ways. While this concept has its critics, it plays through academic life in many ways, in teaching, conferences, theorizing, publishing and promotion (Katie Beavan, 2020; Angelo Benozzo, Neil Carey, Michela Cozza, Constance Elmenhorst, Nikki Fairchild, Mirka Koro-Ljungberg & Carol Taylor, 2019; Jackie Ford & Nancy Harding, 2008; Alison Pullen, Nancy Harding & Mary Philips, 2017).

In a practical sense, hegemonic masculinity is evident in theory/paper development workshops held by the Rambo of XXX where Rambo’s version is the only one offered. It also exists in both mainstream and critical OMS in relation to editorship, authorship and reviewing. Few of the articles addressing how to theorize cited in my critique are by women, and the number of women cited in these articles can often be counted on one hand. This is perhaps

reminiscent of Dr. Rosalind Franklin's exclusion from the Nobel Prize awarded to Watson, Crick and Wilkins. Her X-ray images of DNA (obtained without permission) were crucial in discovering the double helix. Over the last 10 years, we have seen more women's voices, but often female academics based in North America who are taking an objectivist approach to theorizing process and practice. The rest of us struggle to have our voices heard because we don't embrace the 'correct' (normative, abstract) language and proceduralized ways of theorizing.

Hegemonic masculinity is also a form of social control perpetuated discursively through the normative language of rationality in theory articles. As I've noted, *strong* theory is important, theorizing is about *imposing conceptual order* (Roy Suddaby, 2014), *distance* (Joep Cornelissen & Rodolph Durand, 2014), *tools* (Dean Shepherd & Roy Suddaby, 2017) and *rationality* – even though it may be a *practical* rationality (Jörgen Sandberg & Hardimos Tsoukas, 2011). Theories should have *structural elements* (Jörgen Sandberg & Mats Alvesson, 2021) and a *linear* form of connectedness, even in narrative theorizing where the focus is '*the true underlying pattern of events*' (Brian Pentland, 1999, p.712, my italics) and where great stories have five key elements: 'conflict, character, setting, sequence, plot and arc' (Dean Shepherd & Roy Suddaby, 2017, p.60).

Generative theorizing through abduction is also masculinized and proceduralized by providing a decision tree, model, systematic steps and social-psychological processes (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007; Alf Steiner Sætre & Andrew Van de Ven, 2021) . . . compare this to Karen Locke, Karen Golden-Biddle and Martha Feldman's (2008) more fluid interpretation where abduction is about imagination, feelings and hunches. I agree with Mike Reed and Gibson Burrell (2019, p.41) that the consequence is an imposition of order, systematization and universalism on pluralism – but their 'ballsy' answer to this is *destruction, ruination and contestation*. Do we really have to man the barricades?! Contrast this language to Silviya Svejnova's (2019) response to Reed and

Burrell where, drawing on Mary Parker Follett's work, she calls for constructive pluralism in which we appreciate other positions in a generative way.

Myopic self-referentiality

The 'diversity' problems we study elsewhere plague [our own] intellectual work and institutions. (Karen Ashcraft, 2018, pp. 615–16)

All of the above leads to myopic self-referentiality in three main ways: (1) we are too concerned with ourselves and our academic interests; (2) we rarely go beyond our own disciplinary/epistemological positioning to consider alternatives; and (3) many articles on theorizing about theory urge us to be reflexive while lacking any sense of self-reflexivity.

Regarding my first point, theory is about what makes sense to other academics. While recognizing that there's a shortage of novel ideas, Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg (2013) argue that a theory is interesting if 'it attracts attention from *other researchers* and, thus, becomes influential . . . [and] Collectively held assessments of what counts as interesting research are much more profound than *purely subjective views*' (pp. 130–1, my italics). They propose a methodology of dialectical interrogation that includes (thankfully) intuition, conversation, experience and reading inspiring texts (is this not personal, subjective?) but are not really specific about how this translates into theorizing. Kevin Corley and Dennis Gioia (2011) encourage 'leading-edge' (academic) thinkers to adopt theoretical prescience, '*the process of discerning what we need to know and influencing the intellectual framing of what we need to know to enlighten both academic and reflective practitioner domains*' (p.23, italics in original), and in doing so academics can address organizational, social, academic and practical issues. In other words, the process of theorizing is still in the hands of key 'leading' academics who can 'enlighten' practitioners. And intersubjective participatory forms of theorizing that can enlighten both researchers and practitioners

(e.g. Diane Burns, Paula Hyde, Anne Killeth, Fiona Poland & Richard Gray, 2014) are often sidelined as not rigorous and even as ‘therapy’.

My second point is that myopia also exists in terms of a lack of engagement with other disciplines and ways of thinking. In United States business schools, where I’ve spent a good part of my career, the term ‘other disciplines’ refers to disciplines within the business school (accounting, information systems, organizational behaviour, etc.), not philosophy, anthropology or sociology. This is evident in Shaker Zahra and Lance Newey’s (2009) proposal to build theory at the intersection of disciplines (e.g. economics, psychology) and fields (e.g. HRM, entrepreneurship, cognition). Myopic self-referentiality also plays through conferences. In a recent Call for Papers, the organizers cited themselves 18 times, along with their usual ‘buddies’, and only 17% of the citations in the Call were by women. Pluralism is limited and other voices excluded because conference participants feel they have to cite (obsequiously) the ‘key’ people.

Third, a number of articles on theorizing talk about the need for reflexivity while lacking any sense of self-reflexivity in terms of questioning how our own assumptions and practices may marginalize, be contradictory, establish a status hierarchy and limit pluralism. There is significance in Henry Mintzberg’s (2017, p.180) observation that perhaps the problem is that we are unable to recognize that ‘our theories are about ourselves, and how can we be objective about that’. Because in the drive for objectivity and structure in theorizing lies a failure to recognize its contested and constructed nature – that objectivity and rationality lie in the eyes of the beholder.

Theorizing is a researcher’s/research participant’s way of making meaning about what s/he thinks may be going on – and making her/his ‘theories’ meaningful to others.

A lack of self-reflexivity is also seen in exhortations for others to be reflexive, imaginative, and to embrace mystery in their theorizing, which are then operationalized by presenting

decision trees, typologies, or categorizing the form of rationality in which we might be engaging. Why do we need to structure imagination? Is this not contradictory and self-defeating?

To summarize, the orientation towards ‘bally’ theory is as a predictive or explanatory cognitive device, abstracting and objectifying first-person experience so that it may be of ostensible use to other academics (and maybe enlighten practitioners) through the identification of regularities and patterns: retrospective theorizing about past events to explain, predict or improve the future. Alternative ontologies and epistemologies are marginalized. Sadly, when myopic self-referentiality is combined with a lack of reflexivity, those who pride themselves on being open, inclusive and imaginative often seem unable or reluctant to walk-the-talk.

This lack of self-reflexivity in terms of claiming to be open to alternative perspectives while expecting scholars to toe the theorizing line, along with a lack of understanding of alternative ontologies and epistemologies, privileges a transcendent limited masculinized view of theorizing that feeds off itself. . . . It has become the ghost in the machine as we take for granted our own positionality, values, and the application of unquestioned norms that erase all others.

So, what are the alternatives for those of us interested in understanding what we do and what it means to be a human being (a leader, entrepreneur, professional, etc.) in our particular circumstances (personal, organizational, social, cultural, historical, etc.), i.e. theorizing differently? If, as Marta Calás and Linda Smircich, (1999, p.665) asked, ‘we start writing and talking differently [then] what else is there?’ This is the question I now want to explore.

Re-Imagining OMS: Theorizing humanly through sensibility, sensitivity, reflexivity and imagination

Life’s not fair, is it? Some of us drink champagne in the fast lane, and some of us eat our sandwiches by the loose chippings on the A597. (Victoria Wood)

Why do I begin my discussion on theorizing in more human ways with a quote from a British comedienne and actor? Two reasons. First, she was an astute observer and translator of the foibles and challenges of everyday human life and of society. She performed authentic, plausible and critical (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993) stories that provoke us to see ourselves in those stories and to question our eccentricities and the contradictions in life. Her observation is also central to my argument because it brings me to my second point: it highlights the politics of class and I extend this to the academy-at-large where current theorizing about theory is about the privilege of drinking champagne in the fast lane while the rest of us watch. And, as I have illustrated, the fast lane involves particular masculinized forms of theorizing and definitions of theory that exclude others. Her observation also resonates because she grew up just down the road from me, both of us in working-class Lancashire families, and I spent many happy hours as a child on family day trips, sitting on the side of A and B roads with cousins, aunts and uncles who chatted about life and events while eating sandwiches and trying to avoid being hit by loose stones thrown up by passing cars. It was in those living moments, recurring across time, that I learned the value of family, community, history, stories, laughter and love. In academic terms, the importance of intersubjectivity – of *relationships between people* – in understanding and making meaning about our world in moments of sociality and moral being. So how may we ‘theorize’ from this perspective?

I speculate that had Victoria Wood been an academic, she would have been a phenomenologist, maybe doing narrative research, gathering life histories and oral histories, engaged in ethnography and performance ethnography. . . terms you rarely see in articles on theorizing about theory. Would she have been looking for causal mechanisms, hypotheses, generalizations and abstract ‘theory’? I doubt it. She didn’t need to, because her sharp and witty observations about lived experience resonated with many people and on many levels. In other words – to use phenomenological terms – she

elucidated through rich thick description what we implicitly know and experience. And resonance is far more influential than abstract generalizations because we are provoked and inspired to reflect on our own experience with new eyes . . . in ways that are meaningful to us and may highlight possibilities for change. When issues and ideas resonate, we begin to note differences that may make a difference in our lives. This interweaving of experience and reflection by both researcher (actor/comedienne) and research participants (audience) is an inherently phenomenological attitude (Linda Finlay, 2006) in which we contemplate our involvement and intentionalities in our world. A way of theorizing that embraces imagination and the notion of *theōrein* as considering, speculating, looking at.⁵ I now want to address what theorizing might look like from this more human and resonant perspective.

How can we achieve pluralism in OMS and the ‘open and inclusive space’ and support for ‘different genres of writing’ as, for instance, called for by the editors of *Organization Theory*? There are other forms of knowing and theorizing that if accepted would mean that organization and management theory *would* become more pluralistic, imaginative and generative. These are forms of theorizing that embrace our humanness, are situated within experience, engaged, about living relationships with others, speculative, sensitive to people who are different to ourselves, and sensual, responsive, reflexive and impactful. I work with and meet colleagues who are engaged in ethnography, collaborative research and participatory action research that is situated in lived experience – and who find it difficult to shoe-horn this rich empirical experience into the privileged straightjacket of abstract theory in the fast lane. Rather than focus on theory as an end product and as supposedly revealing ‘the general structure or character of events in the social world’ (Joep Cornelissen, Markus Höllerer & David Seidl, 2021, p.3), I would like to focus on finding ourselves (Simon Glendinning, 2007) and on theorizing in more human ways as:

How we make meaning of our/others experience and generate insights around new ways of thinking, doing, and being in our world that may resonate with others.

My ‘definition’ of imaginative theorizing lies in the context of discovery rather than justification (Karen Locke, 2011; Richard Swedberg, 2016). As Karl Weick (1995, p.387) noted, theory omits ‘some key portions of the originating insight’, which I interpret as: viewing theory as an end product diverts us from noticing, acknowledging and cultivating insights around what might be happening in unfolding living moments and relationships and in the in-the-moment doings, sayings and meaning-making of people.

Procedural rigour in an after-the-fact theorizing process often suppresses surprise and imagination. Working from a Peircean perspective, Karen Locke, Karen Golden-Biddle and Martha Feldman (2008) draw our attention to the importance of abduction in imaginative theorizing – that when we experience something unusual or surprising, we begin to doubt, question and work through possible explanations – in our ordinary lives and our lives as researchers. They are careful to emphasize that, for Charles Peirce, ‘*doubt is a living sensation that is palpable*’ (p.909, my italics) that spurs imagination as we engage with and explore our feelings, thoughts, hunches and the possibilities for seeing and doing something differently. The feeling of surprise is important when I’m looking at fieldwork: what is unexpected; what word, phrase, image or action strikes me; what provokes me to say ‘wow!’? Then I start exploring where that might take me in terms of understanding the situation differently and how my ‘surprise’ might relate to and extend existing ways of thinking. Surprises that can be meaningful and lead to interesting theories (John Van Maanen, Jesper Sørensen & Terence Mitchell, 2007).

Barbara Simpson, Rory Tracey and Alia Weston (2018) offer another approach to ‘theorizing’ through *travelling concepts*, a form of ‘empirical sensitization’ and interpretive engagement of researchers and research participants with the features, flow and dynamics of

their experience and with emerging meanings and insights: theorizing through paying attention to the fluidity of meaning-making in lived experience. These forms of theorizing are very different to the abstracted counterfactual technique of challenging existing theories and using contrastive questioning to develop ‘plausible alternative conceptual representations’ (Joep Cornelissen & Rodolph Durand, 2014, p.1004), which privilege academic sensemaking. Instead, they involve working from within our fieldwork, sometimes engaging research participants in reflexively questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and practices, i.e. a form of theorizing that is humanly embedded in experience, which aims to accomplish resonance by generating different ways of seeing and understanding experience – from within that experience by eating our sandwiches with others (see for example Radilaite Cammock, Cath Conn & Shoba Nayar, 2021).

I suggest that if we are open to subjective and intersubjective ontologies, and value their place in generating rich understandings, then we need to be attuned to ways of knowing, ‘theorizing’ and making a ‘theoretical contribution’ that explore and illuminate what it means to be human. These different ways of knowing focus on finding meaning from within our ongoing living experience and embrace sensibility and sensitivity – an openness and responsiveness to others, based on a care-ful and reflexive understanding of what we do as academics. Theorizing from this perspective focuses on offering ways of anticipating and becoming more attuned and responsive to what may be happening in the moment.

I will now address how we might reimagine OMS through more human ways of theorizing by presenting alternative approaches and offering examples as a means of showing what this might look like. These examples are not ‘fast lane’ theorizing from a distance – they don’t conform to masculinized norms of theory as an end product – they are fluid, open and sometimes emotional forms of theorizing that are insightful, provocative, imaginative and have something relevant and interesting to say.

Theorizing through sensibility and sensitivity

We live life in present moments embedded in a past and anticipating a future, so how may we account for this in our theorizing? In ways that have ‘a phronetic quality that focuses our attention on the contingent, vague, and indeterminate aspects of human life’ (Kevin Barge & Martin Little, 2008, p. 519)? I suggest we might do so through:

- Sensibility, which foregrounds knowing from a human point of view, and
- Sensitivity to *living, sensory and unique moments* in which we notice ours and others spontaneous (i.e. often unsystematic) experiences.

How might we begin to understand the moment-by-moment unfolding details of our practical activities and relationships in ways that might provide new beginnings? To capture them ‘in flight’ (Harold Garfinkel, 1967, p. 79)?⁶ To answer these questions, we require another form of knowing, inquiring and theorizing.

For many years I have been searching for different ways of talking about ‘theory’ and theorizing from subjectivist and intersubjective ontologies – in ways in which we are not lost to ourselves. I’ve used various terms such as: practical theories, interpretive insights and strategies, sensitizing resources, conversational features, action guiding anticipatory understandings and preparing activities. Each of these is a form of theorizing that *draws attention to what it means to be human and to features of our experience that may be shared or shareable*, i.e. to more situated forms of knowing and understanding that can be translated and/or reinterpreted by readers in ways appropriate to their own circumstances. These forms of theorizing may resonate with others by offering insights that are open to interpretation and re-interpretation by different people in different situations and circumstances. . . in contrast to monologic, abstract, theoretical orderings.

Practical theories. Practical theories are the ways in which our research participants make sense of their experience. They may be expressed as heuristics, metaphors, intentions, actions – ways of explaining how we engage, relate and act in our living experience. It can be a form of engaged reflection by our research participants or between researcher and research participants (Barge, 2001). This way of thinking about theory struck me when doing my PhD, while interviewing a vice president who commented that the first thing he did when he went in to work was to ask ‘what are the casualties . . . what might take us out of business today?’ This was his practical theory – a living theory-in-action – that we went on to discuss, particularly in terms of its impact on how employees talked about the organization as a battlefield, and for me about how language is constitutive in terms of how we see and act in our world. Practical theories are not our academic interpretations or abstract codes, but draw attention to the particularities of the situation, help explain why they might be so, and offer a starting point for researcher/research participant reflection and reflexivity.

Interpretive insights and strategies. From subjectivist and intersubjective ontologies, we are not searching for objective facts – ‘facts’ are negotiated socially shared understandings of what may be happening – but for interpretations. Interpretations are multiple meanings that individuals give to their experience that may be shared or may differ, and that a researcher may construct from his/her empirical data (subjectivism). From an intersubjective perspective, meanings unfold, interpretations and insights are created between researchers and research participants in their dialogue. Such insights are not abstract theoretical generalizations, but are ways of seeing something differently (a situation, a way of being and acting) that are embedded within a context but that may resonate with others in different contexts. Insights may arise from a feeling of wonder during or after our fieldwork, being ‘startled or struck by something unusual’

that is embedded in, but also transcends, everyday experience (Arne Carlsen & Lloyd Sandelands, 2015, p. 375). Such feelings of wonder may come from the literature, from ‘data’ (research participants keep talking about xxx, why? what might it say about zzz?), from field-work observations and interactions, from life/work events, our own narratives (see examples below) and those of our research participants. And while insights may initially be context-specific, we craft them in ways that relate abductively or inductively to the literature, that resonate and may be (re)interpreted and taken further as interpretive possibilities by others in different circumstances . . . i.e. ‘theorizing’ not in procedural ways but as insights that are fluid, open and unfinalized. These insights may also provoke reflexive conversations with research participants, generative conversations from which new theoretical and practical understandings emerge.

Leanne Cutcher’s (2021) interpretive study of how older women (including herself) are positioned as mothers in organizations offers a number of insights which include being seen by others as ‘endlessly maternal’ disembodied mothers engaging in ‘care work’. She doesn’t offer abstract theory or constructs, rather her insights serve as a basis for reinterpreting ‘the maternal in organizations and alternative meanings of the female subject that is not defined by motherhood’ (p. 12). Her own and her interviewees’ reflections are a form of knowing from a human point of view.

Sensitizing resources. In his critique of social theory, Herbert Blumer (1954) compared definitive concepts (defining attributes of objects) to sensitizing concepts, which offer ‘a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances [and] suggest directions along which to look.’ (p. 7). Sensitizing concepts or resources are important because our living experience, relationships and the circumstances in which we find ourselves are unique, shift moment-to-moment and are often vague. Sensitizing concepts are a form of prospective and fluid theorizing, offering ideas or resources that

may direct our attention to potential features of our experience as they unfold, help attune us to what might be going on and to see possibilities for moving on. In contrast to generalizations, such resources sensitize us to the particulars of life: focusing on meanings ‘as they are actively lived and felt’ rather than on the “conceit” of scholars’ (John Shotter, 2016, p. 169).

Leah Tomkins and Alyson Nicholds’ (2017) phenomenologically situated mirrored autoethnography critiques the concept of authentic leadership and reflexively examines Leah’s experience of teaching a course on authentic leadership and its influence on her own authenticity and academic identity. They argue that identity and authenticity are relational, and for both students and academics are infused with dilemmas (which I suggest are prospective sensitizing concepts) of independence/dependence, resistance/compliance, and voice/silence, drawing attention to potential uncomfortable issues we may face relating to ‘my attitudes towards authority, ambition and self-preservation, and the ways in which these unfurl in my relationships with other people, not least my students’ (p. 266). It’s a human story that resonates and perhaps provokes us to think about our own experience and relationships differently. My reflexive re-interpretation of Leah and Alyson’s article is questioning to what extent I complied with ‘the flow of institutional life’ (p. 260) until I felt I could no longer do so – culminating in writing this paper?

Conversational features. Conversational features are also a form of ‘theorizing’ through sensitizing resources but from a dialogical perspective, by drawing attention to how we may create meaning, shared significances, explore multiple meanings and differences, and engage in shared reflexivity in responsive and spontaneous conversations. Dialogic epistemologies democratize knowledge generation (Elisabeth Torras-Gómez, Mengna Guo & Mimar Ramis, 2019) by drawing upon an intersubjective ontology and often the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) to consider how we make meaning together in living conversation – emphasizing the ‘we-ness’ rather than the

'I-ness' of lived experience and meaning-making. For Bakhtin dialogue is our whole being into which we invest our 'eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, [. . .] whole body and deeds' (p. 293). Differing from discursive, metaphoric and linguistic theorizing – which focus on the words themselves – dialogism draws our attention to what happens in the responsive conversational interplay between people in generative dialogical encounters (Nic Beech, Robert MacIntosh & Donald MacLean, 2010): how research participants and research participants/researchers make meaning together in situ. By studying how we make meaning in specific contexts and moments, we can draw insights around ways of relating and talking with others that may be appropriate in other circumstances. But because the focus is living conversation, theorizing is not concerned with developing abstract theories or constructs, but with highlighting conversational features that attune us to what may be happening in unfolding conversational moments and offering ideas of how to move on.

One such example is based on a participatory action research project conducted by my colleague, Guiseppe, which focused on helping an Italian non-profit organization deal with conflict (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017). We offer five conversational resources:

1. Being attuned to relationally responsive dialogue – being open and responsive to others and exploring multiple and possible meanings;
2. Engaging in shared reflexivity within conversations – questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, language, actions, power relations and knowledge claims;
3. Noticing and exploring arresting moments – moments in which we are struck and 'moved to respond to each other or to our surroundings in different ways' (p.34);
4. Exploring tensions, contradictions and subtle variations in meanings during conversations;
5. Creating action guiding anticipatory understandings – which I will go on to explain.

Conversational features are not fixed techniques or recipes, but a way of attuning us to what's happening in our emerging living experience and relationships. For it's in our moment-to-moment relationally responsive ways of talking, feeling, gesturing and interacting that I make life meaningful with you and learn to anticipate and respect you – a key feature of theorizing in more human ways through sensibility and sensitivity.

Action guiding anticipatory understandings. If we embrace a form of knowing that lies within situations, is embodied and relational, then what may help us understand what may be happening, anticipate what might happen and how we might respond? Action guiding anticipatory understandings are not cause–effect abstractions, but offer ideas that can help sensitize us to what we might otherwise take for granted, and to figure out how to relate ourselves to what might be going on around us from within specific circumstances. 'It is a knowing to do with one's participation within a situation, with one's "place" within it, and with how one might "go on". . . .' (John Shotter, 2014, p.100). As such, they are understandings that prepare us to notice what may be happening around us and how to respond as researchers and practitioners. They are not techniques to be applied or tools to be used that foreground the agency of the individual user. Rather they are a form of practical hermeneutics that emphasize the relational, responsive and interpretive nature of our lived experience.

An example of action guiding anticipatory understandings is Jenny Helin's (2013) work around dialogic listening, which offers 'research practices in which we can bodily experience social phenomena in a moment of pre-understanding, the moment before these phenomena are interpreted and cognitively made sense of' (p. 238). Based on a collaborative study of ownership and succession issues in a family business, she examines, reflexively, the dialogue in one of her meetings with family members and the importance of 'listening into' as a prospective form of theorizing. She gives an example of when one family member, Dan, says he never

had a relationship with his brothers – a moment of surprise (an arresting moment) to everyone: to Jenny because it was different to her family experience, to Dan himself who stopped talking, and to family members trying to take in and feel what was happening. After this moment, family relationships began to change. Dialogic ‘listening into’ is not a technique, research protocol, nor a dehumanized representation, but a way of being in which we are attuned to what may be going on around us. It is therefore a way of theorizing based on a sensitivity to unique *living moments – a way of understanding that might guide our future actions*. Drawing on Bakhtin’s work, Jenny elaborates the features of dialogic listening as: relational and shared, an active process, polyphonic, and an embodied activity. These features may resonate by calling upon us to think about the possibilities of seeing and being in the world in this way – in our personal lives and our research.

Elucidation. Theorizing from a phenomenological perspective involves *elucidation* (Glendinning, 2007), a way of seeing differently by opening up our intuitive relationships in and with our world to many possible interpretations. Elucidation involves exploring possibilities that may illuminate what it means to be human in a messy and complex world by making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, including through our ‘mindful bodies’ (Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, 2017). The purpose is to develop a rich account that allows us to see taken-for-granted aspects of life with new eyes (Emma Williams, 2018). From subjectivist and intersubjective ontologies, elucidation is about intentionality, chance, first-person experience and descriptive idiographic or thematic interpretation – not causality, categories, variables, constructs, general principles and abstract patterns. Thus, the phenomenological attitude means being open to others rather than being overly concerned with ourselves and our academic needs, to ‘see the world freshly, in a different way’ (Linda Finlay, 2009, p. 12).

What scholars engaged in theorizing through abstraction and proceduralization often fail to

understand is the idiographic nature of this and other subjectivist and intersubjective epistemologies, including narrative, ethnographic, autoethnographic, collaborative, indigenous and so on, which are ‘concerned with how to understand the concrete, the particular and the unique whilst maintaining the integrity of the person’ (Virginia Eatough & Jonathan Smith, 2017, p. 197). In her hermeneutic phenomenological study of the meaning of work for Generation Y employees, Tabitha Coates (2017) identified ten themes from her initial in-depth interviews, which she then discussed with her participants in a second round of interviews. She compares the interpretations of her participants with current theories to offer alternative perspectives and raise reflexive questions (not generalizations) around existing assumptions, theory and organizational practices relating to generational cohorts.

Messy living narrative accounts. Narrative accounts are ‘living’ in the sense that they are attuned to responsive, unfinished experiences in the moment and to how we as individuals and communities make sense of lived time. As one editor noted in rejecting one of my (now published) papers, ‘a narrative typically assumes a starting position, process and end position, also sometimes transcribed as a means–end relationship in particular sequences or episodes’. What this person and others embracing proceduralized theorizing fail to see, is that:

- We may view narratives as ontological in the sense of a way of being in and making sense of our lives, for as Jerome Bruner (1987) notes, life is a narrative achievement. From this ontological living narrative perspective, narrative is not an epistemological or methodological ‘tool’, with an academically imposed sequential means–ends process, but a personal account situated in a time and place that connects us to others.
- We need to recognize reflexively that living narratives are not true, factual, verifiable, and complete because they are

a way of making sense of our lives in and across moments – ‘an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience’ (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 162) that cannot be verified, but may be plausible and resonate with others outside those moments. So as theorists let’s accept that and move on.

I offer as an example Bud Goodall’s (2005) compelling narrative account of discovering upon his father’s death that he had been a CIA agent. I use this when teaching epistemology, asking students if it contains ‘theory’. The response is often ‘No, but I couldn’t put the article down until I finished reading it!’

‘Your father wanted you to have this,’ Hovermale [attorney] had said when he handed me the key. I wondered if Hovermale knew what these items were. I turned the page and began reading. What my father had given me was the story of his life. Not all of it—it was, after all, a diary and not an autobiography—but enough of it to present me with what I would later learn to call ‘a relational identity crisis’. He had passed along to me a story of a man whom I had called ‘Dad’ for the past 24 years but who was not really my father. My father had been an ordinary government worker who had retired on full disability from the Veteran’s Administration. The story I read was about a man with my father’s name who worked for a clandestine organization, a man who ran illegal operations during the Cold War, a man who communicated through codebooks. *The Great Gatsby* in my hands and his Holy Bible were codebooks. (p. 494)

It’s a partial and unfinished narrative full of intrigue, pain, (mis)understandings and toxic secrets. Read closely and the ‘theorizing’ is there, but not as abstract theory, or at micro, mezzo, macro levels, but as narrative insights. That we inherit narratives both personally and culturally that help shape our ‘life grammar’, that these narratives impact our lives in ways we may not be immediately aware of, that metaphors can hide truths, facilitate ‘perspective by incongruity’, the dialectic of disclosure and secrecy, and our experience of a relational

identity crisis. These are insights that facilitate reflection around what can happen in families, organizations, politics, and in society.

How then can we generalize, abstract and clarify constructs in this living narrative? We can’t – but Bud’s narrative resonates – you connect with what he says and reflect upon it in terms of your own personal, social and organizational narrative inheritances. His narrative is not lived, written, or theorized in sequential, plot-like, cause–effect terms, but its winding and unfinished path conveys the author’s emotions, uncertainty and the powerful narrative theorizing lying within. Because his experience is written in this way, we connect with his narrative, which may provoke us to re-interpret and re-vision ourselves, our relationships and our place in the world . . . who doesn’t inherit narratives? Resonance, finding ourselves in the narrative, is a form of interpretation and engaged ‘theorizing’ that can be impactful in our lives.

Theorizing through sensibility involves an embedded way of thinking and writing that focuses on the felt quotidian detail of everyday life and work. It aims to help us understand and reflect on life, our intentionalities, our differences, who we are or might be, our embeddedness in our world, and how to potentially change things from within experience – as practitioners, researchers and ordinary people. I’ve had reviewers’ comment that this isn’t theory, ‘it’s just common sense’. What such reviewers fail to recognize is that there are many situations where sense is not commonly experienced, can be a taken-for-granted pre-understanding that we often don’t recognize or act upon, and where what is deemed to be ‘common’ privileges certain understandings while excluding others.

Sensual theorizing

As I’ve noted in my critique, theory based on masculinized rationality draws mainly on an objectivist ontology and epistemology in which abstraction is key. But if we think about what provokes us to explore something and come to know our world, it’s often through our

senses – not abstractions of senses or treating our body as an object – but our feeling, sensory, emotional and intellectual engagement with the world around us. My own visceral ‘Wow!!!’ moment about theorizing and theory was back in 1994, when 21 words in John Shotter’s (1993) *Conversational Realities* shifted my way of thinking, being, and doing research.⁷ So, how can we ‘theorize’ in sensual ways?

Sensual theorizing begins when we pay attention to our embodied ‘wow’ moments in the field and continues when interpreting our data, when reading the literature. . . and when thinking about how we may theorize in evocative and interesting ways. Bud Goodall’s narrative (above) is sensual and resonates in that you feel his pain and may even empathize. Another form of sensual theorizing is through performing empirical material in ways that resonate. Performance is viewed both as a research methodology (Annette Arlander, Bruce Barton, Melanie Dreyer-Lude & Ben Spatz, 2017) and as a way of theorizing. For many years, communication and performance studies scholar Soyini Madison has been engaged in performed ethnography – *theatrically framed representations* – where a range of ‘data’ is theorized and transformed into a theatre play or street performance – a (re)enactment of researcher and research participant experience. She has created plays addressing water rights, violence against women, and labour issues. Performances can express history, culture, struggles, selves, power and subaltern voices through satire, movement, drama and digital imagery in ways far more powerful than abstract theories because you ‘feel the affective tension’ as you are drawn into the performance. . .

Performance becomes the vehicle by which we travel to the worlds of subjects and enter domains of intersubjectivity that problematize how we categorize who is us and who is them and how we see ourselves with others and with different eyes. [. . .] Ideally, as an audience member consciously re-enters the web of human connectedness and then travels into the lifeworld of the subject, where rigid categories of insider and outsider transfigure into an intersubjective experience, a

path for action is set. [. . .] In performed ethnography, when audience members begin to feel the affective tension and incongruity between the subject’s yearnings and those macro processes and systems that challenge and undermine their lives and futures there is potential for something more and new to be learned about alterity and what might come under the workings of power. We understand that audiences as involved citizens can be both disturbed and inspired to act upon or contemplate this alterity long after the final curtain. (Madison, 2018, p. xxv)

Currently within OMS, sensual theorizing through performance is rare. While work around critical *performativity* exists based on a politics of engagement directed towards narrowing the gap between theory and practice (e.g. Laure Cabantous, Jean-Pascal Gond, Nancy Harding & Mark Learmonth, 2016), this is still a form of intellectualized theorizing that differs from performance and sensual theorizing. One notable example of the latter is Katrina Brown, Natalia Eernstman, Alexander Huke and Nick Reding’s (2017) research on community resilience in the United Kingdom and Kenya. They created a play addressing sustainable farming, economic diversification, supply chain management, and climate issues relating to flooding, which was presented to various stakeholders as a basis for generating dialogue around the issues. Based on critical utopian action research, Ditte Tofteng and Mia Husted (2011) created an expressive play with professional performers around the lived experience of unemployment. The play, performed 45 times, presented (theorized) the interrelationship between personal experience, social hardship, and public policy and practice.

Sensual theory may also be visual because images can spur reflection, connections and new understandings. Sutton and Staw (1995) claim that theory is not a diagram or figure because they are only ‘stage props’ . . . Is theoretical physicist Richard Feynman’s simple yet impactful visualization of the complex interaction of subatomic particles⁸ an influential theoretical representation or a stage prop? I believe visuals can offer provocative illustrations, present plausible and possible relationships that

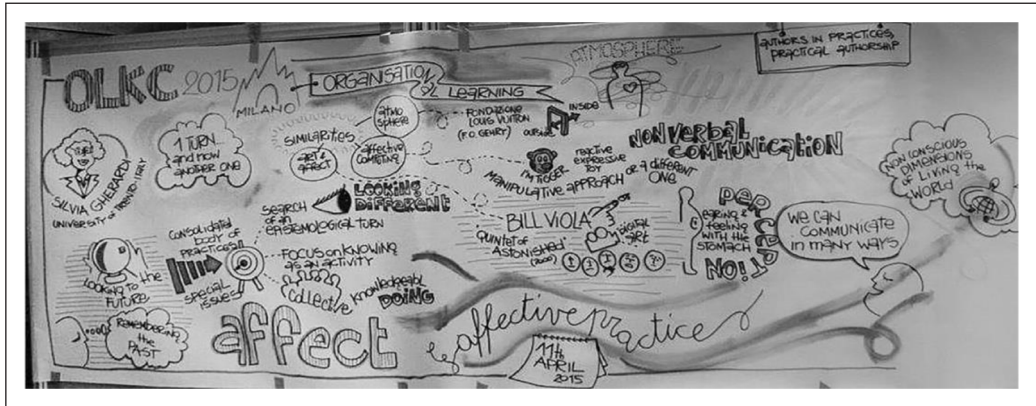


Figure 1. Sara's Visual Narrative (Silvia Gherardi, 2017, p. 355).

others can interpret in ways that are meaningful to them. Visuals not just in the sense of models or frameworks that present the world in boxes, lines and arrows, but images, graphics, art work, photo-elicitation and so on. In OMS, Silvia Gherardi's (2017) performative text addressing the issue of whether the practice and affect 'turns' have commonalities, utilizes the work of Sara Seravalle, a visual writer. Sara translated Silvia's spoken and written word into a visual theorization (Figure 1).

This visual theorization offers opportunity for reflexivity in terms of questioning why specific visuals were selected and used, their potential meaning, why particular connections were made, and how we may take these further. Anyone familiar with British street artist Banksy's work knows how powerful his images are – but are they 'theories'? They are political and social statements that provoke us into considering and speculating (i.e. *theōrein*), very much along the lines of Victoria Wood, but a different genre. They spur us to engage in a reflexive critique of the contradictions, ironies, oppressions and injustices in life. Not a detached intellectual myopic critique, but one in which we interpret the issues and see the world through others' eyes. Theorizing through sensitivity – images, words, performance, etc. – resonates and provokes engaged (re)interpretation, critique and reflexivity.

Let's not forget reflexivity

We are only as blind as we want to be. (Maya Angelou)

In my critique, I highlight what I see as myopic self-referentiality – which is not the same as reflexivity – but rather indicative of a lack of reflexivity. Reflexivity means questioning our own positionality, what we and others may be taking for granted, what we are seeing, saying and doing . . . and not seeing, saying and doing. Radical reflexivity challenges us to see ourselves in relation with others: to question the impact of our assumptions and values and whether we are enacting those – not a masculinized, detached and predominantly intellectual reflexivity. Key reflexive questions in theorizing theory (that influenced this paper) are: What's the purpose of my/our theorizing? What forms of knowledge/knowing do I/we privilege? Who benefits? Is there an irony in proposing decision models and typologies as a means of embracing more imaginative, embedded and generative ways of theorizing? Where are all the women's voices in articles about theorizing theory in OMS? Why is it more acceptable to theorize by anthropomorphizing non-human structures, processes and systems (Dean Shepherd & Kathleen Sutcliffe, 2015) than it is to 'theorize' about being human?

Reflexivity is a form of ‘self-critical partiality’ (Donna Haraway, 1988) which recognizes our own and others’ situatedness: questioning how one form of partial knowledge is privileged, reinforced, and why. To return to the metaphor of the ghost in the machine, how have theory and theorizing based on masculinized rationality taken on a life of their own – reproducing, disciplining and excluding other versions in myriads of ways? Reflexivity recognizes that there are multiple ‘rationalities’ and that the issue of ‘bias’ is not based on the impossibility of achieving ‘neutrality’ (for who is ever neutral?) but based on whose voice is the privileged one.

Katie Beavan’s (2020) open reflexive feminist letter to the CMS Academy about the resurgence of patriarchy and the struggle of female academics is particularly relevant, because she connects her own experience with institutional issues by reflexively questioning ongoing academic practices:

There are a thousand ways into our data – whatever data is anyway? There are multiplicitous ways of knowing. It’s fun to explore with numerous ears (Cixous, 1988). We don’t have to play cleverest idea. I’ve observed, with disquiet, rough trading between us, the not-so-subtle peacocking to prove our knowledge superior. I’ve been a bit aghast by some of the aggressive feathered hierarchical displays. Where I come from, hypermasculine though it is, we’d likely get ousted for acting-up that way.

I’m squirming seeing hatchet work with our participant’s words. Data a wild horse to be broken by the bridle of theory; scholar as *butcher* cleaving up our voices into shreds for pre-ordained theoretically organised consumption.

Personally, I find this mincing unethical.

Personally, I find it mistaken.

I’m researching the

other of all sorts . . . of all diverse richness. the more the other is rich, the more I am rich. the other, rich, will make all his or her richness resonate in me and will enrich me. This is what [scholars] do not know, in general and that’s too bad. (pp.98–99)

Her personal narrative account resonates and provokes us by its very form of theorizing and writing into reflecting on our own experience as well as institutional and social narratives. How a scene has many different interpretations, how we should be reflexive about our work, our actions, and how we treat people in ethical and unethical ways. Katie writes her personal reflexive narrative from her emotions, her body and her mind, a narrative experienced by many others in the straightjacket of institutional work in academia. It’s not a masculinized structured narrative, but an example of ‘narrative inquiry [as] a way of inquiring into experience that attends to individuals’ lives but remains attentive to the larger contexts and relationships within which lives are nested’ (Jean Clandinin, Marie Cave & Charlotte Berendonk, 2017, p. 91).

Reflexivity therefore not only challenges self-complacency, it also opens knowledge to more plural, responsive, responsible and ethical forms of theorizing and knowing. And this reflexive questioning is not a-theoretical, detached, or abstract, but is a way of being open to the *responsive, relational and ethical nature of our way of being* and working as researchers. Karen Barad (2007, p. 382) notes that we need to be reflexive about our ‘responsibility and accountability for the entanglements “we” help enact and what kinds of commitments “we” are willing to take on, including commitments to “ourselves” and who “we” may become’. Instead of denying accountability behind a veil of rationality, abstraction and proceduralization, we need to be open to the voices of others. In this way, reflexivity provokes us to examine what it means to be an academic, researcher, theorist, manager and so on, and recognizing one’s positionality is part of theorizing with humility.

We Don’t Have to Grow Balls

This essay is a provocation to debate – not about how to grow theoretical balls, but about how to theorize with sensibility, sensitivity and reflexivity: ways of theorizing that bring us close to human experience. As Howard Becker (1991/1963) astutely observed – if the people

we study don't recognize themselves in our work, then we should pay attention. Theory is *not the end product* of a 'process by which complex institutional ideas or templates become abstracted and streamlined into theoretical models, with underlying constructs and relationships' (Sébastien Mena & Roy Suddaby, 2016, p.1671). Nor is it about a researcher's coded categorizations. These forms of theorizing are the ghost in the machine by which everything becomes institutionalized through a mechanistic application of protocols, rationalities and preconfigured ways of writing . . . the sole purpose of which is to show that we can do the kind of westernized hegemonic institutional work deemed necessary to be accepted in the 'malestream' fast lane. But 'institutional work' in academic life isn't just about maintaining; isn't it also about *imagining and contesting* – or does that only unreflexively apply to those we study? Those in the privileged fast lane need to walk the pluralism talk and recognize that there are many ways of theorizing.

Theorizing in human ways from/within living moments means looking beyond our own academic concerns, generating different forms of 'theories' that recognize our embeddedness in our world and our responsibility to others. Reimagining OMS in this way places an emphasis on theorizing through discovery and imagination (not justification) – exploring interesting questions; searching for different ways of being, thinking about issues, or doing something, . . . offering insights and possibilities not end products. Embracing theoretical pluralism means recognizing multiple ethico-onto-epistemological perspectives (Barad, 2007) and welcoming many forms of knowing and theorizing.

I read somewhere that Anselm Strauss said that every author's work could be encapsulated in one word. If so, what would you want that word to be? Interesting, rigorous, provocative, generalizable, thoughtful, care-ful, impactful, responsible, . . .? My one (hyphenated!) word emerged through my many conversations with John Shotter – it's exploring 'human-ways-of-being-human-in-a-human-world' (2016, p.116). This means recognizing the uniqueness of people, of

our lived experience, of circumstances, and the many ways of being a researcher, researching and theorizing. It requires reflexively questioning and challenging the ghost in the machine and offering ideas that might resonate with others in potentially unanticipated ways.

I will never aspire to grow theoretical balls in the fast lane . . . I want to eat my sandwiches at the side of the road, despite all the chippings that come my way; have interesting generative conversations with members of organizations, communities and other researchers; pay attention to what's happening around me in life as well as in theory; and try to be reflexive and thought-provoking.

We CAN be human, we CAN theorize with sensitivity and sensibility, with our bodies, our hearts and our emotions in ways that resonate with others. Let's engage in theorizing in more human ways – ways in which we offer ideas, insights, unfinalized narratives that are resonant and open to re-interpreting and re-theorizing by others according to their own lives and circumstances.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Michael Lounsbury and Christine Beckman, 2015.
2. Reported by David Eagleman in *Nature Genetics* (2004) 36(9), 939.
3. Challenges include the paradigm (in)commensurability debate (e.g. Gibson Burrell & Gareth Morgan, 1979; John Hassard, 1988; Norman Jackson & Pippa Carter, 1991); the 'paradigm

- wars' (Jeffrey Pfeffer, 1995; John Van Maanen, 1995); and debates around European versus US approaches to organization theory, which varied in terms of substance, epistemology and style (e.g. Mitchell Koza & Jean-Claude Thoenig, 1995).
4. Personal communication and see <https://www.taosinstitute.net/about-us/people/in-memoriam/john-shotter>
 5. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/theory>
 6. From an unpublished draft paper co-authored with John Shotter before his death.
 7. Cunliffe, Ann L. (2016) Twenty-one words that made a difference: Shifting paradigms. In Tim Corcoran & John Cromby (Eds.), *Joint Action: Essays in Honour of John Shotter*. Taylor & Francis' Psychology Press, Explorations in Social Psychology (pp.173–190).
 8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feynman_diagram
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