

Impactful Theory Pathways to Mattering

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From the Editors

Impactful Theory: Pathways to Mattering

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Abstract

Organization Theory is an academic journal dedicated to the development and dissemination of novel theory in the domain of organizational scholarship. At the same time, an increasing chorus of organizational scholars have advocated for “impact”—broadly defined as producing societal benefit beyond the realm of academia. In this editorial, we question the implicit dichotomy between theory, on the one hand, and impact, on the other, and critically explore the notion of *impactful theory*. Rather than seeing theory as inherently opposed to impact, we celebrate and elucidate theory as a meaningful way to achieve impact. Specifically, we unpack the apparent oxymoron of impactful theory, and articulate seven distinct pathways whereby theory can be impactful. We close by outlining several critical questions, both for individual scholars and our collective community, as well as future research directions.

Keywords

action research, engaged scholarship, impact, organization theory, performativity, research-practice gap, scientific activism, theorizing

Organization scholars have long called for more societally relevant management research (e.g., Hinings & Greenwood, 2002; Mair & Seelos, 2021; Stern & Barley, 1996). This quest is often espoused in terms of “impact”—broadly defined as producing societal benefit beyond the realm of academia. Underpinning this discussion is a concern that organization research

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is over-theorized, dominated by mindless gap-spotting and formulaic empiricism (Kornberger & Mantere, 2020). Some scholars lament that too often organizational research makes trivial additions that are only meaningful to “tiny research micro-tribes” rather than illuminating social phenomena in original and insightful ways (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 7). Leading journals are criticized for their supposed obsession with theoretical contributions and scientific novelty at the expense of knowledge production that could solve important social problems (Kieser et al., 2015). According to critics, the publishing “game” prizes theoretical contribution, resulting in scholarship “devoid of intrinsic meaning and value, and of no wider social uses whatsoever” (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 5). As one remedy, scholars suggest getting out of the “theory cave” (Biggart, 2016) and becoming “engaged scholars” (Hoffman, 2021) whose research focuses on important problems in the world (Davis, 2015). In other words, there is a call for organizational scholarship to de-theorize as a means of producing more “impactful” research.

In this context, launching a new journal—*Organization Theory*—dedicated to the production of theory might seem counter-productive. At a minimum, it raises the question of why we need more theory given the exigencies that surround us: a pandemic, a climate emergency, an artificial intelligence (AI) revolution, and a myriad of other “grand challenges.” Would not the world be better served by actionable knowledge capable of making a tangible difference? But lurking in this framing of the situation is a dichotomy, one that juxtaposes theory and impact. This dichotomy, we contend, is a misleading, if not false, one. Organization theory can, and often has been, highly impactful—far beyond the realm of the academic community (see, e.g., Bastow et al., 2014). Empirical research with high impact is often underpinned by strong theory. Research results that are formulated in theoretical terms can be applied across contexts, which increases the potential scope of their impact.

As Kurt Lewin (1945, p. 129) famously advocated, “nothing is as practical as a good theory” (see also Van de Ven, 1989). Consonant with this maxim, our aim in this editorial is to celebrate and elucidate theory as a path to impact, rather than seeing theory and impact as opposites. The main argument we develop is that theoretical research has the potential to deliver impact. To this end, we seek to unpack the apparent oxymoron of impactful theory and illuminate multiple pathways whereby theory can be impactful. To develop our argument, we briefly review (and dismiss) a simplified understanding of impact, which conflates impact with the mere utilization of research findings for instrumental and non-academic purposes (Beyer & Trice, 1982). As an alternative, we embrace the possibilities of impactful theory and theory-driven impact. Our focus is therefore on conceptualizing the *impact of theory*. We do so by identifying different types of impact that theory can have and developing a set of distinct pathways through which theory can achieve impact. We conclude by outlining some critical questions and future research directions, inviting organizational scholars to contribute to this important endeavor.

The Emerging Impact Agenda: A Simplified Notion of Impact?

As academics, we are increasingly expected to demonstrate the wider societal impact of our scholarly research. Such calls for impact have come from our academic colleagues as well as from other disciplines, policymakers, research evaluation organizations, and funding bodies. For instance, colleagues in the organization and management theory community have called for “engaged scholarship” whereby “practitioners and scholars co-produce knowledge” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 809; see also Bansal & Sharma, 2021; Hoffman, 2021) and have also encouraged scholars to help co-create change (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022). For their part, leading theory-driven journals have explicitly invited research on societal grand challenges in

a quest to make management research more relevant to society (George et al., 2016). Management journals also are publishing articles on how individual scholars can increase the societal impact of their research (Aguinis & Gabriel, 2021) and editorials (this one included) on a journal's approach to societal impact (e.g., Wickert et al., 2021). In addition, many academic outlets and publishers now use "altmetrics" (alternative metrics) in an attempt to measure the uptake of scholarly output by authors in media outlets, social media, or blog postings.

Increasingly, the demand for impact has been woven into the institutional architecture of higher education through research funding and evaluation bodies. Some countries implicitly or explicitly pressure universities to "re-balance" their research agenda in favor of issues in society. For instance, in 2014, the United Kingdom began evaluating and ranking research institutions based on the societal impact that their research produced. Its Research Excellence Framework defines impact as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (UK Research and Innovation [UKRI], 2022). Such impact counts for 25% towards the overall research assessment of an institution, which otherwise emphasizes publications in highly ranked journals (UKRI, 2022).

Research funding bodies have also begun asking applicants to identify "relevant end users" of their research beyond academics, and to outline the "demonstrable contribution" that their research will make to society and the economy (UKRI, 2022). Horizon Europe, the European Union's biggest flagship research funding program, describes itself as "as a means to drive economic growth and create jobs" through coupling "excellent science, industrial leadership and tackling societal challenges" (European Commission, 2022). Similarly, North American funding bodies in the medical and health sciences (e.g., Canadian Institutes of Health Research, National Institutes of Health)

explicitly seek to measure returns on investment in health-related research.

Demands for increased impact have also entered the business school environment more directly. The latest accreditation standards from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) have enshrined a requirement that business schools demonstrate both the "impact of scholarship" and "engagement and societal impact" (AACSB 2020 Standards 8 and 9). Moving forward, business schools must demonstrate how they make "a positive impact to the betterment of society," achieved through "engagement with business and broader society" (AACSB, 2021). Prominent business school rankings, including *The Financial Times*, *Corporate Knights*, and the *Times Higher Education*, now seek to assess societal impact as well (Jack, 2022).

Collectively, these initiatives risk promulgating a simplified notion of impact, we contend, because they presume a simple way to measure and attribute impact to scholarship. Yet, uptake is not always easy to trace, nor to demonstrate through numbers. Even if click-throughs can be measured, superficial exposure does not imply a meaningful and lasting impact on ideas, discourse, or practice. Worse, scholars who have analyzed social media dynamics have found that false or misleading news stories "diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth" (Vosoughi et al., 2018). For instance, it seems that Lefsrud and Meyer's (2012) much-referred-to article on the discursive construction of climate change science rose to prominence in part because its findings were misconstrued as evidence that the majority of scientists doubted human-caused climate change.

Uptake thus does not equal impact. We cannot presume that research has impact simply because someone mentioned it or clicked on a link. Regardless of how we define impact in the abstract, the imperative to demonstrate impact favors research outputs that are tangible, measurable, and easily attributable to particular authors or projects, over a short timeframe. We

therefore may overlook research that has real and substantial impact, but which is difficult to trace or measure because of a less tangible knowledge product, a more complex pathway to impact, and a longer timeframe for impact to manifest (Beyer & Trice, 1982). Theory articles are more likely than instrumental, applied research to belong to this latter category, and hence to be mistakenly categorized as having little societal impact in the short term.

The impact agenda presents both opportunities and threats that are worthy of our attention. Clearly, we will not be able to respond to the challenge of populism or reclaim our relevance in society just by becoming publicly funded consultants. However, the push for impact, and for measuring it, is likely to persist, which prompts us to engage with the question of *how* organizational theory becomes impactful. What we need, therefore, is a more nuanced appreciation of the relationship between organization theory and its societal impact. Thus, we invite readers to reflect critically on the simplified form of impact that is currently circulating in academia, and develop more sophisticated models of the relationship between theory and impact that encompass the ways in which counter-intuitive and path-breaking theorizing can change the way societal actors perceive the world.

The Impact of Theory

Many critiques of the organization and management field's obsession with theory (Hambrick, 2007) presume that impactful research and theoretical contributions are in opposition to each other. We see this as a false dichotomy. For starters, such a dichotomy is premised on a narrow understanding of what counts as theory. By comparison, *Organization Theory* takes "a pluralistic and inclusive view of theory" (Cornelissen et al., 2021, p. 2), in which theorizing is understood as a practical accomplishment in its own right. Such theorizing practices—that is, the work researchers do when forming particular theoretical claims—can entail a variety of activities. As a

consequence, theory is not one thing, but an umbrella term encompassing various forms. Although the propositional form of theorizing has tended to dominate our field, other recognizable forms include process, configurational, perspectival, and meta-theorizing, as well as various forms of critique.

Intuitively, different forms of theory proffer different prospects and pathways for impact. For instance, interventions based on robustly identified causal mechanisms may lend themselves to more instrumental utilization. At the same time, the more applied the findings, the more likely they are to become obsolete (Beyer & Trice, 1982, p. 605). By comparison, theory can have more "far-reaching, if indirect, consequences" (p. 599) when utilized conceptually (e.g., Morgan, 1986). For instance, when the innovation scholar Clayton Christensen was pressed by Andy Grove, chief executive officer (CEO) of Intel, to explain how Intel could avoid being disrupted, he demurred, and instead told him the story of how Nucor and other mini-mills had disrupted the steel industry (Christensen, 2010). When he was finished, Grove said: "Okay, I get it. What it means for Intel is . . ." and then articulated how Intel would defend itself against disruption by launching what became the Celeron line of processors (Christensen, 2010, p. 47). "Instead of telling him what to think, I taught him how to think—and then he reached what he felt was the correct decision on his own" (p. 47).

Not only do different forms of theorizing potentially lend themselves toward particular forms of impact, different aspects of theory can also be mobilized for impact. In this regard, others have pointed to the symbolic value of theory, wherein organization scholars are not viewed as "engineers offering technical advice to managers but as providers of conceptual and symbolic language for use in organizational discourse" (Astley & Zammuto, 1992, p. 443; see also Mauws & Phillips, 1995). But the symbolic use of research also raises the specter of misuse: "researchers may become tools used by management to legitimate either the status quo or those changes favorable only to management"

and “users may distort research results by selecting or even altering findings” (Beyer & Trice, 1982, p. 601).

Sensitized by these observations, in the section below we turn to articulating different impact pathways for organizational theory. To start, we broadly distinguish between three different ways of how the relationship between theory and impact is conceived: as *transfer*, wherein scholarly theories are taken up, more or less faithfully, in situated practices; as *performativity*, wherein theories are understood as interventions in the world rather than representations of it; and as *co-creation*, wherein academics and practitioners co-produce theory and impact jointly. At one end of the spectrum, the approach is akin to “mode 1” (disciplinary, traditional) of knowledge production; the other end of the spectrum hues closer to “mode 2” (transdisciplinary, contextual) of knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2003). Relative to our focus, we see these pathways as representative of different types of relationships between theory and impact. In all cases, however, a key question is whether and how the results of organization scholarship are put into practice (Kieser et al., 2015). Finally, as we unpack below, some of these pathways provide a counterweight to widespread beliefs that impactful research is necessarily co-created by empirical researchers and managers (or other societal audiences), or that theoretical contributions are divorced from practice to the extent they are produced by academics alone (Table 1).

The transfer model of impact

In the transfer model, the process of theory production unfolds independently from the practical application of its outputs. A transfer model of impact implies that academics create knowledge products (such as theoretical accounts of organization and management) that others can subsequently use for different purposes (such as to address specific organizational or managerial challenges). Of course, the notion of “knowledge transfer” may be shaped differently

depending on the particular form of theorization involved. For instance, rather than merely diffusing from one place to another, theory may undergo translation and editing as it moves from the academic domain to instantiation in practice (Kieser et al., 2015). Regardless of the specificities, impact occurs when the finalized knowledge product enters an organizational context outside academia and produces some effects as a result. Transfer can be construed in different ways, each of which carries implications for how we conceptualize the relationship between theory and impact. Below we discuss two pathways through which theory can have an impact through such a transfer process.

Impact pathway 1: Theory dissemination. Dissemination represents a traditional conceptualization of impact in which scholars, or intermediaries, transmit theories to non-academic target audiences or the public-at-large who then utilize these theories in their practices. Dissemination implies that scholars make conscious efforts to transfer the theories they produce, or at least make them available to others who may undertake to disseminate them, such as “professors, gurus, consultants, professionals, journalists and managers” (Engwall & Kipping, 2004, p. 252). Over time, the paradigmatic victory of a theory (Kuhn, 1970) and its widespread dissemination through teaching, consulting, and practitioner literature can lead to impact beyond the academic sphere.

Dissemination underpins efforts to make research publications and research data publicly available through initiatives such as Open Access and Open Science. Dissemination also is at play when academics present their research findings in practitioner-oriented journals or online videos (e.g., *AOM Insights*), host workshops for practitioners, or communicate academic knowledge through personal websites and social media. At the same time, the processes of theory production and utilization remain largely separate from one another: scholars produce theory more or less independently from audiences, and audiences may utilize theory in their practice without the theorist’s

Table 1. (A continuum of stylized) impact pathways for organizational theory.

Relationship between theory and impact	Transfer model of impact: Theory developed in academia is transferred/ translated into practice	Instrumental use	Performative model of impact: Impact emerges as theory is performed in practice	Critical performativity	Problem-driven theorizing	Intervention-driven theorizing	Scientific activism
Impact pathway	Theory dissemination	Prescription: Theory seeks to prescribe reality	Enactment: Theory intervenes in the world	Invention: Transform the world by inventing it	Collaboration: Theory as a tool for engagement and an object of elaboration	Intervention: Theory as a tool for problem-solving	Social change: Theory as a tool for driving social change
Role of theory	Representation: Theory seeks to represent reality	Evidence-based practice	Constructivism	Deliberate constructivism	Engaged scholarship	Action research	Societal transformation
Defining constructs	Positive science	Legitimation of decisions and actions	Impact emerges, whether intended or not, as the theory is performed in practice	Impact emerges intentionally as scholars aim for the theory to be performed in practice	Dialectical method consisting of collaborative scholar-practice learning communities	In-situ field experiments and intervention	Scholarly participation and activist intervention
Mechanism producing impact	Diffusion of theoretical knowledge (such as via the models we teach)	Best practices derived from theory	Theory-driven changes make the theory come true	Theory-driven provocation challenges dominant thinking	Co-creation of theory and impact	Theory-based solutions	Theory-driven social change
Evidence of theory impact	Paradigmatic victory of theoretical paradigm						

involvement in its utilization (Gieryn, 1983). This relative independence reflects “the belief that texts and practices carry with them the codes necessary for their own decoding and therefore enable an unproblematic knowledge transfer” (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008, p. 912).

Within *Organization Theory*, a number of papers appear premised on a dissemination approach, in which insights derived from theoretical contributions might be mobilized to aid organizations, managers, and entrepreneurs (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2020; Roulet & Pichler, 2020; Shepherd & Williams, 2020). For instance, Roulet and Pichler (2020) see direct applications of their theory of scapegoating and whistleblowing following accusation of organizational misconduct: “By theorizing how accused actors deal with blame, our model also has practical implications. It could help stakeholders, such as the media, regulators, or governments (Greve et al., 2010), to critically assess the responses of suspected organizations and their members.” Impact consists here in the theory being directly taken up by practitioners.

Impact pathway 2: Instrumental use of theory. Whereas dissemination emphasizes the role of the researcher and intermediaries, an instrumental approach to impact highlights users. Scholars can facilitate this pathway when they communicate their research findings in a form and an outlet adapted to the needs of managers and other organizational actors. Examples are practitioner-oriented journals like *Harvard Business Review* and *Sloan Management Review* as well as books aimed at wider audiences as illustrated by Pfeffer and Sutton’s *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action* from 1999. To facilitate such uptake, scholars often employ catchy metaphors to communicate theory to their target audience (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011).

Impact also requires users to adapt selected theories to particular purposes in specific contexts. In contrast to the dissemination pathway, impact arises not only from the availability of accessible theory but from users’ adaptations of

such theory to their own ends. Instrumentality implies that users make conscious efforts of translation in order to render academic theory understandable in the world of practitioners. When users translate theory, they interpret it in light of their own prior understandings and adapt it to the context of implementation (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). In so doing, they may depart deliberately from the original knowledge product and imbue it with new meaning through their own sensemaking and sensegiving (Boxenbaum, 2006).

Indeed, prior research shows that “the nature and use of knowledge changes dramatically as it is adopted and appropriated. Users selectively interpret and use knowledge as it serves their own purposes, fits their unique situations, and reflects their relations with their practicing community” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 804). Academic knowledge needs translation because academics and practitioners pursue fundamentally different forms of knowledge (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Whereas academics pursue generalizable knowledge, practitioners typically pursue context-specific and actionable knowledge.

Within *Organization Theory*, several articles point to prescriptive recommendations that can be derived from their theorizations. For instance, Fisher (2020, p. 21) pursues an instrumental impact pathway in offering theory-based prescriptions to entrepreneurs who seek to overcome the liabilities of venture newness and other legitimacy challenges: “The more we understand these complications, the more we can inform entrepreneurship theory and practice to help entrepreneurs navigate the early phases of venture development.”

In a similar vein, after first distinguishing between decentralized versus distributed organization, Vergne (2020, p. 1) derives “crucial implications for antitrust policy” from his analysis that blockchain is both decentralized and distributed, whereas machine learning is centralized and concentrated. To him, this suggests the need for a shift in focus from regulating at the corporate level to the data level. In place of a top-down approach to regulating monopolies

through corporate breakup, this framework prescribes a bottom-up approach to anti-trust that regulates at the data level as a way of counterbalancing “data gravity” that results from the accumulation of data.

The performative model of impact

The performative model of impact provides a second approach to understanding the relationship between theory and impact. From a performative perspective, theories have an impact to the extent they are performed in practice. As Austin (1962, p. 12) put it, performatives are utterances “in which to say something is to do something.” Everyday examples include saying “I do” at a marriage ceremony or announcing “I sentence you to prison” in a courtroom. Such performative utterances are not true or false statements aimed at representing reality. Instead, they bring about the realities they name.

At the same time, words are not enough. Austin pointed to the need for what he called felicitous conditions for these performative effects to take place. In the case of a marriage, it is not enough to merely say “I do.” An authorized official must preside over the ceremony; the couple must not be play-acting, and so forth. In other words, the institutional context matters, materiality matters. When applied to the question of theory, performativity draws attention to “the constitution of new worlds through their articulation” (Garud & Gehman, 2019, p. 680). Below we discuss two pathways through which theory can have an impact performatively.

Impact pathway 3: Performativity of theory. The first pathway of a performative approach to impact pertains to the ability of theoretical pronouncements to generate interventions in the world. That is, theory produces impact through its enactment and performance—and as separate from the intentions of theory producers and users. For instance, according to proponents of this perspective, economic theory “performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observing how it functions” (Callon, 1998, p. 2).

The impact of theories is not related to their a priori accuracy, but the result of processes they set in motion, including self-fulfilling tendencies (Ferraro et al., 2005). Once management theories gain sufficient currency, managers begin behaving in ways that accord with theory. “Whether right or wrong to begin with, the theory can become right as managers—who are both its subjects and the consumers—adapt their behaviors to conform with the doctrine” (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 77). In recent decades, organization theorists have recognized the performative power of theory more broadly (for a review, see Gond et al., 2016).

In terms of impact, performativity emphasizes effects without recourse to a classic notion of causality (Butler, 2010; Knudsen, 2017). A performative approach to impact also elides distinctions between producers and users of knowledge as well as between theory and practice. Academics do not represent the world as much as perform it, together with many other actors. To exemplify, MacKenzie and Millo (2003) examined the option pricing theory developed by Black, Scholes, and Merton in 1973 and found that it “succeeded empirically not because it discovered preexisting price patterns but because markets changed in ways that made its assumptions more accurate and because the theory was used in arbitrage” (MacKenzie & Millo, 2003, p. 107).

A performative approach to impact is difficult to identify within articles, in part because these effects unfold over time. However, within *Organization Theory*, several papers appear to subscribe to such an approach to impact (e.g., see Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020; Clegg et al., 2021; Eisenman & Frenkel, 2021; Glaser et al., 2021; Janssens & Zanoni, 2021). For instance, Flyverbom and Garsten (2021, p. 3) examined anticipatory governance, which they conceptualized “a knowledge-based, performative phenomenon that addresses potential and desirable futures and operates as a mode of shaping, controlling and orchestrating organizations.” On the one hand, they argued that the concept of anticipatory governance “highlights processes of knowledge production, their perspectival

and performative nature, and temporal orientations as central features of such efforts to shape conduct” (p. 5). On the other hand, these same activities “have governance effects that makes anticipation performative by its very nature” (p. 1).

In this pathway, theory itself becomes the mechanism producing impact. Since the act of performing theory is a collective, heterogeneous, and distributed process, scholars cannot control theory uptake, but they may nonetheless set the stage for conflicts, upsets, crises, and competition between performatives so as to stimulate impact.

Impact pathway 4: Critical performativity. The second pathway for a performative approach to impact is critical performativity. According to Spicer et al. (2009, p. 538), the concept of *critical performativity* entails “active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices.” Subsequently, Alvesson and Spicer (2012, p. 376) elaborated on this definition: critical performativity “is critical because it radically questions widely accepted assumptions and aims to minimize domination. It is performative as it opens up new ways of understanding and engaging with the discourse with the ambition to have some effects on practice.”

Relative to our focus on impact, critical performativity offers “a new take on . . . the relation between theory and practice” (Knudsen, 2017, p. 9), one that is related to, but distinct from, the performative perspective reviewed above. Whereas the performative pathway is ambivalent to the intentions a theorist may have had, critical performativity theorists aim to both interpret *and* change the world, not by studying phenomena from a performative perspective, but by developing theories capable of affecting reality. In other words, for these scholars, the very act of theorizing is meant to have an impact through its effects. Ultimately, such an approach “aims to combine intellectual stimulation through radical questioning with an ambition to use discourse in such a way that has an impact, both in terms of emancipatory effect and

practical organizational work” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 376).

But how does a scholar go about critically performing theory? According to Spicer et al. (2016, p. 240): “Critical ideas don’t become performative on their own. They require a felicitous context . . . This involves engaging disgruntled elites, bringing together slack resources, creating forums for micro-mobilization and framing ideas in a way that resonates with a broader public.” In other words, the scholar intervenes in the social world to set the stage for critical performative effects.

Within *Organization Theory*, feminist scholars such as Benschop (2021, p. 3) have recognized that the way we theorize phenomena such as gender can become “performative in the sense that they constitute our social realities, and transform social norms and institutional and organizational arrangements.” Banerjee and Arjaliès (2021, p. 17) can be seen as another example of pursuing critical performativity as a pathway to impact. As they describe it, their aim “was to engage in critical and reflexive theorizing . . . not just to change the conversation about the ecological crisis, but to change the very terms of the conversation” (see also Cutcher et al., 2020). To this end, they call for the recognition of the “unsustainability of our organization and management theories” (p. 18). Instead, they posit a “decolonial imagination” (p. 1) in which scholars and educators “embrace a pluriverse of values and realities that can create more just and sustainable worlds” (p. 18). On their account, this is an active project, one that will require interventions that dismantle taken for granted concepts such as accumulation, extraction and competition, and replace them with notions of distribution, regeneration, restoration, and cooperation.

The co-creation model of impact

The co-creation model of impact promises to bridge the gap between theory and practice by merging the processes of knowledge production and use. A core feature consists in taking a

starting point not in academic paradigms but in so-called “real-world” problems (Davis, 2015; Mair & Seelos, 2021). In other words, the motivation for theory development is problem-driven rather than paradigm-driven. This problem-driven orientation, which focuses on questions relevant to practice and society at large, chimes with the recent surge of organizational scholarship on grand challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015) and wicked problems (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016).

The co-creation model advocates for academics to shape the social systems they set out to study in collaboration with their inhabitants. As such, scholars are not disinterested “fly on the wall” outsiders, but an active part of the settings they study with a stake in the practical outcomes of co-created knowledge. The co-creation model reflects, and underscores, the long-standing argument that all theorizing is value laden, as it is impossible to be fully detached. While this orientation is explicitly embraced in action research and intervention research (David & Hatchuel, 2014), engaged scholarship and scientific activism also embrace a proactive role for academics as part of the knowledge production process.

Impact pathway 5: Problem-driven theorizing. The first pathway for co-creation, which we term *problem-driven theorizing*, aims at engaging researchers and practitioners in collaboratively solving a problem and, in so doing, generating new theoretical insights (Coghlan, 2011). This pathway is frequently underpinned by a pragmatist stance, which some have characterized as inherently a “problem-solving philosophy” (Farjoun et al., 2015, p. 1788). Theory does not emerge through abstraction but, instead, as actors respond to concrete, situational problems that require them to engage in problem-solving activities. Since problems only become consequential in action, theoretical knowledge must be elaborated in relationship with practice. As James (1975) famously argued, theories should be evaluated not by their truth value but by their practical consequences.

While *Organization Theory* scholars have called for more problem-driven theorizing (Howard-Grenville, 2021), such theorizing has often faced resistance in leading academic journals, perhaps because it is believed to be “not always as rigorous as academics have come to expect” (Bartunek, 2007, p. 1324). Scholars have taken steps to overcome this barrier by legitimizing this type of knowledge production. Rather than seeing the integration of practice as diluting theory, they have advocated for embracing it as a generative part of the theory development process. For instance, Hamann et al. (2020) do so by theorizing the contextual lifeworld(s) of researchers as a valid and generative component of theorizing.

Engaged scholarship, a collaborative form of research which has become an increasingly popular way to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Sharma & Bansal, 2020), offers a particularly promising approach to problem-driven theorizing. It assumes that neither researchers nor practitioners on their own have the capability to capture the complex real-world problems alone (Sharma & Bansal, 2020). Instead, engaged scholarship adopts a “strategy of intellectual arbitrage” as a “a dialectical method of inquiry where understanding and synthesis of a common problem evolve from the confrontation of divergent theses and antitheses” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 806). Theory and practice are equal components of this dialectical process. Theoreticians bring their existing theories and frameworks to the table, and practitioners bring their problems and understanding of the context to the table. Theoretical progress is made “by leveraging the relative contributions and conceptual frameworks that researchers and practitioners bring to bear on a given problem or question” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 803).

One prominent example is the Minnesota Innovation Research Program (MIRP), which began in 1983 with the objective of developing a process theory of innovation in organizations. To do so, 14 research teams, involving more than 30 faculty and doctoral students from the University of Minnesota, conducted

longitudinal studies that tracked a variety of new technologies, products, services, and programs. *The Innovation Journey* (Van de Ven et al., 1999, p. ix) was “the capstone of a trilogy of books” that reported on the results of the research. “We figured that if it took ten years to collect the data, we deserved at least ten years to analyze and make sense of the data” (p. x). By comparing innovations across common dimensions, researchers were able to identify and generalize overall *process* patterns (Van de Ven et al., 1989, pp. 10–18; see also Jelinek, 1997; Van de Ven & Grazman, 1997). More recently, Bill Coyne (former senior vice president of 3M) and Andy Van de Ven co-authored an article for the *Strategic Management Review* that synthesizes many of the insights from the MIRP program (Coyne & Van de Ven, 2021).

Within *Organization Theory*, Heimstädt and Dobusch’s (2020) recently proposed a constructive perspective on transparency and accountability. This approach “deliberately blurs the distinction between researchers and practitioners” (p. 10). Rather than describing what people in organizations do in terms of transparency and accountability, they advocate for studying “how people in organizations draw on transparency and accountability when analysing and organizing their everyday work” (p. 10). In so doing, “organization scholars will not only be able to produce surprising theoretical insights for other researchers, but will also help practitioners observe their engagements with transparency and accountability in novel ways.”

Impact pathway 6: Intervention-driven theorizing. The second pathway for co-creation can be found in the family of interventionist practice-based research, including action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008); intervention research (David & Hatchuel, 2014); appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 2017); action science (Friedman & Rogers, 2008); and critical, feminist, and Marxist variants of participatory action research (Coghlan, 2011; Kemmis, 2008; Reid & Frisby, 2008). In contrast to engaged scholarship, interventionist research explicitly seeks to intervene in an organization and

evaluate, test, or validate its effects. Although all in situ research intervenes (even if unintended, as illustrated by the Hawthorne effect), here intervention is used deliberately to produce knowledge.

Most accounts trace the origins of interventionist research to Kurt Lewin. Recognizing the generative relationship between a theory building and testing its practical value, he argued that the best way to understand something is to try changing it (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Lewin, 1945). This reflects the idea of constantly oscillating between theory and practice. This occurs in a collaborative and cyclical change process involving planning, taking action, and fact finding about the results of action, which in turn serves as the impetus for further planning and action (Bradbury et al., 2008; Lewin, 1946; Peters & Robinson, 1984).

While scholars sometimes dismiss intervention-driven research as atheoretical, theory may be a critical ingredient to as well as an outcome of interventionist research. In Perlow’s (2012) research on time and collective work, her theory-inspired intervention with the Boston Consulting Group for mandatory “time off” led to widespread adoption of the practice as well as further theoretical development. The role of theory is more or less pronounced, though, in the different interventionist schools that developed from Lewin’s initial insights. For instance, action is predominant in classical action research, which developed from the 1960s to 1980s (Coghlan, 2011). In contrast, theory predominates in “abductive experimentation” (Kistruck & Slade Shantz, 2021), an action-oriented process of inquiry for investigating grand challenges via interventions and generative field experiments.

A few recent articles in *Organization Theory* offer insights about how interventionist theorizing might take shape (Chiles et al., 2021; Sarasvathy, 2021). For instance, Sarasvathy (2021) noted that cause and effect theorizing has limited applicability to the domain of entrepreneurship, where reality is unpredictable, and fundamentally unknowable: “Faced with such uncertainty, hypothesizing and hoping [for] an

objective external world to validate or falsify claims is not a useful strategy” (p. 8). Instead, consistent with her larger effectuation program, Sarasvathy advocates that scholars and entrepreneurs decide, in collaboration, on what problems to solve and what tests to be conducted. Based on these interventions, they then adapt organizational practices accordingly.

Impact pathway 7: Scientific activism. The third co-creation pathway is scientific activism. Driven by values and ideology, scientific activists aim to use science to create social change. Through scientific activism, scholars create and mobilize theory that substantiates their claims and promotes their activist agendas. For instance, marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson’s (1962) *Silent Spring* alerted the public to the environmental impact of pesticide use, inspiring the environmental movement and leading to a ban on dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT). The philosopher Judith Butler, one of the most important theorists on gender and feminism since Margaret Mead, fundamentally challenged gender categories in her book *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990). She also was an activist in the feminist and queer movement. Her theory-driven activism has been instrumental in adjusting and expanding gender categories in broader society. The late David Graeber, an anthropologist and anarchist activist, not only theorized anarchist visions of social change but also lived them out; for instance, as a leading figure and co-creator of Occupy Wall Street, a prefigurative and anarchist movement (Graeber, 2013).

Scientific activism implies that scholars produce theories that deliberately advance social change. It explicitly counters the stance that academics should be objective seekers of truth. In practice, many scientific activists operate at the interface of academia and advocacy by combining university positions or affiliations with visible positions in the media, grassroots movements, or policy committees. In this way, theory is not merely an “immobile mobile” (Latour, 1987) that can be detached from the body of the theoretician. Instead, scientific

activists mobilize theory and theory mobilizes activists. The hybrid role is reflected in emerging labels, such as scholars describing themselves as “scientivists” (Göpel, 2016) because they theorize the change that they advocate. For instance, climate activist Andreas Malm (2021) argues in his recent book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* that sabotage of fossil fuel infrastructure and machinery is a legitimate form of climate activism.

In organization theory, there has been a long tradition of critical management as well as feminist scholarship that challenges the legitimacy of managerial power (e.g., Benschop, 2021; Collinson, 2020; Courpasson et al., 2021; Cutcher et al., 2020; Janssens & Zanoni, 2021). Scientific activism has also played a long-standing role in research on multistakeholder partnerships where some scholars have produced academic knowledge aimed at combining knowledge production with intervention in stakeholder negotiations (e.g., Gray, 2008). More recently, the climate emergency and grand challenges more broadly have inspired organizational theorists to take a more social change-oriented and activist-oriented stance (Banerjee & Arjaliès, 2021; Howard-Grenville, 2021). One example is Organization Scientists for Future, an academic advocacy movement that seeks “to inspire fellow academics to take action on climate change” through research, teaching, consulting, and leading by example. These theorists call for a change in our discipline and challenge organization scholars to think more deeply about “how our organizational and management theories can contribute concretely to helping humanity prepare for and respond to these shocks and build long-term societal resilience” (Williams & Whiteman, 2021, p. 526). For instance, Gail Whiteman, who helped create the science-solution outreach platform Arctic Base Camp at the World Economic Forum’s annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, illustrates how scholars can take their ideas out of the journal world and onto the street.

In *Organization Theory*, some scholars also have taken steps to orient their activism back at our own scholarship, and challenge who we are

as scholars. For instance, Petriglieri (2020) seeks to promote more human workplaces through his research, teaching, and consulting. This activist orientation leads Petriglieri to embrace a progressive theoretical stance (in his case, a systems psychodynamic stance) “as a form of progress and protest” in order “to embrace science’s methodical pursuit of truth while countering its dehumanizing potential” (p. 1). The aim is to produce “more meaningful accounts of, and more useful theories about, the issues facing organizations, organizing, and the organized today” (p. 1). An activist stance on theory can forge a new path for theory building that resonates with an activist pathway to impact.

Perhaps one of the most ground-breaking developments in our field consists in giving organizational scholars academic recognition for scientific activism. For instance, Barbara Gray and Jill Purdy received the 2020 Responsible Research in Management Award for their book *Collaborating for the Future: Multistakeholder Partnerships for Solving Complex Problems* (Gray & Purdy, 2018). In addition, the Organization and Management Theory Division of the Academy of Management selected Barbara Gray as its 2022 Distinguished Scholar. She responded with a passionate and compelling call for activist research in a Distinguished Scholar address that reverberated at the 2022 Academy of Management Annual Meeting.

Reflections on Theory-Impact Pathways

The seven pathways articulated above present a spectrum from the least to the most interventionist mode of theorizing. Although we have depicted them as distinct pathways, they are likely to intersect in both intended and unintended ways. Co-created theories might have impact through transfer, while disseminated theories might become impactful when used and tested in co-production processes. Similarly, performative theories may offer fertile tools for scientific activism. Indeed, Butler’s (1990)

Gender Trouble shows how theory becomes effectively employed in scientific activism, thereby amplifying its impact. More generally, though, organizational scholars tend to recognize that *all* theories are inherently performative, in unintended ways. The Hawthorne Studies, “the largest, best known and most influential investigations in the history of organizational research” (Hassard, 2012, p. 1432), were designed and executed as intervention-driven studies. Initiated a century ago, these studies investigated the effect of environmental conditions, such as the intensity of lighting, on factory worker productivity. The results showed, very surprisingly, that workers were more responsive to social factors, such as managerial attention and relationships to co-workers, than to changes in their physical environment. The resulting theories fundamentally changed broader conceptions of a good manager, conceptions that still persist today (e.g., Buckingham & Goodall, 2015). While designed as intervention-based research, its unparalleled impact was achieved through subsequent transfer, instrumental, and performative use.

Our framework may offer some clarity, but it also raises several practical and normative questions. Are some pathways more effective than others? On what grounds? How might impact be enhanced through a combination of pathways? Does a high abstraction level enhance or reduce the potential of a theory to be impactful? Is there a sweet spot between high and low abstraction where theories are most impactful, or are we better off formulating highly abstract theory initially and then developing a cascade of theoretical products adapted to different practice domains? More broadly, the institutional architecture of knowledge production is tilting towards impact, producing changes in funding and incentive structures. Will some pathways become more legitimate than others? Will researchers be incentivized to develop theory in domains that offer good opportunities for large-scale impact in a short timeframe? Will researchers be rewarded for pursuing pathways that allow for a clearer

attribution of theory and impact in the context of measuring impact? We encourage organizational scholars to pursue research on these questions and to reflect on their implications for the academic profession.

Building on a more nuanced understanding of how our theories produce impact, we also invite future research to investigate the relationship between impactful theories and how they are identified, evaluated, and attributed. This undertaking could include question such as which timeframe for assessing impact is appropriate for organization theory. How is impact attributed to a specific theory or, more difficult even, to researchers? And how do emerging definitions and measures of impact affect our theory production? Can we discriminate between desirable and undesirable impact? Addressing these questions is of critical importance for our ability to counter the simplified notion of impact.

In numbering the pathways, we are not suggesting that one pathway is inherently better than another one. Even if the co-created model appears to be more immediately aligned with the current impact agenda, this model is not without risks. Critics may argue that co-production presents a naive understanding of the unequal power dynamics that shape academic-practitioner collaborations. Researchers will likely be more dependent on the whims of practitioners for finalizing the project than the other way around, and co-creation scholars may have less freedom to determine the research focus and to critically interpret the results. Furthermore, the theory developed through problem- or intervention-driven scholarship may come to resemble what Aristotle called *techne*, applied technical knowledge oriented toward instrumental purposes. At the limit, scholarship amounts to consultation, namely the production of actionable knowledge that prescribe how to resolve a particular problem. In this way, theory generation might be co-opted by corporate interests or the interests of other powerful stakeholders, such as policymakers and funding bodies who may ultimately certify the impact produced. In turn, scientific activists need to balance their aims of

promoting social change with scientific reflexivity, so that they do not fall prey to motivated reasoning and produce knowledge only to the extent that it aligns with their own ideological goals as activists.

To be sure, the pursuit of impact raises important ethical questions. And efforts along any of the identified pathways might not go as planned. In this regard, March's (2013, p. 732) warnings on the dangers of "the relevance game" bear repeating:

I have come to believe that seeking relevance in the generation and development of fundamental ideas is more often dysfunctional than it is useful, that the ideas that transform ways of thinking about practical problems rarely come from a direct focus on those problems, and that the joys of appreciating the beauty of interesting ideas provide adequate justification for them.

Organization theories may unintendedly produce negative effects even if they "merely" seek to understand, interpret, or represent reality. Ghoshal (2005, p. 75) famously argued that "[b]ad management theories are destroying good management practices." Among the theories he singled out were agency theory, transaction cost economics, and Porter's five forces framework. For instance, a theory that assumes people will behave opportunistically induces managerial actions likely to enhance opportunistic behavior (Ghoshal & Moran, 1996). Or, theories that assume short-term revenue growth or profit as dependent variables are likely to drive managerial actions that are detrimental to planetary health. For these reasons, we cannot evade important ethical questions about the relationship between theory and impact. Instead, understanding these relationships will help scholars be more conscious and reflective about the impact of their preferred pathways.

Conclusion

This editorial sought to challenge the apparent dichotomy between theory and impact. We argued for the need to embrace the notion of

impactful theory—theory that, by virtue of helping us to better understand the world, enables us to change the world. Rather than de-emphasizing theory building and prioritizing the generation of practical insights, we advocate for theory building as a pathway for producing impact. Theory, we argue, can change our perspective on the world, challenge our assumptions, help us recognize new problems, and conceive of possible solutions to them. We proposed seven pathways of how theory becomes impactful. We hope these pathways might increase scholarly confidence in their feasibility and inspire the organization theory field to pursue impact through theorizing. As a journal that is inspired by diversity and paradigmatic plurality, *Organization Theory* advocates for various forms of theorizing and a multi-pronged approach to impact, and thus is well placed to produce impactful theories. And by providing articles in an open access manner, *Organization Theory* also provides a means for disseminating theory to a broad audience.

In advocating for impactful theory, we hope to ease the ambivalence that some organization theorists may feel towards the policy-driven impact agenda. On the one hand, the impact agenda provides us with a license to do research that matters. It invites us to engage in public debate to counteract the degraded state of public discourse, and presents a chance to reclaim our political and societal relevance. It also is an opportunity to be valued not just for producing journal articles for a limited readership, but also for engaging wider audiences in new ways of seeing the world and promoting progressive social change.

On the other hand, the ideas (and ideologies) driving the impact agenda are not neutral. In fact, such an agenda is driven by an investment logic whereby publicly funded research is expected to produce a tangible return. As university education has become increasingly marketized, the impact agenda may also privilege the production of academic knowledge that is more readily compatible with its marketization and application. In contrast, knowledge that is complex or possibly critical and uncomfortable

for “end users” may become marginalized, just like knowledge that challenges the economic and political interests of powerful actors.

One of the challenges we face is that our strongest impact may be the hardest to prove because it has the longest time horizon *and* it is unlikely to be attributable to a single author. Yet, the current policy context privileges the pursuit of immediate, measurable impact, with the implicit assumption of attributability and linearity. Even if the myth of the “lone genius” persists, any long-term societal impact is most likely to be the outcome of a collective endeavor by a global and diverse community of scholars who build on each other’s work and cross-fertilize each other’s ideas. As Talcott Parsons (1938, p. 16) reminded us long ago, “no science develops in a vacuum, either intellectual or social.” Research output cited in public debate might represent the last sprout on the tree. We are always standing on the shoulders of others. Individual contributions are likely to accumulate into strong impact, which in turn cannot be linearly attributed to any one source. It is thus entirely possible for theory papers to carry a high *potential* for creating impact but not to be recognized for the impact they produce. We must thus acknowledge the complexity of impact journeys and resist the tendency for policy-driven impact agendas to favor certain types of knowledge production over others. In this spirit, *Organization Theory* encourages authors to engage in producing bold and interesting theory with the potential for creating long-term collective impact in diverse and non-linear ways.

In summary, we hope to have stimulated our readers’ thinking about the relationship between theory and impact, and in such a way encouraged further debate and research on pathways for organization theory to create and achieve impact. We call for organizational scholars to partake in the collective quest to develop a sophisticated conception of impact that recognizes the generative potential of organization theory to impact society in unexpected, powerful, and diverse ways. *Organization Theory* offers a platform for conceptual organizational

research that pursues a diverse set of impact pathways.


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